Prayers and Reflections

Correcting Human Rights Abuses

Opening Prayer

Lover of Humanity and Creator of Rights,
Help us to see injustices in the world. Help us to recognize human rights abuses. Help us to think deeply about such problems. Help us to respond by demanding respect for the rights of every human being. Help us to work to ensure the dignity of all our brothers and sisters. Help us to protect all you have created.

Reflection by the Catholic Bishops in Nigeria

We, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria see and share in the misery of the people of Nigeria. We know their sufferings. We sympathize with their cries that often go unheard. In response to the cry of the people and the call of the Lord, we pledge our efforts and energy to ‘bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour’ (Lk. 4: 18-19).

While we thank God for his goodness, we cannot pretend that all is well. What we witness every day in the lives of Nigerians is far from the kingdom of God. We see that government is failing to live up to its first duty to ensure the safety of life and property of its citizenry. The crushing poverty and ignorance of the people have left them vulnerable to manipulation by unscrupulous and self-seeking politicians, and others who exploit them. Power has been taken away from the people, and put into the hands of an elite. The voice of the people is no longer heard in the halls of government, and the people have become numbed and passive.

Even ‘at this midnight hour’ it is not too late for Nigeria. Through the intercession of Our Lady Queen of Peace and Queen of Nigeria, we continue to pray that Almighty God will sustain our efforts in building God’s Kingdom of Justice and Peace.”


Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit of Justice,
We pray for the people of Nigeria. Breathe upon the powerless and the powerful.
We pray for civil and political rights for the people of Nigeria. Breathe upon the barriers to these.
We pray for economic, social and cultural rights for the people of Nigeria. Breathe upon exploitation and injustice.
We pray for systems of accountability for elected officials of Nigeria and for corporations who benefit from Nigeria’s resources. Breathe upon the systems and structures that are not accountable.
We pray that Nigeria soon sees an end to poverty and violence. Breathe peace.

The Lord said: “I have observed the misery of the people. I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their sufferings. I have come down to deliver them.” (Exodus 3:7-8)
Act through us; help us support the rights of Nigerians and of all your children. Breathe upon us.

Jill Rauh
Activities

(Note: Begin and end with prayers and reflections on page 1)

1. Case Study:
   Go over the map and basic facts on Nigeria on page 3. Read the 1996 Case Study, “A Grandmother in Nigeria” (page 4). Next, review the outline of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indicate what human rights were violated in the situation in the case study: write the corresponding HR article number next to examples of violations of human rights in the text. Read the summary of a 2002 Foreign Policy article showing the response of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (page 4, bottom). Then see the Human Rights Watch summary released in December, 2003, about problems that still exist. Why do you think it takes so long to correct abuses of human rights?

2. Chart
   Do either A or B below with your class or group.

   A. Look at the chart, “Example: Human Rights Violations in Nigeria,” and go over it together. First, look at the middle row, which describes events in Nigeria, then at the top row, which describes how the international community responded to these events, and finally at the bottom row, which describes how human rights advocates and other concerned individuals and groups have responded. Then, answer the following questions:
   What types of actions were taken against human rights violators in Nigeria?
   At what point did Nigerians become more active in their own struggle?
   What could have contributed to their empowerment?
   What progress has been made in securing the human rights of Nigerians?

   or

   B. In small groups, have group members take on a role as a
   (a) member(s) of a Nigerian human rights organization,
   (b) member(s) of an international human rights organization, such as Amnesty International, and
   (c) United Nations special rapporteur(s) on human rights in Nigeria.

   Consider the human rights strategies that have already been employed and the progress that has been made in Nigeria.
   Consider how full democracy still needs to be implemented in the country:
   the rights of women and minority ethnic groups must be fully guaranteed;
   the economic rights of all indigenous must be given priority over large oil companies.
   Discuss possible new strategies in the effort to secure human rights, including economic rights, for Nigerians.
   What role can members from each of the a, b and c groups mentioned above play to most effectively advocate human rights in Nigeria?

3) See if there is interest in forming a core group to monitor events in Nigeria and to check in with Human Rights Watch and report regularly to the larger group. End each report with a prayer for Nigeria (see page 1)
Leader: President Olusegun Obasanjo.
Economy: GNP per capita $310 (Ghana $390, Britain $22,640). This compares with $420 when the NI first profiled Nigeria in 1980.
Monetary Unit: Naira.
Main Exports: Petroleum and its derivatives, around 40% of which goes to the US. Despite oil’s dominance of the economy, agriculture is still the main area of employment, accounting for 47% of the workforce.
Income Distribution: Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a tiny élite that made its money through contracts provided under the aegis of the previous military rulers. For the majority, it is a struggle to survive.
People: The official UN figure is 109 million. People per square kilometre: 118 (Britain 238).
Health: Infant mortality 112 per 1,000 live births (Ghana 63, Britain 6).
Environment: The main issue is pollution by the oil industry in the Niger Delta region.
Culture: There are around 250 ethnic groups. The four main groupings, however, are the Hausa and Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest and the Igbo in the southeast.
Languages: English is the official language but each region’s main language depends on its dominant ethnic group.
Religion: Predominantly Muslim in the north, mainly Christian in the southeast, with a mixture in the southwest.
The Ogoni are one of the ethnic groups that traditionally lived in the area that is now Nigeria. After independence from Britain in 1960, a succession of military dictators ruled the country, ruthlessly suppressing ethnic movements, such as the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Soldiers attacked villages and ethnic leaders were killed. The Ogoni region was particularly valuable because of the vast oil resources discovered there in 1958. Shell Oil Company built pipelines to remove the oil and caused ecological disasters in the area. The Ogoni villages were receiving no benefits from the oil in their lands and were dealing with oil spills and explosions of oil lines and fires.

Case Study: A Grandmother in Nigeria

I am fifty-four years old, a widow and a farmer. Like most of the Ogoni people, my family’s whole life depends on the land. My husband was shot during the army’s attack on our villages in 1994 (to stop a local democratic movement). Since then, I have had to take care of my younger children and help my older children with their children.

My three eldest children help me work on our farm, which is about ten acres. We divide it into three portions and rotate cultivation. We plant yam and cassava, our staple crops. We also plant vegetables like pumpkin, okra and peppers, for our meals. We used to produce enough crops so we could sell some to pay for clothing and education for the children.

Last year brought much suffering to us because of a huge oil spill. Shell Oil’s Korokoro oil works has had a pipeline running across my farm and many of the other farms in my community since 1958. The pipes are old and rusty. On November 12, one of the pipelines burst, gushing thick, black crude oil out on the soil. It ran out for almost eight hours before Shell workers came to do something. The oil spilled from the farmland into the nearby stream, my village’s water supply.

In the days after the spill, my crops began to rot and soon there was no food that could be harvested. The spill also killed many of the fish in our stream (another source of our food) and affected our drinking water. With no food, we must walk many miles to work at a large farm to make money to buy food. My younger children and my grandchildren can no longer go to school because all our limited cash must be used for food. Many of my neighbors’ children are malnourished. They are waiting for a feeding station, on what was good farmland, to begin distribution of emergency food supplies being sent by an Irish relief agency.


Human Rights Ruling

African Commission on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) has ruled the Nigerian government should compensate the Ogoni people for abuses against their lands, environment, housing, and health caused by oil production and government security forces. The commission called on Nigeria to undertake a “comprehensive cleanup of lands and rivers damaged by oil operations,” mostly by the Shell Oil corporations. It must also ensure that the social and environmental impact of future oil development on its territory does not harm local communities.

The ruling is a sweeping affirmation of “ESC Rights” as defined by the UN’s International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Human rights groups are hailing the decision as a major breakthrough in the battle for international recognition of economic, social and cultural rights, which have long been given lesser status than political and civil rights.

Source: Foreign Policy in Focus, July 5, 2002
1. Are born free and should all be treated in the same way
2. Are equal despite difference in race, sex, language, etc.
3. Have the right to life and to live in freedom and safety
4. Should be free from slavery
5. Should not be subjected to torture
6. Have the right to be recognized before the law
7. Have the right to be treated equally before the law
8. Have the right to ask for legal help when their rights are not respected
9. Have the right to not be imprisoned unjustly
10. Have the right to a fair trial
11. Have the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty
12. Have the right to privacy
13. Have the right to travel within and to and from their own country
14. Have the right to political asylum
15. Have the right to a nationality
16. Have the right to marry
17. Have the right to own property
18. Have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
19. Have the right to freedom of opinion and expression
20. Have the right to meet with others
21. Have the right to take part in government matters and to vote
22. Have the right to social security (i.e., to have basic needs met)
23. Have the right to work and to join a trade union
24. Have the right to rest and leisure
25. Have the right to an adequate standard of living and medical help
26. Have the right to an education
27. Have the right to take part in their community’s cultural life
28. Are entitled to a social and international order that can provide these rights
29. Must respect the rights of others
Nigeria: Freedom of Expression Under Attack

Human Rights Watch recently released a 40-page report, “Nigeria: Renewed Crackdown on Freedom of Expression,” that documents killings, arrest, detention, ill-treatment, torture and other forms of harassment and intimidation of real or perceived critics of the government since 2001. Most of these abuses have been carried out by the Nigerian police or by members of the intelligence services known as the State Security Service (SSS).

In the most serious cases, people have been shot dead simply for exercising their right to protest the new government and its policies. During massive public protests in July after an increase in the price of fuel, between 12 and 20 people were shot dead by the police in Lagos, in the oil city of Port Harcourt, and on the outskirts of Abuja. The victims included peaceful protestors and passersbys who were not even involved in the protests. The new President Obasanjo’s promises of democracy mean little as long as people are being detained, tortured and shot simply for expressing views critical of the government,” said the report. “No one has been brought to justice for these acts.”

The Human Rights Watch report also describes the harassment of opposition party supporters and other political activists since the April and May elections, in which President Obasanjo and his ruling People’s Democratic Party won a comfortable victory. The elections themselves were marred by political violence, especially in the south and southeast of the country, and by widespread fraud and ballot-rigging. The government and the security forces have since tried to prevent political rallies from taking place. Members of organizations agitating for autonomy for the Yoruba or Igbo ethnic groups have been arrested and detained unlawfully.

Human rights activists and journalists have borne the brunt of the government’s crackdown, including harassment by the police and attempts at censorship on several occasions in the past two years. Several journalists have been physically assaulted. Most recently, on November 21, Psaro Yornamue, a journalist in charge of the Rivers State office of the Daily Independent newspaper, on his way to his office was beaten and threatened in connection with an article he had written alleging corruption by the state’s deputy governor. On November 24, three journalists at Insider magazine were arrested by the police in Lagos, detained for two days and charged with sedition and defamation of character in connection with an article alleging that the Vice-President and the National Security Adviser to the President were involved in large-scale theft of crude oil.

Since completing research on the report, Human Rights Watch has been informed of further concerning incidents. In November, police disrupted public processions organized by activists of the Ogoni ethnic group to commemorate the execution of Ogoni leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists in 1995. On November 10, in the southern oil port of Bonny, police arrested 17 Ogoni activists, several of whom stated that they were beaten by the police. The activists, who were released the following day, face charges of unlawful procession and conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace. Police also arrested more than 20 Ogoni activists in a suburb of Port Harcourt on November 14, on the grounds that they had taken part in a commemorative vigil on November 9. Leaders of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) have also received personal death threats in recent weeks.
### Example: The Case in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, urge the Nigerian Government to initiate reform.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>The Commonwealth suspends Nigeria and warns it will expel Nigeria if there are not genuine reforms.</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>A Nigerian and an international NGO submit a communication to the African Commission for Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), alleging that the Nigerian government has violated the Africa Charter.</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>General Abacha’s transition program is universally denounced as a sham.</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights is finally granted access to the country.</td>
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### What Can Be Done About Human Rights Violations?

All over the world, people are working in different ways and at different levels to prevent and end human rights violations. People are working as government representatives, as members of international organizations, as lawyers and judges in various court systems, as supporters of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as members of local community groups, and as individuals in their own homes.
## Example: The Case in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>What International and Regional Bodies are Doing About Human Rights in Nigeria</th>
<th>Events in Nigeria</th>
<th>What Concerned Individuals and Advocacy Groups are Doing About Human Rights Violations in Nigeria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>The UN Economic and Social Council reviews Nigeria’s first report on economic, social, and cultural rights and calls for the Nigerian government to address a range of abuses; Nigeria’s suspension from the Commonwealth is lifted.</td>
<td>Oputa Panel, set up by Obasanjo to investigate human rights abuses under previous governments, has little power and fails to address abuses under the current regime, but raises public awareness of human rights and accountability.</td>
<td>Several dozen NGOs join together to form the Transitional Monitoring Group (TMG) and deploy election observers throughout the country; many individual human rights groups propose reforms to the new government.</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>World Bank delegations visit to discuss poverty alleviation; Nigeria commits to an economic program monitored by the IMF and to transparency in the management of public resources.</td>
<td>The military responds to the apparent killing of 19 soldiers by a group of civilians with a series of massacres in Benue State, where soldiers kill over 200 civilians of the Tiv ethnic group and destroy villages, displacing thousands.</td>
<td>Human rights activists and writers are able to report freely and critically and encourage public debate about sensitive issues for the country.</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Some U.S. assistance to the Nigerian military is suspended until the government accounts for the military action in Benue.</td>
<td>Sharia (Islamic) Law, which includes such punishments as flogging, amputations and stoning, is commonly practiced in the northern states, resulting in human right abuses, especially of women, and fuels religious and ethnic tension.</td>
<td>Human rights organizations call on President Obasanjo and the government to prosecute those responsible for ordering and carrying out the Benue massacres.</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>In response to NGO complaints, the ACHPR rules that Nigeria has violated seven articles of the Africa Charter and orders the government to compensate the people for abuses against their lands, environment, housing and health caused by oil production and government forces.</td>
<td>The group BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights and other local Nigerian NGOs successfully represent victims of unfair Sharia sentences in appeals courts; several hundred women occupy Chevron’s Escravos terminal for 10 days demanding jobs and environmental cleanup.</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>International election observers claim minimum standards for democratic elections were not met in parts of the country.</td>
<td>Strikes are called in Lagos and Abuja by the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) following a 50% fuel price hike.</td>
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