

Why the Abduction of Nigerian Girls Matters

Holly Yan | CNN International

(CNN) -- One year ago this month, Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau released a video announcing a new, reprehensible front in its bloody attempt at forced Islamism: his fighters will begin abducting girls and selling them.

The kidnappings, he said, were retaliation for Nigerian security forces nabbing the wives and children of group members.

And for 12 months, the radical militant group has done just that -- with Nigerians treating the sporadic kidnappings with disgust but resignation.

But that's changed now.

"When this first happened ... what I was hearing from my friends and from other people was like, 'Why do I care? Nigeria is done. Nigeria is going to disintegrate,'" said Emeka Daniel, whose father was kidnapped in Nigeria in an unrelated incident.

"I refused to believe that," he said. "We can't let this be the new normal."

Here are six reasons why the Boko Haram abductions, the repugnant message its leader released this week, and Nigeria's inadequate response should matter to the rest of the world.

Terrorism isn't isolated

Just imagine if 276 girls had been kidnapped in the United States. The response would be mass outrage and a forceful demand for a response.

As borders become more irrelevant for terrorists, the whole world needs to take notice of the likes of Boko Haram.

"We need to take ownership as if this happened in Chicago or this happened in Washington, D.C.," said Nicole Lee, outgoing president of the TransAfrica Forum. "We need to be talking about this. ... We need to make sure our own government is helping in any way that we can."

What the Boko Haram has set out to do in Africa's most populous nation is as heinous as the havoc the Taliban is wreaking.

"They actually originated as a group called the Nigerian Taliban, which kind of explains where they're coming from," said CNN's national security analyst Peter Bergen. "They

are aiming to impose Taliban-style rule on much of Nigeria, particularly in the north where they are based."

The group's name itself means "Western education is sinful" in the local Hausa language. Its aim is to impose a stricter enforcement of Sharia law. The group especially opposes the education of women.

Under its version of Sharia law, women should be at home raising children and looking after their husbands, not at school learning to read and write.

Then consider its ties to al Qaeda.

How closely related Boko Haram is to al Qaeda is hard to define, but the United States says it has links.

"Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is the North African al Qaeda affiliate, has given money to Boko Haram in the past," Bergen said. "There is reporting suggesting that Osama bin Laden was in communication with the leadership of this group." Daniel put it succinctly.

"People are thinking, this doesn't affect my country, but I'm telling them terrorists ... didn't just wake up one morning and decide to become terrorists," he said.

"These guys, it takes years for them to decide to go out there and commit these atrocities. So as the world, we have to come together and try to find a solution to this problem."

The United States is so concerned about anti-Western terrorism in Nigeria that the State Department released a warning last week to Americans traveling within and to Nigeria that "groups associated with terrorism" may be planning an attack in Lagos, the country's commercial center, Bergen said.

The inhumane treatment of children concerns us all

The terrorists raided the girls' school in the middle of the night, posing as soldiers. After a gunfight with security guards, they stormed the students' dormitory and herded the girls into vehicles.

As they made their escape, the militants burned down nearby buildings in the northern town of Chibok. The girls disappeared into the night.

Even worse are fears of what will happen to the girls next.

The new video from the purported leader of Boko Haram detailed this chilling plan:

"I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market, by Allah," said a man claiming to be Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in the video first obtained by Agence France-Presse.

If the claim proves true, the 276 teen girls could become child brides or sex slaves. Rights groups have said Boko Haram has kidnapped girls as young as 12. And the abductions are only getting worse.

In the first two months of this year alone, Boko Haram kidnapped at least 25 girls and women, according to Human Rights Watch.

In November, the militant group abducted dozens of Christian girls and women, most of whom were later rescued by the military deep in a forest in Maiduguri. At the time of their rescue, some were pregnant or had children, and others had been forcibly converted to Islam and married off to their kidnapers.

The parents' hands are tied

Any parent can only imagine the horror of a child getting kidnapped. Now multiply that by 276 and add the fear of a volatile terrorist group.

Families of some of the kidnapped girls are petrified of speaking to the media for fear of retribution against their daughters.

"Many of the parents feel if there is even (any) kind of movement from their end, they could see the children killed," CNN's Nigeria-based correspondent Vladimir Duthiers said.

"The parents told us, over the course of the last three weeks, they themselves have risked their own lives trying to go in armed with machetes, sticks and rocks to do the job they say the Nigerian military is unwilling to do."

It's the price they pay for daring to send their girls to school despite threats from Boko Haram. The kidnapped girls were from Borno state, where 72% of primary-age children have never attended school, according to the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria.

Daniel said he knows what the parents are going through. His father was abducted in Nigeria four years ago while returning home from work.

"You can't sleep. You can't eat." To this day, Daniel said, he can still hear the cries of his family members.

"So I really feel for these mothers that lost their daughters. It's -- I can't -- you can't really begin to understand what they are going through until you're in that situation."

Daniel's father was shot and almost died. He was released only after the family paid a ransom.

What happens in Nigeria has deeper repercussions

Nigeria boasts Africa's largest economy. But internal problems can have a ripple effect far and wide.

Nigerian militant activity has already spilled over to neighbors such as Cameroon, whose government has warned that clerics have been recruiting members in mosques in the country, said Orji Uzor Kalu, a former governor of Nigeria's Abia State.

"In this era of accelerating globalization, it appears Boko Haram hopes to align itself with extremist forces in Niger, Mali and potentially in the Middle East, which raises the specter of coordination on the stockpiling of munitions, intelligence gathering and future assaults," Kalu said.

The Nigerian response has been feeble

Two days after the kidnappings, the Nigerian military said all but eight of the girls were free. That turned out to be untrue, prompting the father of one of the abducted girls to say the government had gone from using "blatant propaganda" to telling "blatant lie."

For three weeks, President Goodluck Jonathan said nothing. He has yet to visit the region.

And when he did begin speaking about the abductions, he criticized the parents for not cooperating with the police, for not sharing information.

"It's been awful, frankly," said Richard Downie of the Nigerian government's response. Downie is the deputy director and fellow for the African program at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"These girls were taken in the middle of last month and really it was not until last night that we had the first lengthy comments from the president, which lends credence to this allegation that the government is not sufficiently invested in this crisis," Downie said Monday.

Add to that the comments Jonathan's wife reportedly made.

"Patience Jonathan, who is the first lady, called some of the mothers to her, to meet with her, and she basically told them that they really need to be quiet and they were really bringing shame and embarrassment to Nigeria," said Lee, from the TransAfrica Forum. "That's certainly a problem."

This can't be business as usual

With a World Economic Forum set to begin Wednesday in the capital city of Abuja, the Nigerian government is under mounting pressure to find and save the girls.

The U.S. government is offering to help, but said Nigeria must take the lead in finding the students.

Officials told CNN the Obama administration is sharing intelligence with Nigerian authorities and could provide other assistance, but there is no plan to send U.S. troops. A group of U.S. senators from both parties has introduced a resolution calling for the United States to help the Nigerian government improve school security and go after Boko Haram.

The resolution stops short of calling for sending American troops. Instead, it urges "timely civilian assistance" from the United States and allied African nations to help rescue the abducted students.

Rights groups are therefore heartened at the groundswell of support, with the globally trending hashtag #BringBackOurGirls.

Crowds from Los Angeles to London rallied over the weekend.

"I think one of the most beautiful things that has happened is people are taking the hashtag, putting them in front of them and saying, 'Bring back our girls,'" Lee said. "I think people are doing that. It's catching fire."

Nigerian Girl Describes Kidnapping

Michelle Faul | Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — The girls in the school dorm could hear the sound of gunshots from a nearby town. So when armed men in uniforms burst in and promised to rescue them, at first they were relieved.

"Don't worry, we're soldiers," one 16-year-old girl recalls them saying. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

The gunmen commanded the hundreds of students at the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School to gather outside. The men went into a storeroom and removed all the food. Then they set fire to the room.

"They ... started shouting, 'Allahu Akhbar,' (God is great)," the 16-year-old student said. "And we knew."

What they knew was chilling: The men were not government soldiers at all. They were members of the ruthless Islamic extremist group called Boko Haram. They kidnapped the entire group of girls and drove them away in pickup trucks into the dense forest.

Three weeks later, 276 girls are still missing. At least two have died of snakebite, and about 20 others are ill, according to an intermediary who is in touch with their captors. Their plight — and the failure of the Nigerian military to find them — has drawn international attention to an escalating Islamic extremist insurrection that has killed more than 1,500 so far this year. Boko Haram, the name means "Western education is sinful," has claimed responsibility for the mass kidnapping and threatened to sell the girls. The claim was made in a video seen Monday. The British and U.S. governments have expressed concern over the fate of the missing students, and protests have erupted in major Nigerian cities and in New York.

The 16-year-old was among about 50 students who escaped on that fateful day, and she spoke for the first time in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. The AP also interviewed about 30 others, including Nigerian government and Borno state officials, school officials, six relatives of the missing girls, civil society leaders and politicians in northeast Nigeria and soldiers in the war zone. Many spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing that giving their names would also reveal the girls' identities and subject them to possible stigmatization in this conservative society.

The Chibok girls school is in the remote and sparsely populated northeast region of Nigeria, a country of 170 million with a growing chasm between a north dominated by Muslims and a south by Christians. Like all schools in Borno state, Chibok, an elite academy of both Muslim and Christian girls, had been closed because of increasingly deadly attacks by Boko Haram. But it had reopened to allow final-year students to take exams.

At about 11 p.m. on April 14, a local government official, Bana Lawal, received a warning via cell phone. He was told that about 200 heavily armed militants in 20 pickup trucks and more than 30 motorcycles were headed toward his town.

Lawal alerted the 15 soldiers guarding Chibok, he said. Then he roused sleeping residents and told them to flee into the bush and the nearby hills. The soldiers sent an SOS to the nearest barracks, about 30 miles away, an hour's drive on a dirt road. No help arrived.

When the militants showed up two hours after the warning, the soldiers fought valiantly, Lawal said. Although they were outnumbered and outgunned, they held off the insurgents for an hour and a half, desperately waiting for reinforcements. One was killed. They ran out of ammunition and fled for their lives.

As dawn approached, the extremists headed for the boarding school.

There were too many gunmen to count, said the girl who escaped. So, even after the students realized the men were Islamic extremists, they obediently sat in the dirt. The men set the school ablaze and herded the girl's group onto the backs of three pickup trucks.

The trucks drove through three villages, but then the car of fighters following them broke down. That's when the girl and her friend jumped out.

Others argued, the 16-year-old remembered. But one student said, "We should go! Me, I am coming down. They can shoot me if they want but I don't know what they are going to do with me otherwise."

As they jumped, the car behind started up. Its lights came on. The girls did not know if the fighters could see them, so they ran into the bush and hid.

"We ran and ran, so fast," said the girl, who has always prided herself on running faster than her six brothers. "That is how I saved myself. I had no time to be scared, I was just running."

A few other girls clung to low-hanging branches and waited until the vehicles had passed. Then they met up in the bush and made their way back to the road. A man on a bicycle came across them and accompanied them back home.

There, they were met with tears of joy.

"I'm the only girl in my family, so I hold a special place and everyone was so happy," the girl said. "But that didn't last long."

The day after, the Defense Ministry put out a statement quoting the school principal, saying soldiers had rescued all but eight of the girls. When the principal denied it, the ministry retracted its statement.

With confidence in the military eroded, the residents of Chibok pooled their money, bought fuel for motorcycles and headed into the dangerous Sambisa Forest. The forest sprawls over more than 23,000 square miles (59,570 sq. kilometers), nearly eight times the size of Yellowstone National Park in the United States, and is known to shelter extremist hideouts.

Mutah Buba joined the search party hoping to find his two sisters and two nieces. They got directions from villagers along the way who said they had seen the abductors with the girls on a forest path. Finally, an old man herding cattle at a fork in the road warned them that they were close to the camp, but that they and their daughters could be killed if they confronted the militants.

The searchers returned to Chibok and appealed to the few soldiers there to accompany them into the forest. They refused, point blank, Buba said. Parents in Chibok ask why they came within a couple of miles of their daughters, yet the military did not.

"What was strange was that none of the people we spoke to had seen a soldier man in the area, yet the military were saying they were in hot pursuit," said Buba, a 42-year-old drawn home to Chibok by the tragedy from Maiduguri, the Borno state capital 80 miles to the northwest.

The military says it is diligently searching for the girls, with extensive aerial surveillance. "Every information relayed to security agencies has so far been investigated, including the search of all places suspected as a possible hide-away of the kidnapped girls," Information Minister Labaran Maku said Friday.

Many soldiers have told the AP they are demoralized, because Boko Haram is more heavily armed and better equipped, while they get little more than a meal a day. Some of the kidnapped girls have been forced into "marriage" with their Boko Haram abductors, sold for a nominal bride price of \$12, according to parents who talked with villagers. Others have been taken across borders to Cameroon and Chad, they said. Their accounts could not be verified, but forced child marriage is common in northern Nigeria, where it is allowed under Islamic law but not the country's Western-style constitution.

In the meantime, the parents are frantic. Through sobs and jagged gasps for air, the mother of a missing 15-year-old said she had lost confidence in the authorities. "I am so very sad because the government of Nigeria did not take care of our children and does not now care about our children," said the mother, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect her daughter. "All we have left is to pray to God to help them and help us."

The mother of six wondered what would happen to her daughter's lofty ambition to become a doctor. She said the girl spent her time caring for the family, and would cook whatever her mother wanted to eat.

"She is my first-born, the best," said the mother, who broke into a scream followed by wails of sorrow. "What am I to do as a mother?"

Spurred by growing national outrage, President Goodluck Jonathan on Friday set up a committee to work out a rescue strategy, and expressed confidence that the military will find the girls.

The only way to get the girls back is through negotiation, according to an Islamic scholar who has mediated the release of previous hostages. The scholar, who remained anonymous because his position receiving messages from Boko Haram is sensitive, said the militants are willing to free the girls for a ransom, but have not specified how much.

The 16-year-old who escaped keeps thinking of her friends, and wondering why she was able to get away while they are still captive. She is at times afraid and at times angry.

"I am really lucky and I can thank God for that," she said. "But God must help all of them ... Their parents are worrying. Every day, everyone is crying."