

The Hon. Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
The State Department
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

May 15th, 2020

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We are Christian faith-based NGOs working on religious freedom violations around the world. As you are aware, Nigeria has significant challenges to religious freedom. Many of our organizations are engaged on the case of [Leah Sharibu](#), a young Christian prisoner of conscience held by a Boko Haram faction because she would not renounce her faith. The Nigerian government has done far too little to seek her release.

Sadly, the Nigerian government's poor performance on prisoner of conscience issues has not been limited to a lack of action related to individuals held by non-state actors. Indeed, many within the religious freedom sector have raised concerns about how the Nigerian Government has held Shia Muslim leader Sheik Zakzaky [against Nigerian court orders](#).

Now that practice has expanded to the arrest and detention of secularists by state-level governments. Specifically, Mubarak Bala, the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, who was arrested on April 28th, 2020 by Kaduna State police. Groups that have worked with him report:

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 of Section 26(1)(c) of the Cybercrimes Act...(and) 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. Since leaving Islam in 2014, Mr. Bala has been the victim of death threats and harassment. In June the same year, he was held against his will in a psychiatric facility in Kano state. As such, freedom of religion organizations 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.

It has come to our attention that those same secularist groups have produced the following requests of the State Department:

(T)o take immediate action to urge the Nigerian authorities to:

- *Clarify Mr. Bala's legal status and his whereabouts, and release him, immediately and unconditionally, if he was not charged within the 24-hour time frame stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;*
- *Grant Mr. Bala free and unimpeded access to his legal counsel;*
- *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 against him 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.*

As Christian organizations, we strongly echo these requests. We have seen prisoners of conscience either abandoned or imprisoned by the Nigerian authorities. As Christians, our faith teaches us to stand against injustices that harm our neighbors, regardless of their faith or beliefs. Additionally, the violation of any individual's freedom of religion, belief, and expression is a threat to all people's rights.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Nathan Wineinger, Director of Policy and Coalitions at 21Wilberforce (nathan@21wilberforce.org).

Signing Organizations:

21Wilberforce

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)

Baptist World Alliance

Christian Freedom International

Christian Solidarity International - USA

Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy

Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC)

In Defense of Christians

Institute for Global Engagement

International Christian Concern

International Committee on Nigeria (ICON)

Jubilee Campaign

Open Doors USA

Tahrir Alnisa Foundation (TAF)