



Nigeria: **A Country of Particular Concern** **Attacks Against Religious Communities Has Not Decreased**

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A Vital Voice for Those Suffering in Silence

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JUBILEE CAMPAIGN IS A NON-PROFIT, TAX EXEMPT, CHARITABLE ORGANIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

This brief summary report outlines three of the major concerns we have noted in Nigeria as reported by the US State Department, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and UN bodies and civil society organizations: the application of blasphemy laws in northern states, the continued violence against religious communities and the government inaction and deflection of criticism.

Some recent concerning statistics coming from Nigeria:

[Nigeria Security Tracker] At least 2,043 abduction victims from January-April 2021.

[ICON] At least 2,557 kidnappings in 2021, as of June 2021.

[Jubilee Campaign] At least 15 reported abductions of religious leaders, with at least eight killed in 2021 alone.

[Human Rights Without Frontiers] 3,462 Christians killed by Islamist militant groups in 2021.¹

Arbitrary detentions of individuals based on their religion or belief in 2020:

- Authorities have detained Sufi **Yahaya Aminu Shariff** on death row since August 2020. The Kano State High Court ordered a retrial in January 2021.
- Authorities in Kano state have detained Humanist **Mubarak Bala** since April 2020, despite a Federal High Court ruling calling for his release in December 2020. Not until August 2021 were formal charges brought against Mubarak Bala.

¹ admin_HRWF. "NIGERIA: 3,462 Christians Hacked to Death by Nigerian Jihadists in 200 Days: Human Rights Without Frontiers." *Human Rights Without Frontiers* |, 26 July 2021, hrwf.eu/nigeria-3462-christians-hacked-to-death-by-nigerian-jihadists-in-200-days/.

1. The Application of Blasphemy Laws in Northern States and Discrimination of Religious Minorities

USCIRF has been designating Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern since 2009 in their annual reports but in its most recent 2021 report USCIRF was particularly concerned by the recent applications of the Sharia penal code in the northern Nigerian states. There, “state-sanctioned Sharia courts” have issued “harsh sentences” for alleged blasphemy, including the death penalty in 2020.² Kano authorities have kept 22-year-old Muslim musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu detained under death row since August 2020 and detained prominent humanist activist and atheist ex-muslim Mubarak Bala since April 2020, despite a Federal Court ruling calling for his release in December 2020.³ The same Sharia court in Kano state that sentenced the musician to death then later sentenced a teenager to 10 years in prison with hard labor for speech used in a private argument with a friend under its blasphemy laws.⁴ Authorities kept the teenager detained for up to five months before his conviction was finally overturned with the help of a good legal team and international pressure.⁵

In addition to these cases, the UN Human Rights Committee in 2019 raised concerns regarding the religious freedom situation generally in northern Nigeria. The Committee mentioned the “discrimination against Christians in the northern states in terms of access to education, employment and land permits to build churches.”⁶ The report also raised concern about the existence of hate speech and incitement to religious hatred and violence, again, “particularly in the northern states against religious minorities.”⁷ In addition, Boko Haram, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) and its splinter groups have justified their violence and killings under apostasy and blasphemy laws.⁸

A United Nations communication from September 2019 also raised concern about the “excessive use of force”⁹ by Nigerian police towards members of a Shia minority group, Islamic Movement of Nigeria, during a demonstration in 2019. Authorities have also kept Shia Muslim leader Ibrahim El Zakzaky and his wife incarcerated since 2015. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention established that the arrest of Zakzaky and his wife was arbitrary and called for his release.¹⁰ A court decision in July 2021 acquits the couple, however,

new charges have been filed in Kaduna state which could delay the couple’s release further.¹¹

2 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF Annual Report 2021 - Tier 1: US-CIRF-recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Nigeria, April 2021, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Nigeria%20Chapter%20AR2021.pdf>.

3 “Yahaya Sharif-Aminu.” USCIRF, 5 Aug. 2021, www.uscirtf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/yahaya-sharif-aminu; “Mubarak Bala.” USCIRF, 7 Aug. 2021, www.uscirtf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/mubarak-bala.

4 Busari, S. (2021, January 30). *Outrage as Nigeria sentences teenage boy to 10 years in prison for blasphemy*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/16/africa/blasphemy-nigeria-boy-sentenced-intl/index.html>.

5 McSweeney, Eoin. “Nigerian Teen Jailed for Blasphemy HAS SENTENCE QUASHED.” CNN, Cable News Network, 22 Jan. 2021, www.cnn.com/2021/01/22/africa/boy-blasphemy-free-nigeria-intl/index.html.

6 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on Nigeria in the absence of its second periodic report, 29 August 2019. CCPR/C/NGA/CO/2. para 44.

7 Ibid. para 45.

8 Taylor, Dr. Jenny. “Why Muslims Are Killing Muslims in Nigeria.” Religion Unplugged, Religion Unplugged, 30 Oct. 2020, religionunplugged.com/news/2020/10/30/why-muslims-are-killing-muslims-in-nigeria.

9 UN Special Procedures [primary author: Working Group on Arbitrary Detention], *Information received concerning allegations of excessive use of force by Nigerian police officers against members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN)*, 27 September 2019, AL NGA 5/2019.

10 Human Rights Council, *Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its eighty-third session, 19-23 November 2018 Opinion No. 81/2018 concerning Ibraheem El-Zakzaky and Zeenah Ibraheem (Nigeria)*, 10 January 2019, A/HRC/WGAD/2018/81. para. 43.

11 Al Jazeera. “Nigerian Court Acquits SHIA Leader El-Zakzaky of All Charges.” *Nigeria News | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 29 July 2021, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/29/nigerian-court-acquits-shia-leader-ibrahim-zakzaky-of-all-charges; Tauna, Amos. “Kaduna

The blasphemy laws in Nigeria, and the way they are being used, raise serious concern as they appear to be predominately used against religious or belief minorities and excessively target and restrict their freedom of speech. International law is clear that any limitation of speech must remain an exception and strictly follow international human rights standards.¹² Nigeria is a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and to give effect to freedom of speech enshrined in the treaty, but also the right to freedom of religion or belief and the minority protection In Article 27, it must repeal its blasphemy laws.

In addition, the US House and Senate passed two resolutions calling for the global repeal of apostasy and blasphemy laws. The two resolutions H. Res 512 and S. Res 458, called on the State Department to, in addition to calling for the release of religious prisoners of conscience, designate countries that implement apostasy or blasphemy laws to be designated as CPCs, “as a result of the abuses flowing from the enforcement of such laws and from unpunished vigilante violence often generated by blasphemy allegations,” this can be seen in the blasphemy case of the teenager, where following the conviction mobs forced the teenager’s mother to flee her hometown.¹³ These resolutions were passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

2. Continued Violence Against Religious Communities and Individuals

Added to the systemic discrimination, state-led arbitrary arrests and detentions in Nigeria, is the ongoing violence carried out by Islamist and other militant groups, often targeting religious communities. As noted in the IRF 2020 State Department report, “religious figures and houses of worship were often victims [of the violence].”¹⁴ Nigeria Security Tracker has reported at least 2,043 kidnapping victims from January-April 2021. ICON has recorded a number of at least 2,557 kidnapped in 2021, as of June 2021. There have been at least 15 reported abductions of religious leaders, with at least eight killed in 2021 alone with an NGO based in Nigeria reporting 3,462 Christians killed by Islamist militant groups in 2021.¹⁵

Militant groups have targeted Christian and Muslim schools with abductions, disproportionately targeting female girls and Christian students.¹⁶ The state response to the attacks on schools is to close them. Most recently Kaduna state authorities ordered 13 schools shut after the abduction of 140 students from Bethel Baptist High School.¹⁷ The United Nations children’s agency, UNICEF, estimates that more than about 1,120 schools are closed across north-western Nigeria. According to conservative estimates armed men have abducted at least

Files Fresh Charges against Ibraheem El-Zakzaky.” *Daily Post Nigeria*, Daily Post Nigeria, 30 July 2021, dailypost.ng/2021/07/30/kaduna-files-fresh-charges-against-ibraheem-el-zakzaky/; “Why New CHARGE Filed by Kaduna Government Against SHIITES Leader, El-Zakzaky Is Useless- Falana.” *Sahara Reporters*, 1 Aug. 2021, saharareporters.com/2021/08/01/why-new-charge-filed-kaduna-government-against-shiites-leader-el-zakzaky-useless%E2%80%93falana.

12 United Nations, General Assembly. *Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance*** A/72/365. (28 August 2017). *Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, Historic consensus on freedoms of religion and expression at risk, say UN experts*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26937&LangID=E>; United Nations, General Assembly, *Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*, Irene Khan, 13 April 2021. para. 38.

13 McSweeney, Eoin., *supra* note 3.

14 United States Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom - Nigeria*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nigeria/>.

15 admin HRWF. “NIGERIA: 3,462 Christians Hacked to Death by Nigerian Jihadists in 200 Days: Human Rights Without Frontiers.” *Human Rights Without Frontiers* |, 26 July 2021, hrwf.eu/nigeria-3462-christians-hacked-to-death-by-nigerian-jihadists-in-200-days/.

16 Busari, S. (2021, June 1). *More than 150 children are missing in Latest nigeria KIDNAPPING RAID*. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/31/africa/gunmen-abduct-children-nigeria-intl/index.html>.

17 *Nigerian state Closes schools after 140 Students Kidnapped*. Voice of America. 6 July 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/nigerian-state-closes-schools-after-140-students-kidnapped>.

950 students since December 2020.¹⁸

In addition, abductors exploit the children subjecting them to sexual violence or other forms of torture, using them as suicide bombers, child soldiers and sex slaves. In 2018, Boko Haram kidnapped 110 schoolgirls from their dormitory in Dapchi, Yobe State. While 104 of them have been released, Boko Haram continues to keep captive one of them, Leah Sharibu, for refusing to convert to Islam, the five others have reportedly died in custody.¹⁹ Boko Haram forcibly converted Leah to Islam and married her off to a Boko Haram commander.²⁰

The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial and summary killings also reported on the increased violence in Nigeria and raised the flag already in 2019, calling on Nigeria to take concerted actions to address the violence saying, “The state of the administration of justice in Nigeria gives rise to extreme concern,” and that there are “patterns -country-wide- of: failure, to protect communities against attacks by armed groups resulting in widespread insecurity.”²¹

3. Government Deflects Concern Raised by Its Citizens and International Bodies

The government of Nigeria has been quick to release statements chastising individuals or entities who raise concerns about the security situation in Nigeria while remaining silent on human rights violations, and especially, the situation of religious communities.²²

The government has used intimidation towards individuals raising concerns about the increased violence and kidnappings and government inaction. The government has accused them of politicising the situation, uncritical thinking or of just, “blaming the government under the able leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari.”²³ The government has since 2019 criticised the following individuals and entities: the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial and arbitrary executions²⁴, the UK All-Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief²⁵ and recently accused Catholic Archbishop Kukah of lying, for speaking out about the kidnappings of schoolchildren during a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission congressional hearing in July 2021.²⁶

18 Concerns deepen over attacks against children and child abductions in parts of west and Central Africa. UNICEF. (2021, August 4). <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/concerns-deepen-over-attacks-against-children-and-child-abductions-parts-west-and>.

19 “Leah Sharibu.” *USCIRF*, 4 Aug. 2021, www.uscifr.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/current-rpocs/leah-sharibu; “Nigeria DAPCHI Abductions: Schoolgirls Finally Home.” *BBC News*, BBC, 25 Mar. 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43535872.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Human Rights Council, *Visit to Nigeria: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*, Agnès Callamard, 11 June 2021. A/HRC/47/33/Add.2.para 101.

22 Campaign, Jubilee. “PRESS Release: NGOs RELEASE Rejoinder to Nigeria Response to Uk Appg REPORT ‘Nigeria: Genocide Unfolding?’.” *Jubilee Campaign USA*, 3 Feb. 2021, jubileecampaign.org/press-release-ngos-release-rejoinder-to-nigeria-response-to-uk-appg-report-nigeria-genocide-unfolding/.

23 Aso Rock Villa | The Federal Government of Nigeria, State House Press Release: UN Rapporteur of Violence in Nigeria Disappointing, *Facebook*, September 2010, https://www.facebook.com/TheAsoVilla/posts/1098069673717094?_tn_=%2CO*F, accessed 4 August 2021.

24 *Ibid.*

25 @GarShehu, (Garba Shehu, Official Spokesperson to the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria), “Although it is difficult reading, the statement also acknowledges the importance of accurate, unbiased, depoliticised and truthful information when it comes to understanding the realities and addressing the challenges for those of faith in Nigeria.” *Twitter*, June 19, 2020, <https://twitter.com/GarShehu/status/1273956683803475972?s=20>, accessed 4 August 2021.

26 Aso Rock Villa | The Federal Government of Nigeria, *State House Press Release: Response by the Presidency to the Statement Made by Bishop Kukah Before the United States Congress*, *Facebook*, July 18, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/TheAsoVilla%2F-posts%2F1624259231098133>, accessed 4 August 2021.

The remarks against Archbishop Kukah are particularly distressing, given threats made by an Islamic group in January 2021 calling for his expulsion from Sokoto state.²⁷ At the time the government did release a statement addressing the group who threatened Kukah, saying that their demands were, “not in line” with the Constitution of Nigeria which protects the right to freedom of expression and freedom of movement. Spokesperson Gehu, however, conditioned the right to freedom of speech by saying that all Nigerians must respect the “rights and sensitivities” of others, adding that Father Kukah had through his remarks, “greatly offended many,” and that action should be taken through the court system.²⁸ The use of language such as “sensitivities” to justify a limit on speech is too vague and indirectly supports blasphemy laws.

The government has also in some cases responded to legitimate government criticism with violence and arbitrary detention. This can be seen in the arrest and detention of journalist human rights defenders Omoyele Sowore, Olawale Bakare and Agba Jalingo and the arrest and detentions of #ENDSARS protestors.²⁹

An example of government silence can be seen in the case of Mubarak Bala, despite the Kano authorities’ unlawful detention of humanist Mubarak Bala for blasphemy, no Federal Government official or member of Buhari’s administration have spoken out calling for his release. Authorities have also not condemned the death sentence handed down to musician Yahaya, despite receiving a communication from the UN experts and special procedures in April 2021.

Nigeria has received at total of 10 joint and individual communications from the UN Special procedures, from 2020 till today and has not responded to any of them. The communications have been authored by the numerous Special Rapporteurs, raising serious concerns regarding extrajudicial killings, torture, trafficking in persons, slavery, sale of children, freedom of religion or belief, freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, freedom of opinion and expression, human rights defenders, terrorism, minority issues, cultural rights, arbitrary detention, independence of judges and lawyers, education and health.³⁰

27 “CAN Defends Kukah, Demands Arrest of People THREATENING Bishop.” *Punch Newspapers*, 15 Jan. 2021, punchng.com/can-defends-kukah-demands-arrest-of-people-threatening-bishop/;

28 @GarShehu, “The reported ultimatum by a group based in Sokoto, “Muslim Solidarity Forum,” calling on the Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Most Rev Matthew Hassan Kukah to tender an unreserved apology to the entire Muslim Ummah over his recent...” THREAD, <https://twitter.com/GarShehu/status/1349421483794313220>. Accessed 5 August 2021; Reporters, Our. “CAN Defends Kukah, Demands Arrest of People THREATENING Bishop.” *Punch Newspapers*, 15 Jan. 2021, punchng.com/can-defends-kukah-demands-arrest-of-people-threatening-bishop/;

29 “Nigeria: Sowore, BAKARE AND Jalingo Declared Prisoners of Conscience.” *Amnesty International*, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/nigeria-sowore-bakare-and-jalingo-declared-prisoners-of-conscience/; George, Libby, and Paul Carsten. “Threats, Detentions and Frozen ASSETS: Nigeria’s PROTESTERS Depict Pattern of Intimidation.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 30 Nov. 2020, www.reuters.com/article/nigeria-protests-aftermath-insight/threats-detentions-and-frozen-assets-nigerias-protesters-depict-pattern-of-intimidation-idUSKBN28A19W.

30 UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR on executions] *Information received concerning the arbitrary killings of a girl and of a young student reportedly perpetrated by the police, in Berger, Iyana Oworo, Lagos State, and Nsukka town, Enugu, respectively*, 4 May 2022, JAL [NGA 3/2021](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR on freedom of religion or belief], *Information received regarding the allegations of prolonged arbitrary arrest and detention of Mr. Mubarak Bala*, 26 April 2021, JUA [NGA 2/2021](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR trafficking in persons], *Information received concerning allegations of mass abduction and trafficking of children in the Northern region of Nigeria*, 25 Feb. 2021, JUA [NGA 1/2021](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR freedom of peaceful assembly], *Information received concerning threats of arson and destruction made against the Director of NGO Amnesty International Nigeria, Mrs. Osai Ojigbo and the staff of the organisation, if they fail to leave the country*, 13 Nov 2020, JUA [NGA 7/2020](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR freedom of peaceful assembly], *Information received concerning the alleged excessive use of force by police and soldiers against individuals protesting police brutality leading to the deaths of several protesters, as well as the lack of investigations into human rights violations allegedly committed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)*, 28 Oct 2020, [NGA 6/2020](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR terrorism], *Information received concerning the proscription of the “Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)” in September 2017 as a terrorist organization*, 1 Oct 2020, JAL [NGA 5/2020](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR cultural rights], *Information received regarding the death sentence given to Mr. Yahaya Sharif-Aminu who was convicted of blasphemy*, 18 Sep 2020, JUA [NGA 4/2020](#); UN Special procedures [primary author: SR religion or belief], *Information received regarding alleged arbitrary detention of Mr. Mubarak Bala*, 4 May 2020, JUA [NGA 3/2020](#); UN SR housing, *Information received concerning the person living in homelessness in Nigeria*, 5 Feb 2020, AL [NGA 2/2020](#); UN Special Procedures [primary author: SR poverty], *Information received concerning the escalation of the Lagos State Government’s renewed plans to privatize important parts of the water system in Lagos, despite widespread public opposition*, 15 Jan 2020, JAL [NGA 1/2020](#).

Statements made by the government deflecting any criticism and not effectively addressing the violence reported by authoritative institutions is concerning as it creates greater frustration and despondency among affected communities, exacerbating the polarisation the government purports to be fighting, as noted by the UN Special Rapporteur Callamard.³¹

Recommendations

We appeal to the State Department to redesignate Nigeria as a CPC as it will grant the State Department - in contrast to the Special Watch List designation - the ability to exert real pressure on Nigeria if it does not immediately and effectively: address the violence against religious communities and provide protection to them, and ensure the release of individuals arbitrarily detained on the grounds of their religion or belief, including children like Leah Sharibu who are victims of the abductions.

While the previous administration granted a National Interest waiver for Nigeria, despite the existence of child soldiers, we urge the current administration to not do so and through the CPC designation ensure the designation has the desired effect - the cessation of violence against all religious communities and the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief which benefits the whole of Nigeria.

Additional Organizations

Christian Freedom International
Saint Nicholas Freedom Group
United Macedonian Diaspora

³¹ Human Rights Council, *Visit to Nigeria: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard*, 11 June 2021. A/HRC/47/33/Add.2, para 8.