

The Honorable Tony Perkins
Chair, U.S. Commission on
International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite A714
Washington, D.C. 20401

The Honorable Nadine Maenza
Vice Chair, U.S. Commission on
International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite A714
Washington, D.C. 20401

The Honorable Gayle Manchin
Vice Chair, U.S. Commission on
International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite A714
Washington, D.C. 20401

May 1, 2020

RE: Detention of Mubarak Bala, President of the Nigerian Humanist Association

Dear Chairman Perkins and Vice Chairs Manchin and Maenza:

The undersigned leaders of atheist, humanist, and secular groups write to bring to your attention the case of **Mubarak Bala**, President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, who was arrested at his home in Kaduna by police from Kano State Police Command on April 28, 2020.¹ At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether Mr. Bala has been formally charged.

Mr. Bala's arrest followed a petition filed with the Police Commissioner of Kano Command on April 27 by a local law firm who allege that Bala insulted the Prophet Muhammad in his Facebook posts in violation Section 26(1)(c) of the Cybercrimes Act, which criminalizes insult of any persons due to their belonging to a group distinguished by their religion, among other characteristics, and is punishable by a fine and/or up to five years' imprisonment. The petitioners also allege that Mr. Bala's posts will incite the Muslim community and lead to public disturbance, a violation of Section 210 of the Penal Code of Kano State.

For more information, please see the attached briefing from Humanists International, an international non-governmental organization which advocates for secularism, human rights, and equality.

On April 30, the Police Commissioner for Kaduna State confirmed that Mr. Bala had been transferred to Kano State Police Command. However, according to his legal team, the

¹ McManus, John. "Nigerian Humanist Detained for 'Provoking Muslims'." BBC News. April 29, 2020. Available online at <https://bbc.in/35nBT5F>

Commissioner of Kano State Police Command has not yet confirmed that Bala is in their custody.

Since renouncing Islam in 2014, Mr. Bala has been the victim of death threats and harassment. In June of that year, he was held against his will in a psychiatric facility in Kano state.² As such, the undersigned organizations and our international partners are deeply concerned for his welfare.

We fear that Mr. Bala is being targeted solely for his exercise of his rights of freedom of belief and freedom of expression, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution and international and regional instruments to which Nigeria is a signatory—freedoms which are at the core of the mission of the USCIRF.

We ask that the Commission takes immediate action to urge the Nigerian authorities to:

- Clarify Mr. Bala’s legal status and release him if he is not charged within the 24-hour time frame stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;
- Transfer Mr. Bala to a neutral territory, such as Lagos, where it is more likely that he will receive a fair trial, if any trial were to take place;
- Guarantee Mr. Bala’s well-being and safety while he remains in detention, particularly in light of the many death threats he has received, and the increased risks posed to him as a prisoner during the COVID-19 outbreak.

² Associated Press in Lagos. “Nigerian Atheist Faces Death Threats After Release from Psychiatric Ward.” The Guardian. July 3, 2014. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/nigerian-man-insane-atheist-bala-islam>

Thank you for your leadership and attention to critical religious freedom issues across the globe. We appreciate your consideration of our request. Should you have any questions, please contact Rachel Deitch, Policy and Social Justice Manager at the American Humanist Association, at rdeitch@americanhumanist.org or via telephone at (202) 238-9088.

Sincerely,

Nick Fish
President
American Atheists

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Robyn Blumner
President & CEO
Center for Inquiry

Mandisa Thomas
President
Black Nonbelievers

Muhammad Syed
President
Ex-Muslims of North America

Kevin Bolling
Executive Director
Secular Student Alliance

Debbie Allen
Executive Director
Secular Coalition for America

Kim Newton
Executive Director
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Paul Golin
Executive Director
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David Tamayo
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Hispanic American Freethinkers

Margaret Downey
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Mark W. Gura
Executive Director
Atheist Alliance of America

Noelle George
President
Foundation Beyond Belief

Jason Torpy
President
Military Association of Atheists and
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Terry Waslow
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