

## Written evidence submitted by Humanists UK (IRN0004)

### ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Since 1896, our work has been helping people be happier and more fulfilled. By bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Together with our partners Humanist Society Scotland, we speak for 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We work closely with Humanists International, founded in 1952 as the global representative body of the humanist movement, with over 170 member organisations in over 70 countries, and of which our Chief Executive is also the current President. We are also a member of the European Humanist Federation (EHF). We have good relations with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), meeting regularly with ministers and officials. We are on the steering group of the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Forum and are an active member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on FoRB. We are accredited at the UN Human Rights Council – the only national humanist group to hold such accreditation – and make interventions there every session. We contribute annually to Humanists International’s Freedom of Thought Report<sup>1</sup>; and co-founded the End Blasphemy Laws campaign,<sup>2</sup> which has successfully prompted ten countries to repeal their blasphemy laws since it was founded in 2015.

### SUMMARY

Nigeria is one of 13 countries in the world that has the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy. In particular, right now Mubarak Bala, the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, is being arbitrarily detained in Kano State, having been accused of being ‘provocative and annoying to Muslims’ on Facebook. He has been held for over a year without facing charges.

In this response we provide more detail about Bala’s case; more on the persecution of the non-religious in Nigeria in general; and information about the non-religious demographics of Nigeria. We also append the submission that Bala himself made to this Committee’s (abandoned) 2019 inquiry into freedom of religion or belief, in which he talks about his experiences in Nigeria.

The UK Government states that securing freedom of religion or belief around the world is one of its priorities, following on from the integrated review. To this end it has raised Bala’s plight repeatedly at ministerial level – but to no avail. **It cannot be the case that human rights abuses such as those experienced by Bala are overlooked when the UK establishes trade deals with other countries. The UK should not enter into trade deals with countries that have the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy, or that engage in equally serious violations of freedom of speech, expression, religion, or belief.**

### THE PLIGHT OF MUBARAK BALA

Mubarak Bala was arrested at his home in Kaduna State on 28 April 2020 and has been held without charge ever since. His arrest followed a petition filed with the Police Commissioner of Kano State in which he was alleged to have insulted the Prophet Muhammad in his Facebook posts, which led to death threats against him. On 30 April

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<sup>1</sup> *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International: <https://fot.humanists.international/>

<sup>2</sup> End Blasphemy Laws campaign: <https://end-blasphemy-laws.org/>

he was transferred to Kano State, where blasphemy is punishable by death, and has been held there ever since without charge.

Bala initially spent more than five months in detention in an undisclosed location, unable to access his lawyer or family. In October he was finally granted access to his chosen legal counsel.

A fundamental rights petition calling for his release has been lodged before the Federal High Court in Abuja. On 21 December it ruled that his continuous incarceration was illegal and ordered his immediate release on bail, but that has not happened since, with Kano State officials denying its authority. Hearings at the Federal High Court are ongoing and have been repeatedly delayed.

Kano is a region that allows for the operation of Sharia courts alongside secular courts, where riots and murder are not uncommon for accusations of blasphemy, and where blasphemy carries the death penalty.<sup>3</sup>

Several UN special rapporteurs have twice come together to issue a joint statement calling for Bala's release.<sup>4</sup>

Bala's present incarceration is unfortunately not his first problem with officials. In 2014, he was assessed as needing psychiatric help for being 'an atheist' and was held at a psychiatric ward in Kano, northern Nigeria, against his will. This was orchestrated by his father, formerly a senior member of Nigeria's Islamic authorities, after Bala had spoken openly about his atheistic views. After nearly three weeks, Bala was released, having received help from humanist activists who brought the case to the attention of the international media.<sup>5</sup>

Bala previously submitted evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into freedom of religion or belief, in late 2019, which was regrettably abandoned after the general election was called. In that evidence he describes what happened to him after 2014, almost up to his arrest, as well as the picture facing humanists in Nigeria more generally. We include the full submission in an annex to this response. To pull out the key parts:

...I sought a UK visa and it was rejected. I did not know any avenue from the UK that could have sponsored me as they did with others like Malala [from] Pakistan or Jamila in Sudan, the lady that married a Christian, the recent cases then.

I was sent away from home, immediately the media hype died down, and they did not live by the peace deal we reached, but I could not pursue any legal case, even the Nigerian government that assured me protection, after a barrage of mob threats, vanished. I was forlorn. Friends vanished, I became an IDP, a few I met online, were too far, I thought of trekking through the Sahara northwards, I thought of ending it all, since no one cared, but I braved on. The only thing I could do, was to maintain a presence online, like my life depended on it, because it did.

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<sup>3</sup> More about Mubarak Bala's case can be read on the Humanists International website: <https://humanists.international/case-of-concern/mubarak-bala/>

<sup>4</sup> 'UN experts call for urgent release of Nigerian humanist Mubarak Bala', Humanists UK, 24 July 2020: <https://humanism.org.uk/2020/07/24/un-experts-call-for-urgent-release-of-nigerian-humanist-mubarak-bala/>; and Emmanuel Akinwotu, 'UN condemns one year detention of Nigerian humanist Mubarak Bala', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/28/un-condemns-one-year-detention-of-nigerian-humanist-mubarak-bala>

<sup>5</sup> 'Nigeria atheist Bala freed from Kano psychiatric hospital', BBC News Online, 4 July 2004: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-28158813>

For the next five years to date, this is what I do, finding jobs and losing them when they know who indeed I am, losing rent, when the neighborhood realizes I am an atheist, but being online made the world know I still am there, my silence for too long, must be investigated, that's my hope. This is how I live now.

But I have helped a lot of people like me now, we have formed our own community, and get assistance time to time from other bodies, as well as give jobs that we could secure within our circle, to a point that, the society has now adapted to live with us with no threats of death, only other trivial threats such as ostracism, threats of eternal torture, or threat with poverty and hunger, the government, no matter how we complain, never take substantive action, even treating us as a threat.

...

We are many, and we still see the West, the UK being the most qualified, given our history, to educate and stand for rights to life and belief. As well as render assistance in instances where life is under threat, with provision of options and legal backing.

## PERSECUTION OF THE NON-RELIGIOUS IN NIGERIA

Every year, Humanists International compiles the *Freedom of Thought Report: A Global Report on the Rights, Legal Status and Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Non-religious*,<sup>6</sup> which we contribute to. The report measures persecution of the non-religious across four metrics (Constitution and Government, Education and Children's Rights, Society and Community, and Expression and Advocacy of Humanist Values). Nigeria received the worst rating of 'grave violation' in one of these four metrics. The latest edition of the report (December 2020) says with respect to Nigeria:

- 'Blasphemy' or criticism of religion is outlawed and punishable by death'
- 'Apostasy' or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death'
- 'Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is severely restricted'
- 'The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism'
- 'State legislation is partly derived from religious law or by religious authorities'.

While the Nigerian constitution protects freedom of religion or belief in theory, the state in practice enforces several anti-secular and theocratic policies.

First, 'blasphemy' is prohibited under section 204 of the nationwide Criminal Code. Under the heading 'Insult to religion', it states:

'Any person who does an act which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years.'

Second, and more seriously, sections 275-279 of the constitution allow constituent states to establish sharia courts on civil matters. Within several Nigerian states, abiding by sharia law is mandatory, and sentences may be given for apostasy and blasphemy.

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<sup>6</sup> *Freedom of Thought Report*: <https://fot.humanists.international/>

While Nigeria's constitution prohibits constituent states from adopting a state religion, this has been overlooked in practice. As noted, in many of Nigeria's northern, Muslim-majority states, Islam is often regarded as the de facto state religion due to its pervasive influence on the allocation of public funds. Politicians have also been known to refer to religion when justifying their stance on legislative proposals.<sup>7</sup> Further, State Governor Nyesom Wike pronounced the state of Rivers a Christian state in a 2019 speech.<sup>8</sup>

## EXAMPLES OF PERSECUTION

In 2020, the Islamic gospel musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu was sentenced to death by hanging by an upper sharia court for blasphemy.<sup>9</sup> In 2016, Muslim cleric Abdulazeez Dauda was given a death sentence for 'blasphemy' by an Islamic court in the state of Kano, northern Nigeria. Nine of his followers had also been sentenced to death for 'blasphemy' the previous year.<sup>10</sup>

Also that year, Kano State sentenced 13-year-old Umar Farouq to 10 years in prison with menial labour for 'blasphemy'. Farouq was found guilty of offending God, as he had used 'foul language' against God during an argument with a friend. He is appealing the judgment.<sup>11</sup>

In Nigeria, those perceived to have committed blasphemy, whether rightly or wrongly, are also at risk of social persecution, including intimidation and threats of violence. 74-year-old Christian market trader Bridget Agbahime, also from Kano state, was publicly murdered in 2016 by a mob of over 500 people following a false accusation of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. Prior to her murder, Agbahime had been receiving routine harassment. A sharia court acquitted all five accused of her murder.<sup>12</sup>

In 2009, a mob on the rampage in Gwaram, Jigawa State, burnt a police outpost, injuring around 12 people, over an alleged blasphemous statement against the Prophet Muhammad made by a 'non-Muslim' resident of the town.<sup>13</sup> In 2008, a 50-year-old Muslim man, alleged to have uttered 'blasphemy' against Muhammad, was besieged in his house in Kano by a Muslim mob, who then beat him into a coma. He later died.<sup>14</sup>

The Humanist Association of Nigeria was also denied registration as an organisation for many years. After years of campaigning, it was eventually granted formal recognition in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'There's nothing like Family Planning in Islam – Rep. Gudaji Kazaure', BellaNaija, 15 October 2017: <https://www.bellanaija.com/2017/10/muslim-family-planning-gudaji-kazaure/>

<sup>8</sup> 'Rivers is a Christian state, says Wike', pulse.ng, 24 June 2019: <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/rivers-is-a-christian-state-says-wike/03wh1jh>

<sup>9</sup> 'Nigerian singer sentenced to death for blasphemy in Kano state', BBC News Online, 10 August 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53726256>

<sup>10</sup> 'Nigeria court in Kano sentences cleric to death for blasphemy', BBC News Online, 6 January 2016: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-35241608>

<sup>11</sup> '13-year-old Boy Sentenced To 10-year Imprisonment For Blasphemy Appeals Judgment, Sahara Reporters, 9 September 2020: <http://saharareporters.com/2020/09/09/13-year-old-boy-sentenced-10-year-imprisonment-blasphemy-appeals-judgment>

<sup>12</sup> 'Kano blasphemy killing: Where is justice for Bridget Agbahime?', *Pambazuka News*, 17 November 2016: <https://www.pambazuka.org/human-security/kano-blasphemy-killing-where-justice-bridget-agbahime>

<sup>13</sup> 'Nigeria: Blasphemy - Rioters Burn Police Outpost, Injure 12', allAfrica, 20 June 2009: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200906221085.html>

<sup>14</sup> 'Nigeria: Mob Kills 50-Year-Old Man for "Blasphemy"', allAfrica, 11 August 2008: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200808110940.html>

<sup>15</sup> 'Humanist Association of Nigeria achieves formal recognition after 17-year campaign', Humanists International, 11 December 2017: <https://humanists.international/2017/12/humanist-association-nigeria-achieves-formal-recognition-17-year-campaign/>

## DEMOGRAPHICS ON THE NON-RELIGIOUS

Given the fear of imprisonment and the threats of violence described above it is not possible to be openly non-religious in Nigeria. Therefore it is very difficult to calculate what proportion of the population is non-religious. This is complicated by a lack of official statistics on religion in Nigeria, with the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics reporting that 'virtual (sic) nothing is done in terms of data collection' regarding religion.<sup>16</sup> The Pew Research Centre estimated that in 2010, 49.3% of Nigerians are Christian and 48.8% are Muslim, while less than 1% are affiliated with no religion.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, a 2011 telephone poll conducted by WIN-Gallup International and included in *The Global Index of Religion and Atheism* suggested that 4% of Nigerians reported to be 'not a religious person', with 1% describing themselves as 'a convinced atheist'.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, given the small sample size of this poll, and the threat of persecution faced for being openly non-religious in Nigeria, it is highly likely that this figure is inaccurate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The UK should stand up for freedom of religion or belief around the globe, including for the non-religious.**
- **The UK should not enter into trade deals with countries that have the death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy, or that engage in equally serious violations of freedom of speech, expression, religion, or belief.**

**For more details, information, and evidence, contact Humanists UK:**

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<sup>16</sup> Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, Religion and Related Activities: [https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary?queries\[search\]=religion](https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary?queries[search]=religion)

<sup>17</sup> Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, Religious Demography: Affiliation of Nigeria, 2010: [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/nigeria/#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010&region\\_name=All%20Countries&restrictions\\_year=2016](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/nigeria/#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010&region_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2016)

<sup>18</sup> *Global index of Religiosity and Atheism 2012*, WIN-Gallup International: <https://sidmennt.is/wp-content/uploads/Gallup-International-um-tr%C3%BA-og-tr%C3%BAleysi-2012.pdf>

## ANNEX: MUBARAK BALA'S PREVIOUS EVIDENCE TO THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE<sup>19</sup>

Self Intro: I am Mubarak Bala, the individual who was persecuted in 2014 for leaving Islam and becoming an atheist, and almost losing my life to sharia implemented in the state, and my family.

1. I would recall most moments of my childhood today and see that I really have lived as a humanist all my life, only that as adolescence kicked in, bombardments by my madrassa, the strictest of all those in north Nigeria, I pretended to behave like a religious person. I was liberal most of my life, and secular by University years. By the end of those years, a decade ago, I was agnostic, and I never hid nor kept quiet about it.

2. Asking the most celebrated cleric at the time, about the benefits of killing a gecko lizard for a 100 reward, and the answers I got, consolidated my suspicion that Muhammad's thought and philosophy are too narrow to have any say in my life. I was 5 years into my freethought when my family dumped me in a psychiatric hospital, for my posts on Facebook. My father then took my phone, posted the Islamic testimony sentence while I was being drugged unconscious, by a federal medical doctor.

3. The evidence against my sanity were, not adding PBUH to the name Muhammad, denying 'history', Adam/Eve story as fact of our origin, blasphemy, saying Allah is imagined, saying there is no life after I die. I was given antipsychotic drugs and epilepsy drugs, so strong that I lost orientation most times I took them, I tried to avoid them when I could. Friends around the world led by Humanists International, [then] IHEU, helped free me, and I was let go. Legal proceedings against my family dropped, but I intended suing the unprofessional federal hospital, there was no support, I thought since my case was even mentioned in the UK parliament, (I was shown the video in 2014), I could see officials asking if I needed help, medically or legally, only the US embassy did. Later, as I sought assistance for preliminary legal fees, the UK govt had no facility for such in my country, or I was not aware if there was, it was Freedom House in Washington D.C that helped.

4. Much later, when Boko Haram leader threatened me in one of his videos, it was friends online that raised some token for me to seek asylum away, it was \$1,600 they could raise, I sought a UK visa and it was rejected. I did not know any avenue from the UK that could have sponsored me as they did with others like Malala [from] Pakistan or Jamila in Sudan, the lady that married a Christian, the recent cases then.

5. I was sent away from home, immediately the media hype died down, and they did not live by the peace deal we reached, but I could not pursue any legal case, even the Nigerian government that assured me protection, after a barrage of mob threats, vanished. I was forlorn. Friends vanished, I became an IDP, a few I met online, were too far, I thought of trekking through the Sahara northwards, I thought of ending it all, since no one cared, but I braved on. The only thing I could do, was to maintain a presence online, like my life depended on it, because it did.

6. For the next five years to date, this is what I do, finding jobs and losing them when they know who indeed I am, losing rent, when the neighborhood realizes I am an atheist, but being online made the world know I still am there, my silence for too long, must be investigated, that's my hope. This is how I live now.

7. But I have helped a lot of people like me now, we have formed our own community, and get assistance time to time from other bodies, as well as give jobs that we could secure within our circle, to a point that, the society has

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<sup>19</sup> *Written Evidence submitted by Mubarak Bala of Nigeria (FRB0018)*, Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into freedom of or belief, 2019: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/human-rights-freedom-of-religion-and-belief-and-human-rights-defenders/written/105613.html>

now adapted to live with us with no threats of death, only other trivial threats such as ostracism, threats of eternal torture, or threat with poverty and hunger, the government, no matter how we complain, never take substantive action, even treating us as a threat.

8. We, the Nigeria Humanist community, lead many others in Africa, with guidance and coordination, to form an even bigger body that would have a stronger voice and clout to influence policy, and ensure human rights for not just Christians and other minorities under threat, but also people fleeing from religions.

9. We are many, and we still see the West, the UK being the most qualified, given our history, to educate and stand for rights to life and belief. As well as render assistance in instances where life is under threat, with provision of options and legal backing.

Thank you,

Mubarak Bala,  
President, Humanist Association of Nigeria

***May 2021***