



NIAS-IPRI Brief

Africa's Stolen Future: Child abductions, lost innocence, and a glaring reflection of State failure in Nigeria

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Mass abductions of schoolchildren are only a fraction of the larger picture. According to UNICEF, from 2013 to 2017, more than 3,500 children had been kidnapped in northeast Nigeria alone. The children belonged to the age group 13-17. The above figures are likely to be higher as many cases of kidnapping stay unreported for various reasons, including lack of trust in security forces.

Headlines from Nigeria have been flooded with updates on a series of mass abductions which has been on the rise since December 2020. As of August 2021, more than 1,000 students have been abducted and released, and details of some students remain unclear.

The incidents bring forth a few questions; who are the perpetrators? Why are they targeting students or children? What has been the state response? In what ways has the state failed to secure educational institutions which are supposed to be a safe space for children? What has been the impact of mass abductions from schools? Lastly, is there a way forward?

A brief timeline outlines the gravity of mass abductions in Nigeria, albeit the students, in most cases, have been freed after the government negotiated with the kidnappers.

I Zamfara, Katsina and beyond: A brief outline of mass abductions

A mass kidnapping in December 2020 gained international attention when more than 300 schoolboys were abducted from the Katsina State, which is also the home state of the President, Muhammadu Buhari. The boys were released on 18 December 2020 after negotiations.

Meanwhile, a voice note claiming the attack made its way to the media. The speaker claimed to be Abubakar Shekau, the former leader of Boko Haram, and said "What happened in Katsina was done to promote Islam and discourage un-Islamic practices such as Western education."¹ The State Governor, however, blamed 'bandits' for the incident. He said the bandits were following the style of Boko Haram which is infamous for the 2014 Chibok abduction incident.

A day later, on 19 December, 84 children, mostly girls, were abducted from an Islamic school

¹ "[Nigeria's Boko Haram behind schoolboys' abduction - audio message](#)," Reuters, 15 December 2020

in the same state; they were later rescued by the police.²

On 26 February 2021, it was reported that unidentified gunmen had abducted more than 300 girls from the school in Zamfara State in northwest Nigeria. However, the State Governor clarified that some of the girls had escaped, thereby bringing down the total number of abducted girls to 279. The incident unfolded over the wee hours of the day; despite a military checkpoint being just four minutes away from the school, the gunmen arrived on 20-odd motorcycles and directed the abducted girls into the forest, said a CNN source.³ On 2 March 2021, Governor Bello Matawalle, announced the release of the girls. He said the government had engaged in peaceful negotiations with the kidnappers for the release.

Similarly, a week prior to the above incident, on 17 February 2021, one student was killed and 42 people, including 27 students, were abducted from another school from the Niger State, again in northwest Nigeria. However, they were released ten days later, on 27 February, after ‘peaceful negotiations.’

On 11 March 2021, unidentified gunmen raided the Federal College of Forestry Mechanisation, located near a military base, in Kaduna state. Initially, around 180 students and staff were reported to have been abducted by the armed mob. However, the Nigerian army was able to rescue most of them; as of 14 March 2021, 39 students are still missing. This was the first instance wherein college students were targeted for mass abductions. In other cases of mass abductions, the kidnappers targeted students from boarding schools. Similarly, in April, 20 university students were kidnapped in Kaduna; one person was killed during the kidnapping; five students were killed in captivity; the rest 14 were released a month later in May. However, in May, 136 students were abducted from an Islamic seminary by bandits; 15 managed to escape, six died in captivity, and the rest were released in August.

In June, 80 people, including students and teachers were kidnapped in Kebbi state; three students died in captivity; details of the rest are unclear as of August 2021.

In July, 140 students were abducted from a Christian school; 15 were released on ransom; 56 were rescued and details about the remaining have not been specified as of August 2021.

The infamous Chibok and Yobe girls’ abduction

In April 2014, as many as 276 girls were abducted by Boko Haram from a school in Chibok in the Borno State of northeast Nigeria, a stronghold of the terrorist group. The first batch of girls were released by the group after government negotiations in 2016; at the time, 21 were freed from captivity. Some of the girls escaped on their own and till date, some of them remain missing while some of the escapes were made as recently as February 2021, seven years after the abductions. In 2017, Boko Haram released another 82 girls in exchange for five commanders of the outlawed group.

However, abductions continued and in February 2018, Boko Haram struck again. As many as 110 girls were abducted from a school in Yobe State in northeast Nigeria. In March the same year, the government announced that 104 of the captive girls had been rescued.

The rescues are noteworthy; however, there have been serious discrepancies on the State’s

² “[Nigeria student kidnapping near Kaduna army base](#),” BBC, 13 March 2021

³ Stephanie Busari and Nimi Princewill, “[Hundreds of schoolgirls abducted in Nigeria, government official says](#),” CNN, 26 February 2021

side. For example, when negotiations were being held, be it during the Chibok incident or the Yobe incident, the government and security forces were caught lying. Two days after the Chibok abductions, the military announced the rescue of 100 girls. However, parents refuted the claims and the military was forced to withdraw the statement. Similarly, the Yobe government announced the rescue of “some girls” two days after the incident. However, the state government withdrew the claim and clarified that no girl had been rescued.⁴

Zamfara, Katsina and beyond: A brief timeline of abductions in Nigeria

- 2014: Chibok abduction of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram (several still missing/escaping)
- 2018: Yobe abduction of 110 schoolgirls by Boko Haram (104 released)
- December 2020 Katsina abduction of over 300 schoolboys by gunmen (all released later)
- February 2021 Zamfara abduction of 279 girls by gunmen (all were released later)
- March 2021 Kaduna abduction of 180 college students and teachers by gunmen (100 rescued, rest released later in May)
- April and May 2021 abductions of University and school students in Kaduna and Niger states (six killed in captivity, 15 escaped, rest released later)
- June 2021 Kebbi abduction over 80 students and teachers from college (three students killed)
- July 2021 Kaduna abduction of 140 girls by gunmen (15 released by ransom;)

Please note: These are statistics of students being abducted. Simultaneously, several instances of abduction of villagers, including women, have been recorded across some states.

Mass abductions of schoolchildren are only a fraction of the larger picture. According to UNICEF, from 2013 to 2017, more than 3,500 children had been kidnapped in northeast Nigeria alone. The children belonged to the age group 13-17. The above figures are likely to be higher as many cases of kidnapping stay unreported for various reasons, including lack of trust in security forces. Further, UNICEF says, “non-state armed groups in northeast Nigeria have recruited and used children as combatants and non-combatants, raped and forced girls to marry, and committed other grave violations against children.”⁵

II

The geographical spread: From Boko Haram in the northeast to bandits in the northwest

The Chibok incident gained international attention; governments and celebrities from different countries, including the United States, pledged to support Nigeria to rescue the girls. Social media platform Twitter was flooded with “#BringBackOurGirls.”

The unprecedented scale of kidnapping was first of its kind and also highlighted the gravity of the threat that Boko Haram posed. With time, mass abductions became a strategy of Boko Haram.

⁴ Kabir Yusuf, “[Timeline: Nigeria’s alarming trend of mass abduction of school children](#),” Premium Times, 27 February 2021

⁵ “[More than 3,500 children have been recruited and used by non-state armed groups in northeast Nigeria since 2013](#),” UNICEF, 12 April 2019

The literal translation of “Boko Haram” is “Western education is prohibited.” Schools being the foundation of western education, became an easy target for the group, especially since 2009, under the former leader, Abubakar Shekau. Gradually, Boko Haram shifted its targets to schools, teachers and students to create a hindrance to the spread of western education.⁶ The outlawed group kidnapped young boys and girls for different reasons. In the case of boys, Boko Haram looked for increasing the strength of their group while girls are forced into marriage and are raped.

A report by Amnesty International details the ordeals of girls who were kidnapped from different areas in mass abductions. According to the report, abducted girls were forced to marry Boko Haram fighters. Though Boko Haram prohibits rape, as it implements the Sharia law, girls who escaped from the group testified that they were raped secretly; sometimes by the man they were forced to marry or by other Boko Haram members. Further, the girls are also expected to carry out odd jobs like cooking and cleaning in the training camps. However, Amnesty International quotes some of the escaped girls, who said they were trained to “kill and slaughter” as well.

Boys, on the other hand, were abducted, forcibly recruited into the group, trained to use weapons, and were used as child soldiers served as spies for the terrorist organisation. Until recently, abductions of the scale remained largely confined to areas controlled by Boko Haram in the northeast, which had its base in Borno state. However, since the latter half of the 2010s, other local groups have adopted the kidnapping strategy in other parts of Nigeria. For example, all four instances of mass abductions since December 2020 were carried out by local armed groups known as ‘bandits’.

Bandits are generally based in Nigeria’s northwest region in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, and Kebbi states. Banditry in the current scenario has been linked to resource conflicts between the Fulani herder and Hausa farmer communities in the northwestern belt of the country; this has been fuelled by climate change as land for farming has reduced and water has become scarce. Experts believe that the Fulani herders resorted to arms as they were met with attacks from the farmer communities during their nomadic travels. In light of these incidents, kidnapping and looting became an easier way to earn money and buy arms, than herding. The herder bandits are also believed to be targeting those who have wronged them previously. They maintain that both federal and state governments have left herding communities to fend for themselves. They have little or no access to education, be it academic or religious, or other social services. Threats from banditry include murder, sexual assaults, kidnappings and cattle-rustling.⁷

Further, police in the area believe that herder communities are supported by criminal gangs.⁸ Driving the divide between the communities are other external factors like “proliferation of small arms and light weapons, illicit artisanal mining, youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality.”⁹ Though the state has denied paying ransoms, the claims are dismissed by the public.

⁶ “[Our Job Is To Shoot, Slaughter And Kill': Boko Haram's Reign Of Terror In North-east Nigeria](#),” Amnesty International, April 2015

⁷ Adedeji Ademola, “[The Growing Threat of Armed Banditry in North-West Nigeria](#),” *The Strife Blog and Journal*, 8 January 2021)

⁸ Nduka Orjinmo, “[Katsina: The motorcycle bandits terrorising northern Nigeria](#),” BBC, 5 July 2020

⁹ “[Not All Violent Problems Require Violent Solutions: Banditry in Nigeria's North-West](#),” Council on Foreign Relations, 23 July 2020

Currently, the threat of banditry is graver than the threat from Boko Haram. Data from the Nigeria Security Tracker reveals that from January 2019 to December 2019, more than 1000 civilians were killed by bandits; the figure is greater than the civilian deaths caused by Boko Haram. According to Amnesty International's data, the threat appears to have increased the following year wherein from January 2020 to June 2020 alone, bandits killed 1,126 civilians.

Children as targets

According to a study by a faculty at the Nile University of Nigeria, children serve as a strategic interest to the kidnappers for five reasons. Apart from the above-mentioned reasons with respect to abductions by Boko Haram, the study outlines three more reasons. First, they are effective tools of negotiation to demand the release of their group members from prison and ransoms serve as sources to purchase weapons and fund operations. The second reason, kidnapping children garners international attention and helps amplify the demands of the kidnappers. However, while this has been true in the case of the Chibok case, attention to other mass abductions have waned away. No sustained campaign like #BringBackOurGirls has taken place since then. And lastly, in the case of terrorist groups, children were easy to use as spies, suicide bombers and the like.¹⁰

III State response and state failure

In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari was elected on the promises of eradicating extremist groups, especially Boko Haram. However, in the five years that he has been in power, security conditions seem to have worsened and to be specific, spread to other regions in Nigeria from the northeastern part. This has resulted in increased unrest within the population, especially in northern Nigeria.

In light of worsening security in the country, lawmakers and civilians had been calling for the replacement of service chiefs since Buhari came to power. However, it was not until January 2021 that Buhari replaced the army, navy and air force chiefs, thereby reflecting lack of urgency to address the security situation.

Further, the federal and state government have been engaged in a blame game adding to the confusion about the response to threats from mass abductions. For example, Buhari placed the onus for securing school surroundings on the state government and also maintained that State Governments must rethink "rewarding bandits with money and vehicles." This indicates that ransoms, in various forms, are being paid to the kidnappers. Other federal authorities, like Defence Minister Maj. Gen. Bashir Magashi attempted to shift the responsibility to ensure security onto the civilians. He opined that people should be vigilant and not resort to cowardice. He said, "At times, the banditry will come with about three shots of ammunition. When they fire shots, everybody runs. In our younger days, we'd stand to fight any aggression coming to us. I don't know why people are running away from minor things like that."

On the other hand, state governments are dependent on the centre for security assistance. The Nigerian police force, for example, is a highly centralised unit. The state governors opine that they can only function effectively to an extent because there are certain things beyond

¹⁰ Hakeem Onapajo, "[Why children are prime targets of armed groups in northern Nigeria](#)," The Conversation, 16 March 2021)

their purview.¹¹ Similarly, a Senator reiterated that decentralised policing is key to addressing Nigeria's security threats. Referring to a bill to decentralise the police force, he said "Unfortunately, we do not appear ready yet or show a sense of urgency to stem the tide of insecurity or rebuild our economy through the decentralisation or devolution of power... So long as we run a dysfunctional centralised policing, for that long will our insecurity-induced pains and losses continue to rise."¹²

Meanwhile, deploying military forces too has, to an extent, proved to be inefficient due lack of sophisticated weaponry and technology, and most importantly, a lack of will to fight. First, the expenditure on defence amounts less than one per cent of the GDP, well below the recommended 1.5 per cent. This, coupled with rampant corruption, has led to weakening of the military capacity.¹³ Second, the low morale among soldiers is reported to be a hindrance to security operations. A mass resignation of soldiers was witnessed in 2020, citing "poor quality of their fighting equipment," "poor weapons, unimproved allowances and the continuous loss of soldiers to Boko Haram attacks."¹⁴

Lastly, infrastructure development of educational institutions in the outside major cities has been minimal. Most of the targeted schools have been boarding schools, located farther from the city; here security forces are stretched thin. Some communities formed vigilante groups but they do not hold up against the armed bandits.

Further, most schools do not have basic structures like fences or security guards. After the Chibok abductions, a "Safe School Initiative" was adopted; this included building fences around school compounds. However, the Initiative failed to cover schools in the northeastern and northwestern regions thereby leaving them vulnerable to attacks.

IV In perspective

In view of recent mass abductions, various states announced the closure of secondary schools in an attempt to conduct risk assessment. Several survivor accounts reflect the families' reluctance to send back their children, especially girls, to school. This is backed by socio-cultural norms preventing girls from attending schools. UNICEF reports that net attendance in schools in Nigeria stands at 53 per cent only, despite free and compulsory primary education. Therefore, frequent instances of mass abductions have a negative impact on the education in the country.¹⁵

Efforts by the government to pacify the fears in the minds of people have gone in vain. Further, the government has failed to put an end to the Boko Haram insurgency which took root in 2009. A decade later, more terrorist groups have started operating Nigeria, including the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). On the issue of banditry, alleged payment of ransoms has emboldened the kidnappers to ramp up their operations. Therefore, unless Buhari or any president who takes office in the future introduces substantial actions against these threats, the security situation in the country will continue to remain dire.

¹¹ Adejumo Kabir, "[Insecurity: Again, Fayemi, El-Rufai advocate state police, decentralised judiciary](#)," *Premium Times*, 20 February 20201

¹² Sanni Onogu, "[Nigeria not ready to stem tide of insecurity — Ekweremadu](#)," *The Nation*, 20 February 2021)

¹³ "[Disenchanted soldiers](#)," *ReliefWeb*, 14 July 2020

¹⁴ Olaleye Aluko, "[356 soldiers tender resignation to Buratai, cite loss of interest](#)," *Punch*, 12 July 2020

¹⁵ Nduka Orijinmo, "[Nigeria's school abductions: Why children are being targeted](#)," *BBC*, 2 March 2021

V The way forward

To address the problem of mass abductions, the government must focus on four things. First, address the political differences with the state government. Unless there is consensus on how to tackle the problem, the situation will be open to exploitation to the kidnappers. Further, the government needs to introduce structural changes to how the security forces, including the police, operate in Nigeria. Lastly, the government must track, monitor, and tackle arms transfers to terrorist groups and bandits

Second, address the root causes of the problem. An article on the Council on Foreign Affairs says that “violent problems require violent solutions” is etched in the minds of the country’s security forces. The article explains that the government should address “structural inequalities that drive people to violence, like poverty, a lack of education and opportunity, and government mistreatment.”¹⁶

Third, investing in infrastructure. The government has to expedite infrastructure projects and also increase its investments to achieve a secure environment for schools. The government could also train local communities around schools to stay vigilant and develop and install warning systems to alert security officials in the area.

Fourth, building trust with the civilians. The government needs to build a trust factor with the affected communities. This, as mentioned above, cannot be achieved unless there is a radical change in how the government deals with issues threatening the security of the local population.

¹⁶ “[Not All Violent Problems Require Violent Solutions: Banditry in Nigeria’s North-West](#),” *Council on Foreign Affairs*, 23 July 2020

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The International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI) is part of the Conflict Resolution and Peace Research Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS).

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