

AFRICA

A Decade Later: Lessons Learned from Boko Haram's Chibok Abduction

JUNE 12, 2024

Several weeks ago, the date April 14 marked ten years since Boko Haram conducted the infamous abduction of more than 250 girls in the Northeastern Borno State village of Chibok in 2014. The abductions, however, were largely unreported in local or international media until three weeks later. It was at that time, on May 5, 2014 that the bombastic Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, released a video in which he claimed to “enslave” and “marry off” the girls.

The “enslaved” girls included several dozen Muslim girls and the vast majority of the other girls from the school in Chibok who were Christians. The Muslim girls were “apostates” who abandoned Islam by receiving Western education and the Christians were “infidels,” according to Shekau. The stunning “revival of slavery” shocked Nigeria and the world and preceded Islamic State (IS)’s [“enslavement” of Yazidi Kurds](#) and Shekau’s pledge of loyalty to IS less than a year later.

Yet, the fate of the “Chibok girls” went from a “regular” news story to the top of the world’s agenda only when, on May 14, 2014 Boko Haram released another [video](#). This time Shekau and the girls were in split-screen and all the girls, including the Christians, appeared to have embraced Boko Haram’s version of Islam. They orated the Islamic testament of faith together in the video, while wearing hijabs and responding to interview questions from a Boko Haram spokesman about their conversion.

Ten years on, the ordeal is not “resolved,” but it appears the vast majority of girls who were initially abducted have a clearer future. While some girls have been fortunate enough to be released through negotiation and receive asylum abroad, including in the U.S, where they have recovered and now married, others have faced difficulties in reintegrating and being accepted

back into their communities in northeastern Nigeria. Other girls have chosen ostensibly on their own free will to remain with their Boko Haram captors. What is certain is their lives have all been upended by the Chibok kidnapping, and, unfortunately, Nigeria's record shows they are hardly the last group of girls—or Nigerian citizens generally—to be captured for ransom. It is the duty of Nigeria and its international partners to reverse this trend and enhance the human security in the country.

The Chibok Ordeal

Although concern about the Chibok girls has seemingly waned over the past decade, the abduction and the subsequent psychological torment-inducing videos from 2014 commenced a long [ordeal](#) for the girls themselves. Now—a decade later—a total 108 of the 276 girls who were originally abducted have been freed through negotiation (approximately 83 girls) or rescue (approximately 25 girls). Meanwhile, several dozen of the girls have perished due to airstrikes or illness in captivity. This has left around 100 girls who, despite being given the opportunity to be released in negotiations, have chosen to remain in Boko Haram camps with their “husbands” and children as a result of Stockholm Syndrome.

The tragedy of Chibok, therefore, persists. However, there have been numerous other “Chiboks” since 2014, including as recently as this March, when an estimated 200 internally displaced persons (IDPs), including mostly women, girls, and boys, were again [abducted](#) by Boko Haram—and not far from Chibok in Gambarou-Ngala. In the same week, around 100 civilians were abducted by bandits in northwestern Nigeria. Fortunately for the latter contingent, they were freed at the beginning of April for an undisclosed ransom; the status of the former contingent, however, remains unknown.

What these cases show is that Nigeria has not—and continues to not—provide sufficient security for its citizens. However, lessons must be learned in order to ensure the subsequent decade sees improvements. Reviewing the Chibok abduction can aid in preventing similar tragedies in the future.

Reviewing Chibok

Media

The Chibok abduction became controversial once the media widely reported on Shekau's videos and famous people around the world made Chibok their cause célèbre, including with the [#BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign](#) promoted by celebrities ranging from U.S First Lady Michelle Obama, to Malala Yousafzai, to Richard Gere. On the one end, this increased the leverage for Boko Haram in eventual negotiations because it put pressure on the Nigerian government to actually work towards the girls' release, as opposed ignoring the incident altogether, which initially occurred. On the other end, if not for the celebrity attention towards Chibok, the Nigerian government may not have placed additional emphasis on seeking their release. Ultimately, the pressure compelled the Nigerian government to negotiate, but it also meant Nigeria's concessions—large amounts of funds—to Boko Haram backfired by empowering Boko Haram to have resources to conduct similar abductions in the future.

Operational Support

With not only domestic, but also international, pressure on Nigeria and its allies, such as the U.S, to rescue the Chibok girls, the U.S faced similar pressure to [sell](#) "lethal arms" to Nigeria, which could potentially help save the Chibok girls. However, such weapons had been banned for sale to Nigeria prior to the Chibok abduction due to the widespread human rights abuses of the Nigerian army. Ultimately, amid the ongoing attacks by Boko Haram and the desire to eliminate the group that by 2017 was still holding more than 100 of the Chibok girls hostage, the U.S approved the sale of Super Tucano aircrafts to Nigeria. However, that same year, the Nigerian air force conducted an errant air strike on an IDP camp in Rann, near the Cameroonian border, which killed more than 200 civilians. By 2021, the U.S also approved more than \$1 billion in weapons sales to the Nigerian army. The impetus to support Nigeria to counter Boko Haram and rescue the girls came from a good place, but inefficient use of the equipment led to tragedies for hundreds of other civilians who had no connection to Chibok and who were even seeking sanctuary from Boko Haram attacks.

Negotiations

The Chibok girls were freed in two groups of 21 and 82 girls in October 2016 and May 2017. However, their release reportedly involved a ransom payment of more than \$100 million,

which was dropped from a helicopter to Boko Haram in its jungle hideout. Boko Haram ended up using that money to [buy weapons](#) and enrich itself before proceeding to launch an offensive in 2017 that resulted numerous military outposts falling to Boko Haram. This highlighted the Catch-22 of providing Boko Haram money to save the girls but also empowering Boko Haram such that the group later carry out more attacks, including similar abductions.

Conclusion

The Chibok abduction highlights the complex policy choices facing countries like Nigeria when militant groups leverage the media to pressure the government to make concessions that may temporarily alleviate a problem—such a hostage crisis in this instance—but that in the long term may lead to similar crises recurring in the future. Some of the issues encountered in the Chibok crisis, however, could have been handled more effectively—and humanely.

First, the U.S State Department might be more strategic about aligning celebrity messaging with government messaging, which occurred with the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign when the U.S government promoted the hashtag on its social media accounts. The campaign possibly provided leverage for Boko Haram, which knew the Nigerian government, and its backers, would be more willing to pay a higher ransom for the girls' release if the international community, and especially the U.S, was publicizing the girls' plight as a priority internationally. Another possible scenario would have been to use influential figures internationally to pressure the Nigerian government to pay more attention to the Chibok girls' plight through back channels. In this way, the Nigerian government could have negotiated their release without having paid such a high ransom to fill Boko Haram's coffers and enable it to carry out even more attacks. The high publicity of the case incentivized Boko Haram to drag out the negotiation and demand a higher ransom, although at the same it is important to recognize if the case had not been so widely publicized it is unfortunately possible that the Nigerian government would have forgotten the girls altogether.

Second, in cases where the U.S determines providing lethal weapons to a country, such as Nigeria, could be counter-productive due to the human rights record, investments in security could come in other forms. For example, funds are needed to support reintegration initiatives

for Boko Haram fighters who have surrendered, let alone victims of Boko Haram, like the Chibok girls, who are often stigmatized upon their return to their home villages. Moreover, intelligence and human rights training can still proceed as a means to support the host countries' improve its ability to disrupt terrorist networks and conduct counter-insurgency under the framework of international law. At a time when the country's human rights record improves, it would be then be possible to resume weapons sales.

Lastly, negotiation for hostages will always remain a difficult decision for a government insofar as failure to provide the terrorists, such as Boko Haram in this case, with money or concessions can lead to the permanent detainment or killing of innocent civilians, including even youths. The fact that school abductions continue in Nigeria demonstrates that insufficient attention has been paid towards to securing schools throughout the conflict zone, which would help make prevent such abductions in the first place. The government could also seek other deals in according with human rights standards with militants in these cases, such as promises of medicine or short-term ceasefires in return for hostages. It does not appear this occurred in Nigeria because the government considered Boko Haram "faceless" and only international mediation from the Swiss and other humanitarian NGOs led to breakthroughs. However, had Nigeria attempted more local-level negotiations, as have occurred in recent years, it is possible that progress would have been made without having to pay Boko Haram tens of millions of dollars.

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