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NIGERIA | Former secretary of Christian Association wins international religious freedom award

The former National Secretary of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Engineer Samuel Salifu, has become the fifth recipient of the Stefanus Prize for religious freedom. Mr Salifu received the award during a ceremony in Oslo, Norway on 9 November.

The Stefanus Prize was initiated in 2005 by the Stefanus Alliance International, a religious freedom organization formerly known as the Norwegian Mission to the East (NMTE), and is awarded to "a person who has been prominent in the public sphere - nationally or internationally - as a fearless campaigner for human rights, and particularly religious freedom." Former recipients of the prize include Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria.

During his acceptance speech Mr. Salifu spoke of the religious repression in northern Nigeria that pre-dated the independence era and became heightened following the upgrading of Nigeria's membership of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC - now known as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), which occurred without national or parliamentary consultation. He also spoke of his experience when, as CAN Secretary for Northern Nigeria, his forthright stand against religious injustice and discrimination resulted in a period on death row, after being falsely accused by the ruling military regime of involvement in a coup plot. He described being set free after former US President George W Bush Snr requested the release of a personal friend who was facing death on the same trumped up charge. Mr. Salifu concluded his speech by urging those in attendance to stand for righteousness regardless of the personal cost.

Mr. Salifu is currently on the board of CSW-Nigeria and is completing a biography that details the history of Christianity and persecution in Nigeria's northern and central states.

Reverend Yunusa Nmadu, CEO of CSW Nigeria, said, "CSW Nigeria congratulates one of our own on receiving an award that has not only encouraged him personally, but is also an encouragement to our organization. This will go a long way towards strengthening our work as human rights advocates."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, "We congratulate Mr. Salifu on receiving this prestigious award, which is well-deserved. We are delighted that his steadfast dedication and fearless contribution to the struggle for religious freedom and peace building in northern and central Nigeria over several decades has been recognized internationally, and will continue to support him in his efforts to ensure justice, peace and reconciliation between the major religious communities in the country."