

United Nations Human Rights Council, 49th Session (28 February - 01 April 2022)

Item 3 – SR on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Richy Thompson¹

We welcome your recommendation that States should ‘promote and protect freedom of religion or belief for minorities by repealing anti-conversion and anti-blasphemy laws, revoking restrictions on manifestations of their religion or beliefs’.²

We are concerned about the situation in Nigeria where apostasy and blasphemy are outlawed by customary and sharia systems alike, and punishable by death in states subject to sharia law.³ While constitutionally there is no official state religion, Islam is often regarded as the de facto state religion in nine of Nigeria’s northern states.

We have long advocated for the release of the human rights activist and President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, Mubarak Bala. He has been illegally detained for nearly 700 days, denied access to his lawyer, and only had his first court appearance last month.⁴ It has been almost two years since a group of UN experts, led by you, stated ‘the arrest and detention of Mr. Bala amounts to persecution of non-believers in Nigeria’, and called for his immediate release.⁵ The experts further noted that ‘reports have indicated that the small community of non-religious people or non-believers in Nigeria constantly face harassment, discrimination, persecution and prohibitive social taboos’.⁶

Other recent victims of the country’s blasphemy laws include musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who was sentenced to death in Kano state in 2020 for circulating a song about the Prophet Muhammed via WhatsApp, and a 13-year-old boy now serving 10 years in prison for insulting God.⁷

We urge the UN experts to reissue their call for the immediate release of Mubarak Bala and to urge Nigeria to repeal section 204 of its Criminal Code outlawing blasphemy.

Thank you.

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

² UN Human Rights Council, forty-ninth session. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief*. January 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session49/Pages/ListReports.aspx>

³ Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report*, 2021. https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-western-africa/nigeria/#Freedom_of_expression_advocacy_of_humanist_values

⁴ Humanists International, ‘Nigeria: Mubarak Bala appears in court for first time in 644 days’, 1 February 2022. <https://humanists.international/2022/02/nigeria-mubarak-bala-appears-in-court-for-first-time-in-644-days/>

⁵ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, ‘UN rights experts urge Nigeria to immediately release humanist accused of blasphemy’, July 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26123&LangID=E>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Human Rights Watch, ‘Nigeria’, *World Report 2021*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/nigeria#761225>