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NIGERIA | Suspects Discharged in Blasphemy Murder

Five suspects detained in connection with the June 2 murder of Bridget Agbahime, a 74-year-old Christian market trader, in Kano State, northern Nigeria, have been released unconditionally five months after their arrest.

Dauda Ahmed, Zubairu Abdullahi, Abdulmumeen Mustafa, Abdullahi Abubakar and Musa Abdullahi were arrested for the murder of Agbahime and charged with “inciting disturbance, joint act, mischief and culpable homicide” under sections 114, 80, 327 and 221 of the Penal Code.

On Nov. 3, Kano State’s chief magistrate Muhammad Jibril, acting on a directive from the Kano State Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, discharged the five suspects and terminated the case against them.

Agbahime, the wife of a pastor from Deeper Life Bible Church in Noman’sland, Kano, was murdered in Kofar Wambai market June 2 following a false accusation of blasphemy. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s (CSW’s) sources, despite receiving several official warnings, Ahmed, also a trader, had been harassing her for a long time, and often performed pre-prayer ablutions at the door of her shop, damaging her wares. On June 2, when she politely asked him to move away from the door, he began shouting that she had committed blasphemy. A mob of over 500 people gathered and battered Agbahime to death after dragging her out of a store owned by a Muslim trader, where she and her husband had taken refuge. Her husband was saved by the arrival of the police and subsequently returned to his ancestral home in Imo State, southern Nigeria, for his own safety.

The decision to release the five men has been met by condemnation, with commentators questioning whether a magistrate’s court can have jurisdiction over a murder case. In a statement issued Nov. 6, the Enugu State Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria urged Nigeria’s Federal Government to revisit the case, adding that the actions of the court and the

Kano State Government would embolden fanatics to attack Christians under the guise of religion.

The civil rights organization Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria described the decision as “illogical, unconstitutional […] compromised” and “a primitive attempt to stoke up inter-ethnic conflict.” It called on the Governor of Kano State and President Muhammadu Buhari to direct the Commissioner of Police in Kano State and the Inspector General of Police “to rapidly refile the matter in a proper court system so that the killers of this Nigerian citizen are charged and punished for the unprovoked murder of this innocent Igbo woman in Kano State.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The unconditional release of these suspects, one of whom we believe to be directly implicated in, if not responsible for this brutal murder, is both inexplicable and unacceptable. The continuing lack of consequences will increase the impunity surrounding blasphemy accusations, which are used to justify the most extreme acts of lawlessness, regardless of the character and integrity of the person making the accusation. In order to combat impunity and strengthen the rule of law, it is essential that no person or social grouping is seen as being above the law. CSW therefore urges the Federal authorities to ensure this decision is reviewed and that the perpetrators of this appalling murder face justice. We also call on both State and Federal authorities to be more proactive in tackling the culture of impunity and ending the weaponising of religion to justify the taking innocent lives."