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Holding Nigeria to ransom

A second mass abduction of schoolgirls in Nigeria raises questions about the state's ability to keep its citizens safe

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It was a terrible shock for the people of Nigeria when 110 schoolgirls from the north-eastern Dapchi community were abducted by Boko Haram on 19 February. The kidnapping by the terrorist militia brought back traumatic memories of the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014. It sparked national and international outcry, drawing attention not only to the conflict in north-east Nigeria but also to the state's inability to protect its citizens.

The government of Muhammadu Buhari has largely recaptured the north-eastern territories that were controlled by Boko Haram until 2015. The militants aligned to the Islamic State group continue to launch attacks on communities and military targets, seriously affecting the stability of the region.

The Dapchi abduction shows the ongoing challenge this asymmetric warfare poses to the Nigerian state, exposing the country's vulnerability and the inability of its security services to effectively address the situation.

Commercial motivations

Kidnapping in Nigeria was a recurring phenomenon in the oil-rich Niger Delta region in the 1990s The kidnappers' aim was to draw international attention to the plight of the local population and their exclusion from the profits made by multinational oil companies. Inequality, unemployment and pervasive poverty continued to be a breeding ground for politically and, increasingly, commercially motivated kidnappings in the region.

Kidnapping took a different turn in north-eastern Nigeria in April

The scale of abductions grew from 2003, and by 2013 occurrences had become so widespread that the country accounted for 26 per cent of all

2014, when 276 predominantly Christian girls aged between 16 and 18 were abducted from their school.

kidnappings worldwide. Incidents were still largely concentrated in the south; that is, the Niger Delta and Lagos. However, by 2015 the crime had spread throughout the country.

Perpetrators include criminal gangs, militant groups and unemployed young people. As well as politically motivated incidents, there are organised and random kidnappings carried out solely for ransom. While organised operations usually target wealthy individuals, random kidnapping can happen to anyone. Most reported victims have been members of wealthy families, politicians, government officials, businessmen, doctors, teachers, foreign residents and even religious leaders.

As citizens have little faith in the abilities of the police and other security agencies, only about half of the cases are reported. In most incidents a ransom is paid, contributing to further commercialisation of kidnapping in Nigeria, where a flashy car and a fancy suit can be enough to make someone a victim. Abduction in the Niger Delta region increased to the point that oil companies like Shell and Chevron heavily guard and have even temporarily moved their foreign staff to ensure their safety.

Targeting the vulnerable

Kidnapping took a different turn in north-eastern Nigeria in April 2014, when 276 predominantly Christian girls aged between 16 and 18 were abducted from their school. The nation was devastated. This time, the abduction was not targeted at important, affluent people; instead the victims were among the most vulnerable in society: girls and young women without a voice.

Mass abduction was used as a weapon in this unbalanced terrorist war. The intention was to demoralise and destabilise the nation, to further alienate citizens from their fragile state and to display the ruthlessness and determination of Boko Haram.

Several efforts to rescue the girls proved abortive. The UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon called for their immediate release, while local and international celebrities and civil society groups campaigned on social media under the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. The movement was led by Oby Ezekwesili, a former education minister, who took the protest to the streets to put pressure on the government to find the abductees.

The national trauma and the publicity of the Bring Back Our Girls movement put immense pressure on the state, which finally resulted in negotiations between the government and Boko Haram.

The ongoing Chibok trauma may have contributed to the defeat of the incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 elections. The Buhari government came into power and 21 girls were released in October 2016 and another 82 girls seven months later.

Political manoeuvring

Much more dubious was February's abduction in Dapchi, when 110 girls were taken from their school. To general surprise, 101 were released a month later, leading to speculation that millions of dollars had been paid for their return.

The prevalent distrust of the security agencies and state structures among various quarters came to the fore. Security agencies were suspected of abducting the girls with the intention of returning them after making millions, while others condemned it as a political manoeuvre by the government to regain credit a year ahead of the 2019 elections.

These two mass abductions clearly show the incapability of the security services to manage the terrorist threat appropriately. In both incidents there are indications of ransom payments by the government, with Nigeria's Daily Independent newspaper alleging involvement from a Swiss diplomat and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Wall Street Journal reported that the government paid €3 million and agreed to release five Boko Haram leaders in exchange for the Chibok girls. In the case of the Dapchi abduction, Sahara Reporters wrote that a 'handsome ransom' was paid following 'backchannel negotiations', including the release of some members of Boko Haram.

A dangerous precedent

The national trauma and the publicity of the Bring Back Our Girls movement put immense pressure on the state, which finally resulted in negotiations between the government and Boko Haram. Such negotiations were in the interest of the victims, many of whom were released and returned to their families.

Nigeria will continue to be held to ransom until it wins back the hearts and minds of its people.

However, it cannot be ignored that engaging in such negotiations poses a serious dilemma for a state. From the government's point of view, negotiations and subsequent ransom payments were the fastest way to relieve some of the pressure it faced. In the medium term, however, this readiness to negotiate sets a precedent and opens up the government to further demands and blackmail. The Dapchi abductions must be seen as a clear indication of that.

The two cases are more than a hint that Nigeria needs a multidimensional approach to its security challenges. For a long time, there has been a tendency in Nigeria to counter violence with violence. While this has proved successful, to an extent, in regaining territorial control over the north-east of the country, it won't help to destroy Boko Haram and its ideology. It is simply inappropriate to fight an asymmetric warfare with military means alone. A more comprehensive, subtle and sophisticated approach by the state is needed.

Hearts and minds

Intelligence operations must be professionalised and better coordinated to address the ongoing terrorist threat and to prevent and respond to mass abductions. In the medium term, multifaceted peace-building efforts must target communities in the north-east. Only when the security agencies improve the way they interact with the communities and win their allegiance can the fight against Boko Haram succeed.

Systematic, professional gathering and sharing of intelligence about the increasingly fragmented group is necessary for success. Long-term efforts must combine infrastructural and economic development. Ongoing attempts of indoctrination by islamist terrorist must be countered with desensitisation efforts by various state bodies and stakeholders. And the media and the education sector must be brought in.

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