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NIGERIA: Lynched for "Blasphemy"

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Deborah Samuel Yakubu, murdered in Sokoto on 12 May 2022. Still no conviction. Credit: TVC News.

Four years after Deborah Samuel Yakubu was burned on a campus, no one has been convicted.

The question she asked the crowd

On 12 May 2022, Deborah Samuel Yakubu was a nineteen-year-old Christian from Tunga Magajiya, in Rijau Local Government Area of Niger State. She was a second-year student at Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto — an ordinary undergraduate, by every account that is not trying to turn her into a symbol before she was a person. She belonged to a campus fellowship. She had family waiting at home. She was in a class WhatsApp group that was supposed to be about lectures and exams.

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Accounts of what she wrote or recorded differ, as they always do when a rumour becomes a warrant. Some classmates said she objected to religious posts crowding an academic thread. Others said she praised Christ after passing an exam. Still others claimed she had composed an audio they deemed an insult to the Prophet of Islam. The precise sentence is almost beside the point. In a functioning state, an offensive remark is answered with argument, a complaint to the college, or a charge a court can test and a defendant can contest. In Sokoto that morning it was answered with a crowd.

School security hid her in a post. A cab was said to be waiting to take her to the police. Neither held. Male students dragged her out. They beat her with sticks and stones. They put tyres on her and set her alight. Witnesses later said police fired tear gas and warning shots and then gave way.



The **Central Administrative Building** at **Shehu Shagari College of Education**, Sokoto — the campus where Deborah Samuel Yakubu was dragged from a security post, beaten, and burned on 12 May 2022. **A student who saw the lynching remembered her last words as a question.**

“What do you hope to achieve with this?”

The killing was filmed. The footage moved across phones the way a trophy moves. Attackers chanted. Some celebrated online. One man in a circulating video held up a matchbox and claimed the fire as his. Deborah was buried two days later in a Christian cemetery in her hometown.

Her uncle, **Pastor Emmanuel Maaji** of the Evangelical Church Winning All, led the prayers. The Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Sa’ad Abubakar III, condemned the murder. The governor imposed a curfew. Churches were attacked in the unrest that followed. The Christian Association of Nigeria called for demonstrations. Women’s groups and civil-society organisations demanded prosecution.

And then the machinery that should have turned a crime into a case began, quietly, to fail.

Two arrests, no murder charge, an empty dock

The case that prosecutors stopped attending

Two men, Bilyaminu Aliyu and Aminu Hukunci, were arrested. They were not charged with murder. They were arraigned before a Sokoto Chief Magistrate’s Court for criminal conspiracy and inciting public disturbance — offences that treat a filmed burning as a public-order problem,ailable, and far beneath the gravity of what the camera recorded.

On 30 January 2023, Chief Magistrate Shuaibu Ahmad struck the case out. Prosecutors had stopped attending court despite adjournments. The magistrate said what the record already showed: that from the conduct of the prosecution it seemed either that they had no evidence against the defendants, or that they were no longer interested in seriously prosecuting the case. The defendants were discharged.

A female classmate who saw the violence fled Sokoto under threat. Those threats have also kept her from obtaining her academic transcript, which means the crowd that killed Deborah also interrupted another young woman’s degree. Deborah’s friends, according to later reviews of the file, were not properly interviewed. Federal police had surrounded the campus. The pictures exist. The names of at least two suspects were in the charge sheet. None of that produced a murder trial.



Deborah’s parents, Alheri Emmanuel and Emmanuel Garba, at the family home in front of a memorial poster of their daughter. Photo: Open Doors UK & Ireland.

In May 2023 the Sokoto State Police Command said it was still pursuing “prime suspects.” As of August 2026, more than four years after the murder, no one is in custody for Deborah’s killing. No one has been convicted.

“Condolences cannot replace justice. Outrage cannot replace prosecution. Arrests cannot replace conviction, and four years cannot erase a crime.”

— Tunde Agunbiade, National Coalition Against Mass Killings, August 2026

NCAMKI has asked the Nigeria Police Force, the Sokoto State Government, and the Ministry of Justice for an accounting: what became of the investigation, who decided the charge would not be murder, and whether the collapse of the prosecution was incompetence or obstruction. Those are not activist flourishes. They are the questions any republic asks when a homicide is filmed and then allowed to evaporate.

The woman imprisoned for mourning her

The inversion did not stop with the empty dock.

Eight days after Deborah died, on 20 May 2022, Rhoda Ya’u Jatau, a Christian healthcare administrator and mother of five in Bauchi State, shared a WhatsApp video condemning the lynching.



Rhoda Ya'u Jatau, Bauchi healthcare worker and mother of five, after her acquittal on blasphemy-related charges arising from a WhatsApp video condemning Deborah's killing. Photo: Alliance Defending Freedom International.

A mob attacked her neighbourhood, burning houses and shops and injuring more than a dozen people. She was arrested, charged under sections 114 and 210 of the Bauchi State Penal Code — inciting disturbance and insulting religion — and under the Cybercrimes Act 2015 for cyber-stalking. Evidence used against her was withheld from her defence. Bail was denied on the theory that her freedom might provoke more unrest. She was held incommunicado for a period and remained in detention for roughly eighteen months.

She was released on bail in December 2023 after interventions by the **Christian Association of Nigeria**, the **Nigeria Inter-Religious Council**, and **Christian Solidarity Worldwide Nigeria**, and later acquitted. The European Parliament commended that acquittal. Hold the two outcomes next to each other and the lesson is not subtle.

The men who killed walked free when the state stopped showing up.

The woman who said the killing was wrong went to prison.

That contrast is the moral centre of the case. It is also the legal centre. A state that cannot convict a filmed murderer, yet can jail a mother of five for a WhatsApp video of protest, has revealed which speech it fears and which violence it can live with.

The law already forbids what the mob did

This is not a mystery of evidence. It is a mystery of will.

Nigeria's 1999 Constitution is not silent. Section 38 protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Section 39 protects expression. Section 10 says the government shall not adopt a state religion.

Nigeria is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The UN Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 34 is blunt: blasphemy prohibitions are incompatible with the

Covenant except in the narrow case of incitement to violence under Article 20. The Rabat Plan of Action reaches the same conclusion. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which binds Nigeria, protects conscience and expression as well.

Twelve northern states nonetheless maintain Sharia penal codes that criminalise blasphemy, apostasy-adjacent conduct, and, in some formulations, adultery — in some cases with death.

Federal law still punishes insult to religion. The result is a dual system in which the constitution promises a civic order and the codes on the ground invite private enforcement. When the statute book winks at sacred offence as a capital matter, the crowd does not need a judge. It only needs a rumour, a phone, and the confidence that tomorrow's prosecutor will not come to court.

Paper in abundance, convictions in none

On **4 August 2023**, five **UN special-procedures** mandate holders sent Nigeria a joint communication — AL NGA 5/2023 — asking for the status of the investigation, the identity of the responsible authority, whether anyone else had been arrested, the legal grounds offered for the lynching, the justification of Rhoda's detention under ICCPR Articles 3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 18, 19, 26 and 27, and data on prosecutions for religiously motivated violence. They recalled earlier unanswered communications on blasphemy laws. As of the coalition letter of August 2026, there had been no reply.



The **UN Human Rights Council chamber at the Palais des Nations, Geneva**. On 4 August 2023, five UN special-procedures mandate holders asked Nigeria for the status of the investigation into Deborah Samuel Yakubu's murder. As of August 2026, there had been no reply.

The European Parliament recalled Deborah's killing in a resolution of 20 April 2023, adopted by 550 votes to 7, and returned to the subject in February 2025 in the case of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, the Kano musician who has spent years in prison facing a possible death sentence for song lyrics shared on WhatsApp.

In Washington, H.R. 7457 and H.Res. 866 have named Deborah and Rhoda as emblems of a pattern: victims punished, known perpetrators untouched. **In October 2025 the United States redesignated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act.**

Paper has not been in short supply. Convictions have.

Impunity is pedagogy

The pattern is older than one campus. Nigerian reporters have kept a grim ledger: Bridget Agbahime, beaten to death in a Kano market, her alleged killers walking after a **nolle prosequi; Usman Buda, a Sokoto butcher, killed after a religious argument among stalls; Talle Mai Ruwa, dragged from a police station after a collection for petrol and burned while the crowd chanted; Yunusa in Bauchi, linked to a Sufi community, lynched with no one detained; a food vendor called Amaye, burned in Niger State in 2025 after a remark in a casual conversation. Christians accused of insulting Islam, Muslims accused of the wrong Islam, humanists accused of apostasy — the accusation is elastic; the method is not. Private enforcement. Phones as proof. Fire as sentence.**

Researchers have estimated that hundreds have died in blasphemy-related mob killings since the return of civilian rule.

Each unpunished case is a tutorial. A campus is supposed to be the one place where a sentence can be contested without becoming a pyre. When even that place fails, the lesson travels.

Impunity is pedagogy.

When a filmed murder on a college campus produces two arrests, a charge less than murder, a prosecutor who stops attending court, and a magistrate obliged to discharge the defendants, every subsequent crowd learns the lesson.

This week, Nigeria's Inspector-General of Police warned that mob justice is murder and that those who execute suspects in the street can themselves face the death penalty. He cited students lynched over phones, travellers killed on rumour, young people murdered after whispers of blasphemy or ritual crime. The warning is welcome. It is also an indictment of the years in which the same state treated Deborah's killers as a public-order inconvenience. If jungle justice is murder in Edo and Kaduna, it was murder in Sokoto. The difference is not theology. It is whether the republic is prepared to say so in a courtroom when the victim is a Christian girl and the crowd is large.

What the open letter actually asks

On the **United Nations International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief** — 22 August — a multi-faith coalition of more than thirty members of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable in Washington, the Religious Liberty Partnership, and allied organisations transmitted an open letter to **His Excellency Lateef Kayode Kolawole Are, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria** to the United States. Among those presenting it in Washington on 21–22 August 2026 were **Lord David Alton** and **Ján Figel**, **president of FOREF Europe and the European Union's first special envoy for freedom of religion or belief**. Signatories ran across traditions: **Jubilee Campaign, International Christian Concern, Stefanos Foundation, Muslims for Progressive Values, Coptic Solidarity**, and others who do not share a creed but share a refusal to treat filmed murder as a closed file.



The letter is not poetry. It asks for a reopened murder investigation with a fair trial; protection and compensation for eyewitnesses, including the classmate still denied her transcript; compensation for Deborah's family as victims of a hate crime; an official reply to the United Nations; and the removal of the death penalty for blasphemy from northern codes, so that Nigerian law is no longer at war with the Nigerian Constitution. The coalition's charge is precise: the impunity surrounding Deborah's murder sets a precedent that Nigeria will tolerate the death penalty for blasphemy when it is administered by a crowd.

There is a temptation, especially among distant readers, to file this as **“religious conflict in the north”** and move on. That is a way of not seeing. Deborah was killed for speech — disputed speech, campus speech, WhatsApp speech. Rhoda was imprisoned for mourning her. The constitution already forbids what the mob did. International law already forbids what the codes threaten.

The missing piece is not a new slogan. It is the ordinary, unglamorous work of a prosecutor who appears, a police command that treats video as evidence rather than spectacle, and a political class that would rather face a crowd than feed it.

A republic that will not punish a filmed burning has told its minorities what they are, and told its mobs what they may do. Four years is long enough for that lesson to harden. It is also long enough to reverse it — if anyone in authority still wants the constitution to mean what it says.

An open letter to Nigeria's ambassador

On the United Nations International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief — 22 August — a multi-faith coalition of more than thirty members of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable in Washington, the Religious Liberty Partnership, and allied organisations transmitted an open letter to His Excellency Lateef Kayode Kolawole Are, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the United States.

The letter was presented in Washington on 21–22 August 2026. It states that since the filmed murder of Deborah Yakubu (Emmanuel) by male classmates on 12 May 2022, none of the perpetrators have been held accountable.

Among those presenting and signing were:

- **Lord David Alton**, former chair of the UK Joint Committee on Human Rights
- **Ján Figel**, President of FOREF Europe and the European Union's first Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief
- **Nadine Maenza**, Co-Chair, International Religious Freedom Roundtable
- **Nina Shea**, Hudson Institute
- **Mariam Ibraheem**, Sudanese Christian survivor of religious persecution

Organisations on the letter include **FOREF Europe, Jubilee Campaign, International Christian Concern, Stefanos Foundation, Muslims for Progressive Values, Coptic Solidarity**, and other members of the Roundtable and the Religious Liberty Partnership. The full roll of more than thirty signatories is published with the letter.

The letter is not poetry. It asks Nigeria to reopen the murder investigation and bring it to a fair trial; protect and compensate eyewitnesses, including the classmate still denied her transcript; compensate Deborah’s family as victims of a hate crime; answer the United Nations communication of 4 August 2023; and remove the death penalty for blasphemy from northern state codes. The coalition’s charge is precise: the impunity around Deborah’s murder sets a precedent that Nigeria will tolerate the death penalty for blasphemy when a crowd administers it.

The constitution already forbids what the mob did. International law already forbids what the codes threaten. What is missing is a prosecutor who appears, a police command that treats video as evidence rather than spectacle, and a government that would rather face a crowd than feed it.

A republic that will not punish a filmed burning has told its minorities what they are, and told its mobs what they may do. Four years is long enough for that lesson to harden. It is also long enough to reverse it — if anyone in authority still wants the constitution to mean what it says.

The full documented record, the open letter, and the case file Nigeria has so far declined to close.

#Nigeria #DeborahSamuel #BlasphemyLaws #ReligiousFreedom #Impunity #HumanRights #FoRB #RuleOfLaw

READ THE FULL STORY HERE ON THE FOREF EUROPE WEBSITE:

foref-europe.org/blog/2026/08/27/nigeria-lynched-for-blasphemy/

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