

Table of Contents

- ***USCIRF releases new report on violence impacting religious freedom***
 - ***Court sentences Mubarak Bala to 24 years imprisonment for blasphemy***
 - ***Catholic priest abducted, parish worker killed in Kaduna***
 - ***Blasphemy: USCIRF Commissioner Davie calls for the immediate release of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu***
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USCIRF releases new report on violence impacting religious freedom

USCIRF (06.09/2022) - <https://bit.ly/3QI9Ycj> - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) has released the following new report:

Violence and Religious Freedom in Nigeria – This policy update identifies the ways in which widespread violence by nonstate actors in Nigeria threaten freedom of religion or belief. Examples detailed in the report include militant Islamist group violence, some forms of identity-based violence, mob violence, and violence impacting worship. It also explores the role that poor governance plays in driving much of this violence, as well as the impact on religious freedom of several aggravating factors exacerbating insecurity, including localized religious discrimination, the politicization of religion, and wider demographic and economic trends. The report concludes by highlighting the U.S. government’s responsibility to respond to religious freedom violations and rising atrocity risk in Nigeria, as mandated by U.S. law, and laying out policy response options.

In its **2022 Annual Report**, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. State Department designate **Nigeria** as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. In June 2022, a USCIRF **delegation** visited Nigeria and published a **USCIRF Spotlight Podcast** episode detailing the visit’s findings and takeaways.

Court sentences Mubarak Bala to 24 years imprisonment for blasphemy

By Dennis Erezi

The Guardian (05.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3r8ihi9> - Kano State high court has sentenced a Nigerian atheist Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison after being convicted of blasphemy against Islam.

[Bala was arrested in 2020](#) in Kaduna state, and transferred to Kano, his home state. He has been in detention since then.

On April 27 2020, Bala compared popular Lagos pastor and president of Synagogue Church of Nations Prophet TB Joshua to Prophet Mohammed.

"There's no difference between prophet TB Joshua (S.A.W) of Lagos and Muhammadu (A.S.) of Saudi Arabia, it is better for our Nigeria to be terrorism," Bala said wrote on his Facebook page.

In another post, Bala said, "Whoever believes religion has been duped – If you cant take blasphemy against Islam, criticism of its doctrines, this page is not for you. I have not even started ooo."

"Religion insults human reason and conscience, duped me that I have another lifetime," Mubarak said in his Facebook bio.

His posts were greeted with threats of arrest for blasphemy in the comment section. Unbothered about his stance against Islam, Bala said the threat was from 'morons' who should know better.

Days later, a group of lawyers petitioned the Kano State Police command to prosecute Bala for insulting Prophet Muhammad.

Bala renounced his Islamic faith in 2014.

The 37-year-old president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria pleaded guilty to all 18 charges and asked for leniency.

While pleading with the court on Tuesday to tender justice with mercy, Bala promised not to repeat the said blasphemous post, saying he did not know it would elicit the sort of reactions it got when he shared them.

The judge, Justice Farouk Lawan, and the convict's lawyer, James Ibori, had tried to convince him against his guilty plea but the convict insisted he knew what he was doing and maintained his plea.

Bala's lawyer told the court that his client had a mental problem, for which he was treated at Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, Kano.

Photo: Nigerian atheist, Mubarak Bala

Catholic priest abducted, parish worker killed in Kaduna

By Odiwuor Opiyo

CISA (11.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3I6N6cL> - A catholic priest in Nigeria, Rev Fr Joseph Akete Beko, was kidnapped in the wee hours of Tuesday morning according to an official statement by the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna.

"We regret to officially confirm the incident of abduction of one of our priests, Rev Fr Joseph Akete Beko from his residence at St John Catholic Church, Kudenda, at about 1:30 am on Tuesday, 8th March 2022," read the statement.

The statement also said the security guard, a Mr Luka Phillip, was killed and four other people alongside the priest were abducted from the neighbouring houses.

"We call on all men and women of goodwill to continue to pray for the safe release of Fr Joseph Akete Bako and the other innocent persons abducted with him; for the peaceful repose of Mr Luka Philip and divine consolation upon his bereaved family," implored Rev Fr Christian Okewu Emmanuel, the Chancellor of the Catholic Archdiocese of Kaduna.

Rev Fr Beko is yet another victim of the increasing wave of terror unleashed on Christians in Nigeria by perceived Islamic extremist groups since 2009 when the Boko Haram insurgency began.

Ethnic conflicts between the predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers in the country over grazing land has further complicated the question of religious tolerance.

On February 6, 2022, another priest, Rev. Fr. Joseph Danjuma Shekari was also abducted by unknown gunmen from the Rectory at St. Monica's Catholic Church, Ikulu Pari in Kauru Local Government Area, Kaduna State. He was, however, returned safely after a day, according to a report by Fr. Emmanuel Uchechukwu the then chancellor of Nigeria's Kafanchan Diocese.

"With hearts filled with joy, we raise our voices in a symphony of praises as we announce the return of our brother, Rev. Fr. Joseph Danjuma Shekari, who was abducted by armed persons," he said at the time.

In the incident, the Parish cook was killed.

In 2021, Fr. Izu Marcel Onyeocha, a member of the Congregation of Missionaries, Sons of the Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Claretians) was kidnapped and later freed.

"May God bring to an end this evil of abduction and terrorism in our land," prayed Rev Fr Okewu.

Blasphemy: USCIRF Commissioner Davie calls for the immediate release of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu

USCIRF (04.03.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Cirets> – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (**USCIRF**) called for the release of Muslim gospel singer and member of the Tijaniyya Sufi Islamic order **Yahaya Sharif-Aminu** on the second anniversary of his arrest.

“USCIRF urges Nigerian authorities to immediately release Yahaya Sharif-Aminu and guarantee his safety,” said **Commissioner Frederick A. Davie** who advocates for Sharif-Aminu as part of **USCIRF’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project**. *“Convicting this man on blasphemy charges for expressing his beliefs is reprehensible—and sentencing him to death for such actions is absurd. He does not deserve to be detained for two years, let alone sentenced to death. And allowing a mob to burn down his family home with impunity only adds further insult to this grievous injury.”*

On March 4, 2020, a mob **burned down** Sharif-Aminu’s family home after he was accused of performing and sharing a song considered blasphemous in WhatsApp. Later that same month, Nigerian authorities arrested him on blasphemy charges. On August 10, 2020, a Kano court sentenced Sharif-Aminu to death for blasphemy, in violation of Section 382 (B) of the Kano State Sharia Penal Code Law. On January 21, 2021, the High Court of Kano State’s appellate division overturned his death sentence, citing irregularities, and ordered a retrial. Last month, the Court of Appeals in Kano postponed the retrial until May 12, 2022, agreeing to the Kano State government’s request for more time to file its response.

“Sharif-Aminu’s treatment violates international human rights standards and the Nigerian Constitution, but Nigerian authorities still have an opportunity to turn this situation around,” added Commissioner Davie. *“The United States government should pressure Nigerian authorities to ensure Yahaya’s release and safety and that of his family. The U.S. government also should work with Nigerian authorities to repeal blasphemy laws still present in state-sponsored courts.”*

In recent years, Kano state authorities have perpetrated some of Nigeria’s most egregious religious freedom violations. They have arrested, charged, and/or convicted several individuals for blasphemy, prohibited broadcast stations from airing religious content, restricted religious poets and performers, and arrested and detained individuals from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community based on their official interpretation and enforcement of Sharia.

In its **2021 Annual Report**, USCIRF recommended that the State Department redesignate **Nigeria** as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. USCIRF was **appalled** when the State Department removed Nigeria from its designation as a CPC in November 2021 after designating Nigeria for the first time in December 2020. Additionally, USCIRF published a recent factsheet on **religious freedom conditions in Nigeria’s Kano State** and an episode of the **USCIRF Spotlight podcast** on why redesignating Nigeria as a CPC is warranted.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to

deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a commissioner, please contact USCIRF at media@uscirf.gov.

Photo : [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#)
