At-Issue

An Epidemic of Kidnapping: Interpreting School Abductions and Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract: Attacks on Nigerian school students from December 2020 to August 2021 saw hundreds of children abducted and prompted a national outcry at the state's seeming inability to prevent such events. This recent wave of abductions follows other notorious incidents of mass abduction and murder of students, most prominently the cases of the Chibok and Dapchi girls. In assessing the more recent abductions, the authorities and some analysts have made a distinction between contemporary and earlier episodes on the basis of the perceived identity of the perpetrators. While Boko Haram was responsible for the Chibok and Dapchi abductions, "bandits" are held responsible for the attacks in 2020-21. This focus on the perpetrators, however, does not explain how attacks on schools fit into the broader political economy of violence and insecurity of contemporary Nigeria, and why kidnapping has become a fast-growing industry. Moreover, the ensuing reaction of largely treating abductions as security problems requiring a greater military and police response, accompanied by the physical fortification of schools, treats the symptoms rather than the cause. As these same security actors implicated in corruption, violence, and the systemic abuse of civilians are not credible providers of security, in the name of safeguarding and rescuing students Nigeria risks becoming ever more militarized and repressive.

Keywords: Nigeria, Boko Haram, schools, securitization, insecurity

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Introduction

With nearly 97,000 public and private primary schools, Nigeria's primary education sector is roughly equivalent in size to the 98,000 public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, making it the biggest school system in Africa.[1] Nigeria has a further 32,800 public and private secondary schools, thousands more Islamic schools, and a myriad more colleges and vocational institutes.[2] Like in the United States, the vast scale of Nigeria's education sector underlines the enormous challenge of securing every student and every school premises, whether from school shootings, or as in the case of Nigeria, from organized armed attacks.

In 2014, the small, non-descript town of Chibok in Borno State in northeast Nigeria became notorious worldwide after 276 girls were abducted from a public secondary school.[3] The abduction of the Chibok girls, as they became known, sparked a national and international campaign calling for their return; with 111 girls still missing, the Bring Back Our Girls campaign continues to organize daily demonstrations in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and weekly demonstrations in Nigeria's largest city, Lagos.[4] The Nigerian government's mishandling of the Chibok abductions also contributed to the defeat of incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 elections.[5] Jonathan's opponent, former general and one-time military ruler of Nigeria Muhammadu Buhari, campaigned on a platform of restoring security to Nigerians and handily defeated Jonathan—the first time an incumbent Nigerian president lost at the ballot box.[6] Little known outside of Nigeria is that the Chibok abductions were not the first such attacks on Nigerian students and educational institutions. In 2013, forty-one students and one teacher were shot or burned alive at the Mamudo Government Secondary School in Yobe State, also in northeast Nigeria.[7] That same year, another forty-four students and teachers were killed in a separate incident at the College of Agriculture in Gujba, about 120km east of Mamudo.[8] In February 2014, a third educational institution in Yobe State was attacked—this time, fifty-nine students were killed at the Buni Yadi Federal Government College, just 30km south of Gujba.[9] The Chibok abductions followed in April 2014. With Buhari now in office, 110 girls were abducted from the Government Girls Science Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State in February 2018; Dapchi is about 130km north of Gujba and Mamudo.[10] Most of the Dapchi girls were freed a few weeks later in March.[11]

Recent Events

As shocking as these mass killings and abductions were, a seemingly relentless wave of kidnappings between December 2020 and August 2021 has renewed attention on school safety in Nigeria and led many Nigerians to loudly question why insecurity is so pervasive across the

country. In a mere nine months, there were at least twelve mass abductions at Nigerian schools, and four further attempted abductions.

Abductions

In December, one mass abduction and one attempted abduction occurred in Katsina State, Buhari's home state in the country's northwest. On 11 December, more than 300 boys were abducted from the Kankara Government Science Secondary School and were freed a week later.[12] On the evening of 19 December, eighty students at an Islamic school in Dandume, about 60km from Kankara, were opportunistically detained by a kidnapping group that had already abducted four other people. All eighty-four were quickly freed by police and a community self-defense group.[13] In February 2021, there were two mass abductions. On 17 February, forty-two people, including twenty-seven students, were kidnapped from the Government Science College in Kagara, Niger State; another student was killed in the attack.[14] Then, on 26 February, between 279 and 317 students were taken from the Government Girls Secondary School in Jangebe, in Zamfara State.[15]

In March 2021, there were two further mass abductions and three attempted abductions, all in Kaduna State. On 11 March, thirty-nine students were abducted from the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in Mando.[16] On 13 March, a tip-off allowed the Nigerian army to prevent an attack on the Turkish International Secondary School, in Rigachikun.[17] While in Rigachikun, a distress call from the nearby Federal School of Forestry Mechanization in Afaka, which was under attack, saw the same army group intervene to rescue 180 people, including 172 students.[18] On the evening of 13 March and into the early hours of the following day, an attack on the Government Science Secondary School in Ikara was thwarted by combined action by Nigerian soldiers, police, and "volunteers."[19] On 15 March, three teachers were abducted from Ube Primary School in Rama, Birnin Gwari. No children were taken.[20]

In April, two abductions occurred. On 20 April, twenty students and three staff from Greenfield University in Chikun, Kaduna State were abducted. Five students were killed by their captors, and the surviving students were released in May.[21] On 29 April, four students were kidnapped from the King's School, in Gana Ropp, Barkin Ladi, Plateau State. Three soon escaped captivity.[22] On 30 May, 136 children and several teachers were abducted from the Salihu Tanko Islamic School in Tegina, Niger State. One died in captivity; the survivors were released in August.[23] On 17 June, 103 students were abducted from the Federal Government Girls College in Birnin Yauri, Kebbi State.[24] On 5 July, 121 children were abducted from the Bethel Baptist High School in Maramara, Kaduna State.[25] On 16 August, fifteen students, a teacher, and his family, were abducted from the College of Agriculture in Bakura, Zamfara State; and, on 17 August, nine students were kidnapped on their way home from the Islamiyya school in Sakkai village in Faskari, Katsina State.[26]

School Closures

Pity the Nigerian school student. Even though attacks have targeted a tiny proportion of schools, hundreds if not thousands more schools have been indirectly affected, with many ordered closed by government in response to the kidnappings.[27] Official statistics suggest that only fifty-nine percent of school-age children went to school in October 2020, compared to seventy-four percent in January 2019.[28] This comes on top of a six-month long suspension of in-person schooling to prevent the spread of COVID-19.[29] For school children, a public health pandemic has been exacerbated by an epidemic of violence.

Perpetrators

A great deal of attention has been paid to the perpetrators of the earlier school killings and abductions in northern Nigeria: the terror group Boko Haram.[30] Chibok and Dapchi are among Boko Haram's most infamous attacks.[31] This was especially so given the anti-secular education ideology of Boko Haram, and its campaign of violence against schools, which aimed to damage and destroy schools, long before it resorted to the mass killing and kidnapping of students.[32] At least 300 schools were severely damaged or destroyed and 196 teachers and 314 school children killed between January 2012 and December 2014.[33] In the next five years, another 900 schools were damaged or destroyed.[34] More recently, however, significant effort has been made to describe the perpetrators of recent school attacks as unaffiliated with or organized by Boko Haram, and are thus characterized as a different type of threat.

Although Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the Kankara kidnapping, it has not done so in the other cases.[35] Most analysts discount the group as responsible for the kidnappings in 2020-21.[36] Instead, the vernacular term for those purportedly responsible for the recent attacks is "bandits" which Orjinmo suggests is a catch-all term for "kidnappers, armed robbers, cattle rustlers, Fulani herdsmen and other armed militia operating in the region," a definition so broad as to be almost analytically useless.[37] Others have used the terms "criminal gangs," as part of what Parkinson and Akingbule call "a brutal business model" to extort ordinary Nigerians.[38] The focus on who precisely is responsible for any single attack or series of attacks, however, misses a more important emerging reality: that contemporary Nigeria is increasingly insecure, and that such mass abductions are only part of a broader political economy of violence and insecurity. If, as Campbell suggests, kidnapping has become a "growth industry" in Nigeria and is a profitable business despite the low margins on ransoms paid by rural citizens without great wealth, it is largely because the state's economy has not provided enough opportunity for its population.[39] If honest work is not to be had, then crime offers the possibility of survival—more than a third of Nigeria's population is unemployed, ranking the country second-highest on some indices of global unemployment.[40]

Getting beyond Symptoms

Despite Nigeria's many security challenges, however, solely treating school abductions as security problems to be solved by intensifying the response of military and police, and by fortifying schools, does not treat the country's disease but only its symptoms. To address this shortcoming, we make three propositions. First, that the scale of Nigeria's education system makes the indefinite deployment of soldiers and police to protect schools impractical, especially because schools are not the only 'soft targets' vulnerable to insecurity. The soft target concept is unhelpfully reductive—everyday, Nigerians are victims of both opportunistic and planned crimes. In truth, every Nigerian civilian is a 'soft target.' Security will not return to schools and their students by simply finding more men with guns.

Second, without addressing the trust deficit between the state's security actors and the population, the credibility of any state-led security response to violence—whether committed by Boko Haram or other actors—will always be in question. Since few Nigerians see state security actors as credible because of their checkered history of corruption, violence, and their systemic abuse of civilians, simply pouring more resources into the security sector will not have the desired results of reducing insecurity. [41] It instead risks further militarization and repression in the country.

Third, attacks on school are only further incentivizing local vigilantism, to the peril of the cohesion of the Nigerian state. The rise of vigilantism is accompanied by the narrative that the leadership of the Nigerian state has repeatedly articulated: that the state is the victim, and that citizens need to take more responsibility for their own protection. As the defense minister recently explicitly argued, Nigerians should not "be cowards" and confront their antagonists directly.[42] This discourse of state victimhood both marginalizes citizen victims, as well as diverts attention from systemic challenges in the country's governance, including the predatory behavior of state security actors and the failure to substantially improve socio-economic conditions for most Nigerians.[43]

Schools Are Not Only Security Problems

The enormity of Nigeria's population and number of educational institutions to match evidently makes the indefinite deployment of soldiers and police to protect schools impractical. There could never be enough police or soldiers to constantly protect every place of learning in Nigeria against a determined set of attackers. And schools are far from the only lucrative targets for would-be kidnappers. For years, Nigeria's rich and famous have discreetly paid to secure the release of their abducted relatives; the recent adaptation of the kidnappers appears to be the expansion of targeting to even people with less modest financial resources.[44] However, despite the implausibility of the security forces being in a position to physically protect every school, this has not stopped calls for a greater armed presence at and fortification of schools nationwide. In February, President Buhari, in an apparent abandonment of the classical concept

of the state's monopoly of violence, called on local governments to "play their part by being proactive in improving security in and around schools."[45]

Calls to "improve" security are invariably conceptualized as deploying more men, more guns, and more barriers. This was a trend started by the Safe Schools Initiative of 2014 when Gordon Brown, the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education, called for helping "the Nigerian people with fortifications, telecommunications, guards, safety equipment that will enable people [to] feel more secured about the schools."[46] After the Dapchi attack in 2018, security personnel were deployed to all schools in northeast Nigeria, following a demand from the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) for 24-hour military patrols.[47] In December 2020, the NUT renewed its call for 24-hour surveillance at schools, and threatened to strike if its demands were not met.[48] In March, the Nigerian defense ministry announced it would "fast-track" the fortification of schools against attack, and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps was also tasked to "develop a robust scheme" to protect schools.[49]

Militarizing more schools may deter some attacks. But such measures do not guarantee the epidemic of school kidnappings will end. Reportedly, the Nigerian army is already operationally deployed to all but one of Nigeria's thirty-six states.[50] Putting a soldier in every school yard does little to address the root causes of this epidemic of violence and may just displace violence to other civilian targets. Clearly, soldiers are not social workers, nor will they find jobs for idle youth who may be tempted to join the ranks of kidnappers, whether motivated by extremist ideology or by the prospects of a quick pay day. Nigeria's schools—and those in most of the world—manage to operate without armed guards. Security will not be fundamentally found in schools simply by sending more guns. Turning a school into a bunker ultimately will help little if security in the wider community is absent.

Addressing the Trust Deficit

The implausibility of finding a security solution to the issue of school security is underlined by the persistently low levels of trust in the Nigerian police and army. Public opinion data has found that less than a quarter of Nigerians trust the police "somewhat" or "a lot," the lowest figure in eighteen surveyed African countries. In a survey conducted by one of the authors in 2020, only 15 percent of respondents in kidnap-afflicted Kaduna State selected the Nigerian military as the institution in which they had the most confidence to address insecurity and violent conflict in Nigeria; only 2 percent of respondents chose the Nigerian police.[51] This trust deficit has far reaching implications beyond the security sector; the same research showed that those who had recent experiences of insecurity and who accordingly lacked confidence in the government's response to insecurity were also less likely to trust the government's public health response to Covid-19, for example.[52]

Nigerians have good reason to distrust the police and the army. A long-enduring "crisis of legitimacy" in the police, as Obara calls it, has persisted for decades, because of the entrenched corruption, poor service delivery, and predatory behavior.[53] Recent protests over the brutality of the elite Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), implicated in numerous abuses against civilians, sparked worldwide protests.[54] Although SARS was subsequently disbanded, it was quickly replaced by a rebranded unit mostly comprising the same personnel.[55] While confidence in the military is slightly higher, its history of coups and dictatorship, coupled with its own corruption, violence against civilians, and other episodes of ineptitude, has made the Nigerian army far from universally admired.[56]

The defense minister's recent comments that civilians should not flee when gunmen attack only hurt the military's cause. In harking back to some imaginary romantic past when civilians would "stand to fight any form of aggression," the minister showed himself to be out of touch and full of the arrogance of those far removed from any threat.[57] Consequently, simply sending soldiers without considering whether they or the institution they represent are trusted by civilians they are ostensibly charged to protect will be of limited use. Although the increased deployment of the military to confront school kidnappings seems anecdotally popular among Nigerians, the indefinite assignment of a law enforcement function on the military, well beyond its statutory role to provide external defense, will only further erode the possibility of police reform and improved performance. Worse, in the name of taking all measures necessary to rescue and safeguarding students, the limits on what the military can do to infringe on civil liberties are at risk.

State Victimhood and Vigilantism

Who are the victims in these mass abductions? To judge by the pronouncements and actions of senior officials, it is often them and the state they represent. Victimhood is an understandably human, defensive response, but it may also allow for officeholders to abscond from responsibility. Eleven days after the Kankara abduction, Nigerian information minister Lai Mohammed told journalists the attack was perpetrated by "bandits and terrorists [who] want to embarrass government…They want to inflict the most serious damage on the credibility of the country."[58] Mohammed did not mention the student hostages. Despite coincidentally being at his personal residence in Katsina at the time of the Kankara abductions, President Buhari also failed to show much interest in the students' plight when he declined to make the short journey to the site of the abduction. He later claimed that the Kankara attack was timed to embarrass him while at home.[59] Another minister asserted in March that kidnappers were attempting to embarrass the government and made the ill-fated pledge that the Jangebe abduction would be the last.[60] Cloaking itself in the veil of victimhood is not a recent phenomenon for state officials. Mohammed previously claimed the 2018 Dapchi abduction was motivated by Boko Haram's desire to embarrass the Buhari administration.[61] Nor was this tendency limited to the Buhari

administration—the former first lady of Nigeria Patience Jonathan accused protesters campaigning for a more effective government response of being Boko Haram sympathizers who sought to embarrass the government.[62]

State elites invoking victimhood has greater consequences than massaging the egos of public figures. It sends a clear message to communities that they are on their own, and thus is one factor in motivating the proliferation of community defense groups, more commonly known in Nigeria as vigilantes. There is a long and complex history to the development of vigilantism in Nigeria.[63] Some groups effectively function as the state's security subcontractors, other groups very much exist in tension with the state's institutions.[64] In confronting Boko Haram, vigilante groups are part of the civilian counterinsurgency response, fighting alongside, and sometimes in place, of the Nigerian army.[65] In light of the surge of school kidnappings, however, both existing and new vigilante groups are turning towards the protection of schools and the rescue of hostages. Vigilantes were implicated in holding off the attack on Ikara and have been active in the search for the missing teachers from Rama.[66] Ultimately, however, as Agbiboa warns, vigilante groups in Nigeria such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) may only be the "lesser of two evils" and have also committed numerous crimes against civilians.[67] While there are short term gains from the activities of the CJTF, in the long run, Agbiboa argues that the CJTF is likely to threaten the security of the local population.[68] While it is unclear that such an eventuality will necessarily occur with vigilante groups now focused on school abductions, having unleashed the vigilantes to play a more expansive role in state security, they may not be easily restrained in future. The more the state plays the helpless victim, the more likely it is that vigilante groups will only endure and feel they must plant deeper roots on the unsteady ground they inhabit.

Conclusion

Counting the cases of Nigeria's recent school abductions is both sobering and discouraging, particularly for academics, all of whom are products of formal systems of education. To date, analysis has largely failed to assess these cases beyond the spectacle of their audacity, the individual circumstances of where and when events occurred, and the identity of the culprits. We argue that the focus on responsibility for the attacks—or the shirking of that responsibility—obscures the important, second-order implications of these unfortunate episodes. School kidnappings, although audacious, are but one part of Nigeria's political economy of violence, fueled by an ineffective, underperforming state and sparse economic opportunity. Conceiving of solutions to school abductions entirely in the security sphere, necessitating further army and police action, and more guards, walls, and guns for school premises, will not overcome the challenges Nigeria faces. Finding one weak link, that one

sleepy police officer, in a country where there are tens of thousands of schools will always be possible.

This does not, however, mean such attacks are inevitable. Facing reality, though, means accepting that the future militarization of schools is both impractical and likely to be ineffective. The state's legacy of popular mistrust arises because its core institutions, including the police and military, have failed to perform, and have all too often predated, rather than protected, its citizens. The current approach to safeguarding schools risks further entrenching these trends of militarization and repression and does little to rebalance the deficit in trust between state and citizen. Neither does outsourcing security to vigilantes provide a long-term solution to school abductions. The further rise of such groups risks compromising the state even further, particularly as the state retreats into narratives that it, rather than its people, is the victim. In this confluence of events, it is here, perhaps that the Nigerian state faces an existential challenge: the future of its youngest citizens is at stake, both in terms of the education they receive, and the nature of the state they grow up to inherit.

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