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Halting Repeated School Kidnappings in Nigeria

Gunmen snatched more than 270 girls from a boarding school in north-western Nigeria on 26 February, releasing them four days later. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Nnamdi Obasi looks at why the authorities are struggling to prevent these mass kidnappings.

The 26 February mass kidnapping was the third in the past three months in Nigeria's North West or adjacent states. Is the region becoming more insecure?

The North West has been in turmoil for several years. It tends to get less international attention than Nigeria's North East region (which is the centre of activity for the jihadist group Boko Haram and the site of its notorious 2014 kidnapping of over 270 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok). But deadly violence in the North West has surged since the emergence of competition between herders and farmers, who have been vying over land resources, and militias allied with both sides. The violence has a communal dimension, as the herders are predominantly ethnic Fulani, while the farmers are mainly Hausa or from other ethnic groups.

As Crisis Group has [described](#), over the last decade, the herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria's North West has been compounded by the rise of numerous criminal gangs and a corresponding boom in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, extortion, armed robbery of gold miners and traders, and pillage of villages. More recently, jihadist militants – Boko Haram and its splinter groups – have taken advantage of the insecurity to establish a presence and cultivate relations with other armed groups in the region. From 2011 to 2019, this combination of armed groups killed over 8,000 people in the North West's seven states. As of 2020, their violence had forced about 260,000 people to flee, some into neighbouring Niger.

It is against this backdrop that the recent raids on schools and kidnappings of students have taken place. The 26 February incident in Zamfara state follows a raid on a school in Niger state in January, in which 42 children were abducted (with one killed in the process). These both followed a mass abduction at a secondary school in President Muhammadu Buhari's home state of Katsina in December, when more than 300 boys were taken. All the children have since been released.

What do we know about the groups responsible for these kidnappings?

The kidnapers are criminal gangs, whom the Nigerian government and mass media refer to as "bandits". In recent years, these gangs have proliferated across the North West, a region awash with illicit firearms and partly covered by vast forests that are largely unpatrolled by government troops – including the Kamuku forest in Kaduna state, Falgore forest in Kano state, Dansadau forest in Zamfara state and Davin Rugu forest, which spans Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states. Some of these gangs started a few years ago as herder-allied groups but went on to operate autonomously. Many of the gangs are Fulani, but some are ethnically heterogeneous. They lack centralised command structures and generally do not operate like militias. In some cases, they are locked in bitter rivalries with one another, which sometimes degenerate into deadly fights.

Some gang leaders claim they resorted to crime because the welfare of their pastoralist Fulani groups was neglected by successive federal and state governments and their members suffered abuses at the hands of security forces. By and large, however, they do not appear to be motivated by anti-state grievances or ideology. Instead, they have largely raided, extorted and pillaged rural communities, more recently including schools.

"Mass abductions of children attract far more national and international media coverage and tend to stir more public outrage."

Why are these gangs targeting schools and kidnapping students?

The gangs hit schools for several reasons. For one, schools are soft targets. They often have weak security, with few or no fences, and guards tend to be few and poorly trained. State and federal security forces are unlikely to be an impediment, as they are stretched woefully thin across both the country and the region.

Secondly, mass abductions of children are a magnet for attention. They attract far more national and international media coverage, and tend to stir more public outrage, than kidnapping adult villagers or travellers on highways. The media glare forces the government almost immediately into negotiations and may result in quicker government concessions to speed up the children's release.

Thirdly, kidnappers appear to be highly motivated by the concessions they can extract in exchange for releasing abductees, although state and federal officials have repeatedly denied making any. Hard evidence remains slim, but there have been several reports since the Chibok case in 2014 of governments paying ransom, releasing armed group members from detention or agreeing to halt military operations. President Buhari's [recent warning](#) to state governments to "review their policy of rewarding bandits with money and vehicles" lends credence to these reports.

What is the impact of these mass abductions on education in the North West and throughout Nigeria?

The attacks pose a serious threat to education in the North West. The region already has the worst statistics for educational performance in the country. Concerns about the students' safety have prompted governors of six states in the region – Niger, Kano, Katsina, Jigawa, Zamfara and Sokoto – as well as Yobe in the North East, to shut some or all boarding schools, particularly in the most vulnerable local government areas, until a semblance of security has been restored.

The attacks could curtail attendance once schools reopen. Already, many parents say they no longer consider schools safe. Many Muslim parents in the North West are sceptical of what they perceive as a Western model of education; it is likely that some won't allow their children to return. Moreover, given the wider insecurity in the region, the abductions could prompt teachers and other staff to quit and look for employment elsewhere.

Over the long term, the raids on schools aggravate the security crisis in the North West and the country as a whole. The inability of local governments to protect schoolchildren could further erode trust in the government, while making gangs and other armed groups look correspondingly more powerful, and potentially increasing their recruiting potential.

Have jihadist groups been involved in the recent school kidnappings?

While jihadist groups appear to be expanding into the North West, as Crisis Group has [reported](#), there is yet no evidence of their direct involvement in the recent kidnappings. By all appearances, the recent kidnappings seem to have been carried out by criminals seeking ransom payments, the release of arrested accomplices and similar concessions. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of more than 300 boys from a school in Kankara town, Katsina state, in December 2020. But a separate armed group that kidnapped the children released them a few days later in circumstances that remain unclear.

How have the kidnappings and wider insecurity affected public confidence in President Buhari?

When running for office in 2014, President Buhari promised security, tweeting confidently: "We will protect your children. We will protect your wealth. We will make this country work again". Even before the 26 February mass kidnapping, Buhari was under fire for having failed to fulfil that pledge, given burgeoning insecurity in much of Nigeria. On 17 February, the Senate urged Buhari to declare a state of emergency across the country. Five days later, a coalition of 43 civil society organisations called on Buhari to resign or face impeachment if he cannot resolve the security crisis. (As of 24 February, other groups had joined raising the number of signatories to 68.)

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Buhari shows no sign of resigning, nor is a supportive National Assembly likely to impeach him, but these calls underscore the erosion of public confidence in both him and his government. Many Nigerians believe the government is unwilling to confront the security crisis, sometimes appearing to blame ordinary citizens for it – as when Defence Minister Bashir Magashi [seemed to assert](#) that civilians are "cowards" if they do not stand up to armed gangs. Public anger is fuelled by a sense of despair over the deterioration of security across the country. Abdulazeez Suleiman, spokesman of the Coalition of Northern Groups, a civil society network, [says the kidnappings have created a situation](#) that is "difficult for absolutely everyone, as we wonder about the future and worry about each other, our neighbours, our friends, our families and ourselves".

What should federal and state authorities do to stop the mass abductions?

There's no easy answer. Some state governors, like Bello Matawalle of Zamfara state, advocate for engaging in dialogue with the gangs and other armed groups and offering to trade amnesty for disarmament. Others, like Nasir el-Rufai of Kaduna state, firmly reject dialogue and insist on subduing the armed groups. Yet other governors, like Aminu Masari of Katsina state, advocate a

combination of coercion and dialogue to persuade criminals and other armed groups to disarm. None of these approaches has yet achieved the desired results and the situation demands a lot more engagement by the federal government.

For a start, it should deploy more troops to the North West to protect schools and other establishments, respond better to attacks there and apprehend armed groups camped in forests. That will require pulling out troops from lower-priority security operations in other parts of the country. The federal government should come together with state governments to develop a common security strategy. Such a strategy would outline the roles various authorities, security agencies, community leaders and other stakeholders can play to protect schools and improve security across the region. Lastly, federal and state authorities should revisit the Safe Schools Initiative the previous administration launched following the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, and enact tighter financial controls to ensure that the initiative’s funds are used to improve school safety in the future.

ecoi.net summary:
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