

United Nations Human Rights Council, 46th Session (22 February - 23 March 2021)

Item 4 – General Debate

Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Andrew Copson¹

With over 300 days having passed since his forced detention, we remain outraged at the arrest and imprisonment of the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala.² We believe his treatment starkly illustrates how the global prevalence of blasphemy laws continue to threaten the rights and safety of non-religious people and others across the world.

First arrested in April 2014 and detained in a psychiatric ward on the grounds of his humanist beliefs, Bala since came to lead the Humanist Association of Nigeria and is an important figure for humanists and human rights defenders globally.³ He subsequently was arrested again in April 2020, accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammed via Facebook, contrary to the Cybercrimes Act of Nigeria.⁴ However, Bala is yet to be charged for this crime, and so remains detained indefinitely, which represents a gross infringement on his human rights.

A court order issued last July granting him a meeting with legal representation was ignored by his captors who continued to deny him this basic legal right.⁵ It was not until October that he was granted preliminary access to a lawyer, meaning he was imprisoned without any legal representation for six months.⁶ Bala is also detained in Kano State, a region that allows for the operation of Sharia Courts alongside secular courts,⁷ where blasphemy carries the death penalty, and where riots and murder are not uncommon for accusations of blasphemy. There are fears for his safety even while he is held in custody.

¹ Humanists UK is the trading name of the British Humanist Association.

² Humanists International. 'Mubarak Bala spends his 300th day in arbitrary detention'. February 2021. <https://humanists.international/2021/02/mubarak-bala-spends-his-300th-day-in-arbitrary-detention/>

³ Humanists international. 'Mubarak Bala, President of Nigerian Humanists, under arrest'. March 2020. <https://humanists.international/2020/04/mubarak-bala-president-of-nigerian-humanists-arrested-for-blasphemy/>

⁴ Humanists international. 'Three weeks on Mubarak Bala is still in detention'. May 2020. <https://humanists.international/2020/05/three-weeks-on-mubarak-bala-still-in-detention/>

⁵ Humanists International. 'Police refuse to comply with court order granting Mubarak Bala access to his legal team'. June 2020. <https://humanists.international/2020/07/police-refuse-to-comply-with-court-order-granting-mubarak-bala-access-to-his-legal-team/>

⁶ Humanists International. 'Individual Briefing Mubarak Bala'. March 2021. https://humanists.international/2021/03/petition-to-relocate-mubarak-bala-heard-in-court/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=petition-to-relocate-mubarak-bala-heard-in-court

⁷ Humanists International. 'Legal team seek relocation of Mubarak Bala to neutral territory'. February 2021. <https://humanists.international/2021/02/legal-team-seek-relocation-of-mubarak-bala-to-neutral-territory/>

We unequivocally call for his immediate release, along with many other NGOs and governments and if he is not, for him to be granted clear access to his legal counsel and for stronger guarantees for his safety.