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# Nigeria blames jihadist groups for wave of kidnappings but others accuse criminal gangs

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More than 250 children who were kidnapped from this school in Niger state are still in captivity

The Nigerian government says jihadist groups Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province (Is wap) are behind the recent wave of abductions in north-western and central Nigeria, but this has been disputed by analysts who tell the BBC they were committed by criminal gangs locally known as "bandits".

This is the first time the government has stated who it believes is responsible for the kidnappings but it has not revealed any evidence to back its claims.

**Kidnap for ransom has become big business in parts of Nigeria** in recent years - with the culprits ranging from kidnap gangs, jihadists and separatists.

It is a lucrative money-spinner but officials consistently deny paying ransoms.

In the past fortnight alone, there have been three mass kidnappings in the region:

- 17 November - in Maga, **Kebbi** state, at Government Girls Comprehensive secondary school. Two people were killed and 25 abducted including one teacher - now all free
- 18 November - in Eruku, **Kwara** state, at Christ Apostolic Church. Two were killed and 38 abducted - all since freed
- 21 November - in Papiri, **Niger** state, at St Mary's Catholic School. More than 250 children and 12 members of staff reportedly kidnapped, although officials question these figures

Paying ransoms has been made illegal in Nigeria, although there are allegations this ban has been widely ignored.

Speaking to the BBC, presidential spokesman Sunday Dare would not say whether money had been paid to free the minority of abductees who were recently released, simply stating: "Whatever processes are involved - kinetic, non-kinetic, negotiations, etc - have been successful."

Asked who was behind the kidnappings, he replied: "Abundant data - both nationally and internationally - reveals clearly that Iswap are all over the place. Also, whatever is left of Boko Haram, they are right there," he continued.

"They are the ones involved in this process."

Iswap is a splinter group of Islamist militant group Boko Haram, which has been waging an insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria for more than a decade.

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Mr Dare also reiterated President Bola Tinubu's promise to ensure the remaining abductees would be rescued, but failed to give assurances on how long it would take.

In some of the worst cases in the past, kidnapped children have died at the hands of their captors - or been held for years on end, **as in the case of the infamous Chibok kidnappings by Boko Haram.**

Analyst Bulama Bukarti told the BBC he did not agree with the government's claims that jihadist groups were behind the recent wave of kidnappings.

"I don't think that's accurate. There is no Iswap or Boko Haram cell resident in the north-west. The recent kidnappings, including the mass abductions, were carried out by bandits, not Boko Haram or Iswap," he said.

The bandits are local armed groups, often on motorbikes, with no central organisation, who operate mainly in the north-west. Whereas Boko Haram and Iswap mainly operate hundreds of miles away, in Nigeria's north-east.

The BBC asked Aclad - an international monitoring group that analyses attacks by armed groups - to assess the three kidnappings.

Aclad said in all three cases Fulani militia groups, locally called "bandits", were responsible for the kidnappings.

**Fulani herders have come into conflict with both Muslim and Christian communities across Nigeria.**

It said the biggest of the recent kidnappings, in which more than 200 schoolchildren were reportedly abducted from St Mary's Catholic School, "appears to have been partly

Nigeria blames jihadist groups for wave of kidnappings but others accuse criminal gangs carried out to spite the government and achieve some political objectives".

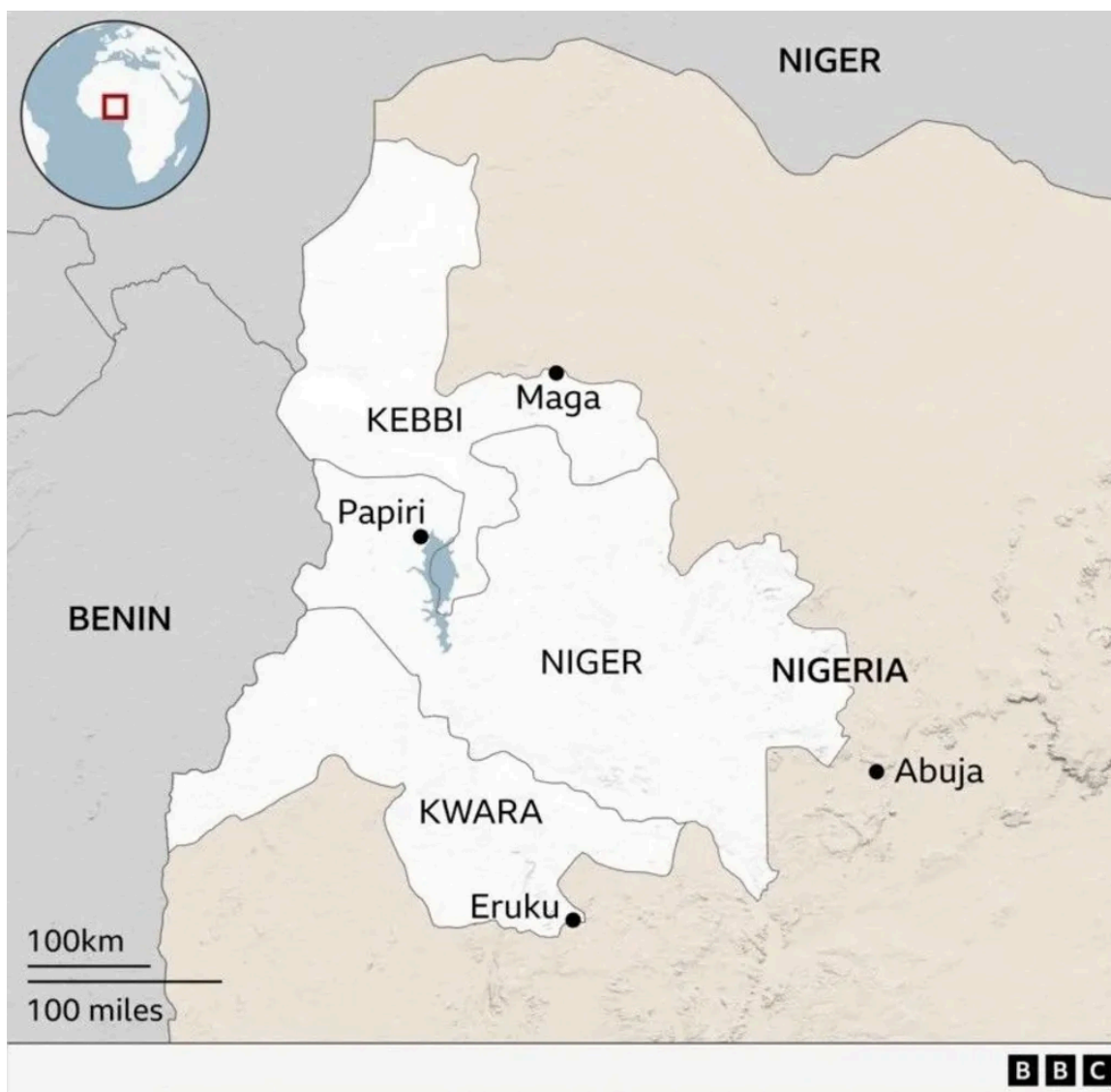
The church attack in southern Kwara state was "part of the Fulani expansionist drive, and as a way to displace the locals from the communities for illegal mining activities", Aclad told the BBC.

"Local displacement for mining has become the emerging pattern of the Fulani militia activities as seen in Zamfara state and the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna state."

Shortly after the mass kidnappings in north-western and central Nigeria, 13 teenage girls were abducted in north-eastern Borno state, the stronghold of Boko Haram. Analysts agree that this is likely to have been the work of jihadist groups.

Nigeria's security crisis has been thrown into the international spotlight in recent weeks after US President Donald Trump threatened to send over troops "guns a-blazing" if the government "continues to allow the killing of Christians".

Nigerian officials and analysts say that members of all faiths are victims of the violence and kidnappings, and say it is not true that Christians are being targeted.



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