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What does the recent escalation of mass abductions in Nigeria tell us? | Joint Brief

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A spate of abductions in Nigeria is heightening tensions in the country. In this Joint Brief with the **Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)**, [Kingsley Madueke](#), [Lawan Danjuma Adamu](#) and [Ladd Serwat](#) highlight findings from a forthcoming report that explores the activities of armed bandit groups operating across Nigeria's North West, focusing on how these groups engage in illicit economies — including kidnapping — as key sources of revenue.

Since the end of February, over 500 people have been kidnapped in a series of mass abductions in Nigeria's North East and North West regions. On 29 February, suspected Boko Haram members [abducted at least 200 people](#), primarily women and children, in the North Eastern state of Borno. In the North West, at least three incidents of mass abductions not linked to Boko Haram have occurred in quick succession since 7 March, when gunmen raided a school and [abducted 287 pupils](#) in the Chikun area of Kaduna. Two days later, on 9 March, [gunmen abducted 15 children](#) from an Islamic school in Sokoto. With authorities and communities still reeling in the aftermath of these incidents, on 12 March armed bandits reportedly struck Kaduna again — this time in Kajuru — taking with them [61 people](#).

Coming about a month before the 10th anniversary of the highly publicized kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok in Borno, this recent spate of incidents marks a dramatic spike in mass abductions, which had not been seen in the country since the abduction of at least [60 train passengers](#) in July 2022.

Who are the perpetrators?

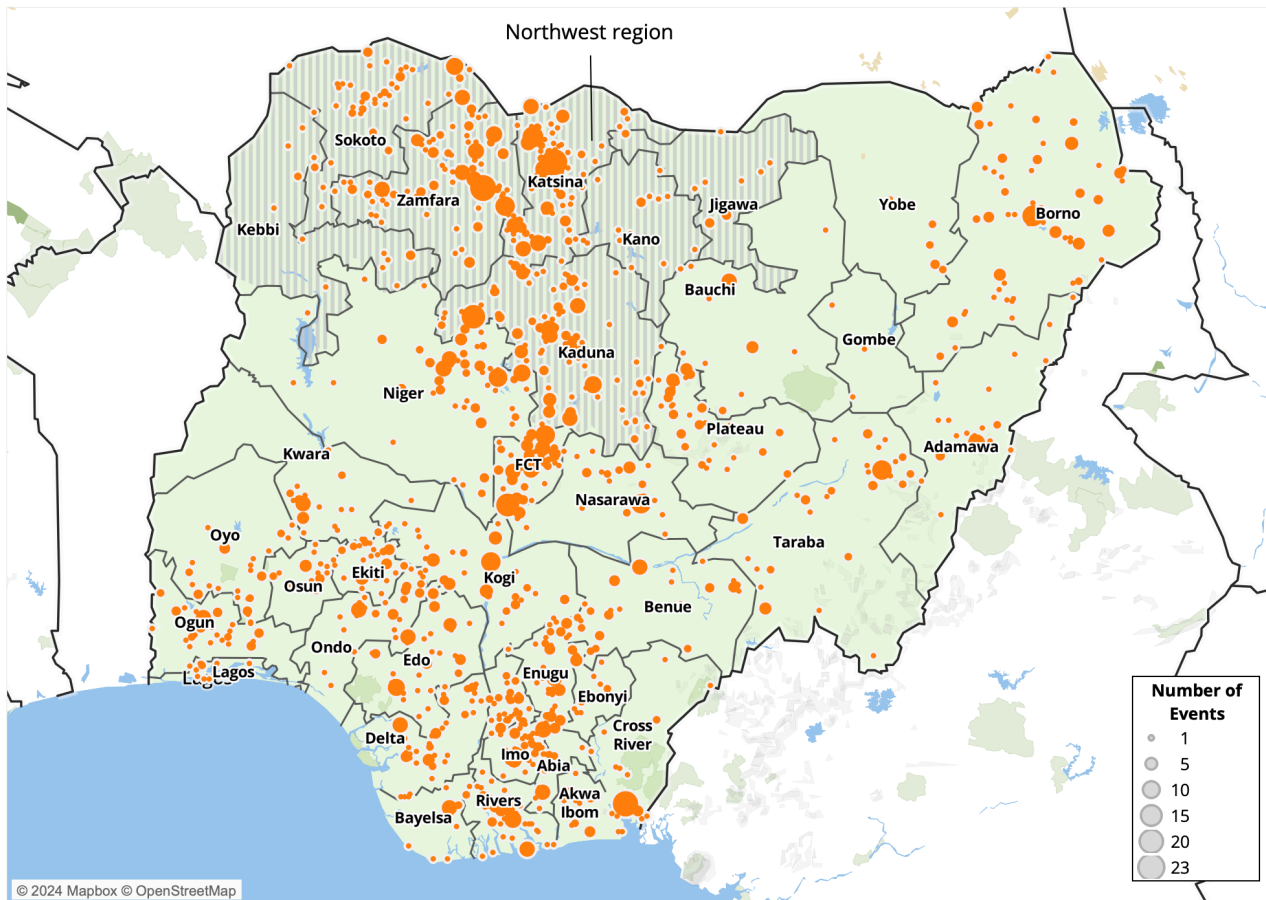
Kidnapping has been a major source of revenue for both violent extremist organizations in the North East and bandit groups in the North West. Incidents involving armed bandits deserve special attention because, as relatively more recent actors, they are more poorly understood, but also because they have likely been behind three of the four incidents occurring in March.

While none of the mass abductions to date have been claimed by specific groups, it is likely that either Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) or Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (JAS), violent extremist organizations operating predominantly in the North East, are behind the February abduction in Borno. By contrast, armed bandit groups — a loose collection of rural gangs operating under different leaders — are likely to be behind the remaining three abductions in the North West.

While in the North West there have been (often temporary) alliances between some armed bandit groups and violent extremist groups — mainly JAS, Ansaru and ISWAP, who have increasingly set up camps in the North West — the different groups remain distinct entities.

Abductions in Nigeria

1 January 2019 - 8 March 2024



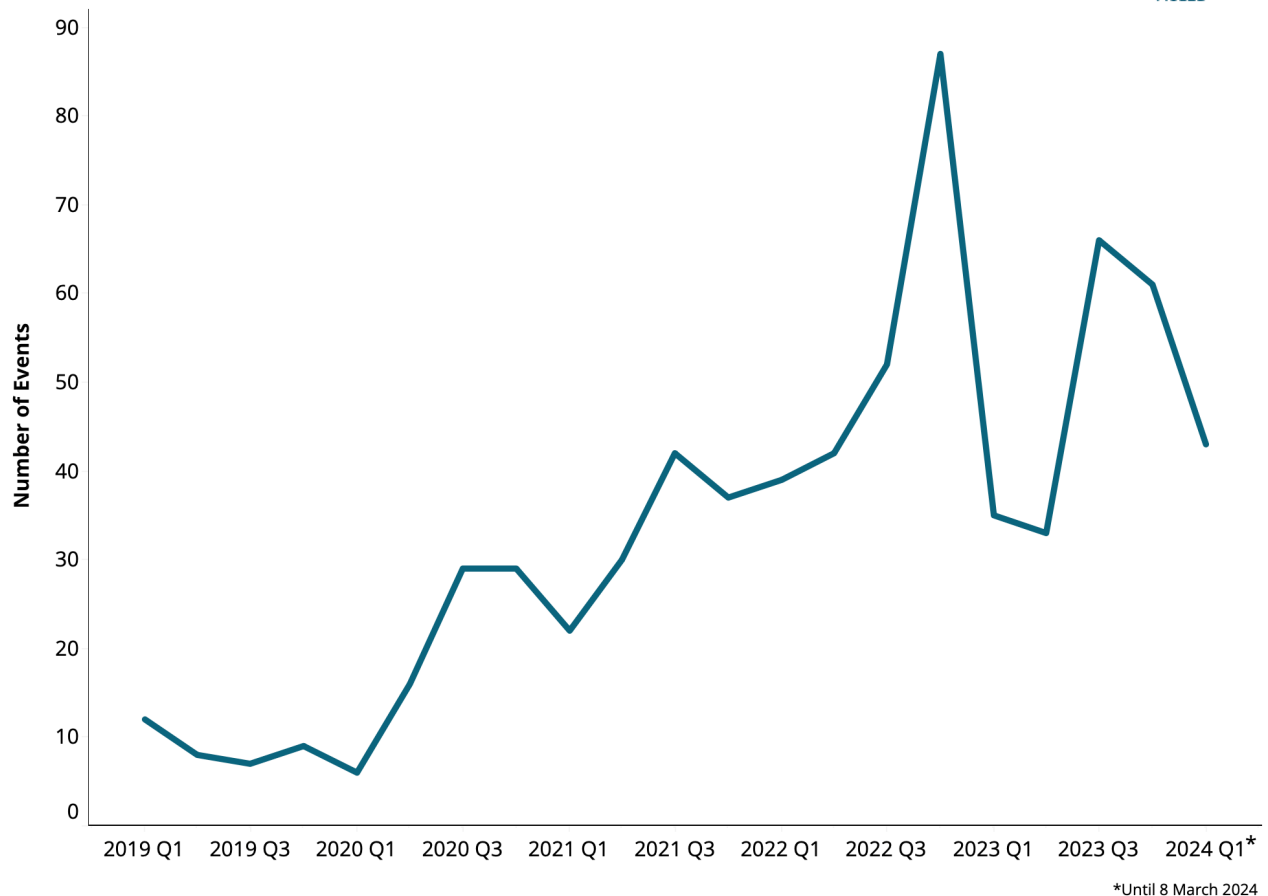
Bandit operations have made the North West the epicenter of abductions in Nigeria, as reflected in the map above. According to [ACLED data](#), between 2019 and 2023, there were 662 recorded kidnapping-related events in the North West, about 169% more than the 246 events recorded in the North East during the same period.

The North West experienced notable year-on-year increases in kidnapping-related events from 2019 to 2022. Over this period, kidnapping was the economic mainstay of armed bandit groups, replacing cattle rustling, which had provided the bulk of bandit revenues between 2011 and 2019, but which became less lucrative as cattle stock were depleted and herders relocated to safer areas, prompting bandits to seek alternative financing streams.

However, there was a decline in kidnappings in 2023 compared to the previous year, which has been sustained in 2024 to date. The reason is likely to be the declining profitability of the kidnapping sector, as affluent targets either fled the region or were impoverished by previous ransom payments.

Abductions in Northwest Nigeria

1 January 2019 - 8 March 2024



Since 2019, to offset declining revenues from kidnapping, armed bandit groups have increasingly relied on the [imposition of levies](#) on farming communities and on the artisanal gold mining sector.

Drivers behind the resurgence of mass kidnappings

The resurgence of mass kidnappings is likely to be attributable to the declining profitability of individual kidnappings for ransom; the strategic use of Ramadan to pressure the government into paying ransoms; the desire to gain bargaining leverage for the release of detained members of armed bandit groups; and the killing of an armed bandit leader in February 2024.

Mass abductions, although more difficult to coordinate, are more lucrative. They also carry the possibility of government ransom payments, which does not usually happen in individual cases. Mass abductions, particularly of women and schoolchildren, place significant pressure on the government, both domestically and internationally, to secure the release of the victims. Though the government's public position is that it does not pay ransoms, there are [reports](#) that state actors have paid ransoms to armed bandits and violent extremist groups in the past.

The timing of the spate of mass abductions — coming at the start of the Muslim Ramadan month of daytime fasting — may have been chosen to exert public pressure on the government in a region that is predominantly Muslim. It may also be linked to the fact that this period is often very expensive, and bandit groups are in even greater need of financial resources.

Alternatively, the perpetrators may aim to use the abducted pupils as leverage for the release of incarcerated members, in line with precedent. For instance, the Katsina state government exchanged detained [armed bandits for kidnapped victims](#) in 2019, and there are unconfirmed [reports](#) that the federal government planned to release some armed bandits in exchange for kidnapped victims of the train attack in 2022.

Finally, according to a Kaduna-based journalist interviewed for this analysis, the Kuriga abduction on 7 March may be connected to the government killing in February of a prominent bandit leader, Isyaku Boderi, previously behind the kidnapping of at least [30 students](#) of the Federal College of Forestry in Kaduna in 2021. Security forces believed he was planning an [abduction of students](#) at the time of his demise.

Looking forward

The recent surge in mass kidnappings could indicate a sustained uptick in the frequency of such incidents. With state forces stretched thin across various conflict zones in the country, the limited state presence in rural and remote areas makes the rural population vulnerable targets for armed bandit attacks. Unfortunately, as armed bandits gain funding from kidnappings, they can acquire more sophisticated weapons and carry out bolder assaults. Without measures such as intelligence gathering to pre-empt armed bandit attacks and ensure the adequate security of schools in remote and rural areas, the current policy of reactive military actions is unlikely to change this vicious circle.

The upcoming main report on armed bandits in Nigeria's North West is part of a collaboration between ACLED and GL-TOC titled '[Non-state armed groups and illicit economies in West Africa](#).'

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