



One year on, where are the Chibok schoolgirls?

On April 14, 2014, nearly 300 girls were abducted at midnight from their school, Federal Government Girls College, Chibok, in Borno State, Nigeria. The state has been the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency. Both the insurgency and the counter-insurgency by Nigeria's security forces have turned Borno and neighboring states like Yobe and Adamawa into war zones, producing the most egregious acts of human rights abuses from belligerents on both sides. Boko Haram's viciousness is evenly matched by the state's brutal reaction that often has targeted northern Muslim youths indiscriminately, helping to both prolong and escalate the violence. The story of the Chibok girls is sad commentary on the state of the insurgency and the counter insurgency. The girls are still in captivity, their families (and the girls) are still traumatized, and the government continues to do business as usual. Worse still, the government fully expects Nigerians, especially the suffering parents of the abducted girls to develop amnesia and completely forget that the abduction ever happened.

It is exactly one year today since the girls were abducted. One year is a long time for many of these girls (who were rumored to have been married off to insurgents or sold into slavery in the rapidly expanding market for sex slaves) to become pregnant by their captors and to have their babies. One year is a long time for even the most inept military to identify, isolate, and rescue the girls from their captors. One year is enough time for a responsible government to evaluate the situation of the girls, reflect on its own duties and capabilities, and make declarative and decisive statements about how the government will (or have) rescue (d) the girls or publicly acknowledge that it is bereft of additional ideas. One year is a long time in Nigeria for many things to happen.

Instead, the government has continued to wax helpless while continuing in its perfidious ways. It should be recalled that when the news of the abduction first broke, it took the government several weeks to respond. But when it responded, it was in characteristic manner, blaming everyone else for the abduction, but the government. It blamed the opposition *All Progressive Congress* (APC) for either orchestrating the abduction, creating the "rumors" of the abduction, or plotting to make political gain from the abduction. When the APC robustly challenged this position, the government shifted focus to certain individuals who behaved "suspiciously" during and after the abductions. In short order, the principal of the Chibok school, the Borno State commissioner for education, and the Borno State governor, were singled out for blame. In one instance of infamy, the wife of the president, Patience Jonathan, took over the investigation of the abduction and was personally summoning elected and appointed officials of government to her office to tongue-lash them for attempting to disparage and ridicule her husband, the Nigerian president. Instead of yielding results, the first lady's "intervention" only succeeded in worsening the situation, exposing her office and that of the president to more ridicule. As if blaming others, including the victims was not enough, the government through hirelings doubted that the abductions actually took place. They asked, "Who witnessed the abductions?" "What are the names of the girls?" "How many girls were abducted?" "How easy is it to abduct 300 girls?" and "Where did Boko Haram keep the girls?" etc. The government is still watering the seeds of doubt it sowed in April, without harvesting any fruits.

Apart from the government, Nigeria's security forces have also continued to embarrass the country with their serial display of ineptitude. For instance, a day after the girls were abducted, spokesman for Nigeria's military, Brigadier General Chris Olukolade, issued a statement claiming that 107 of the kidnapped students had been rescued. The principal of the school and some officials of the Borno State government swiftly denied this claim. And then he told the Agence France Presse that "most" of the students escaped immediately after they were captured, a claim completely at variance with multiple witness and official accounts. General Olukolade was forced to eat his words. In an official statement General Olukolade retracted the earlier statement, prompting ridicule from a cross section of the public even among die-hard supporters of the Nigerian president. Some have called the government inept and many reserve the worst condemnation for the military described as "pepper soup" military incapable of winning the fight against Boko Haram. Even more damning is the fact that at the time that General Olukolade made his announcement, the army and the Nigerian government did not know the number of students abducted. Since that time, new figures – based on the accounts of parents – have been presented, which suggest that close to 300 girls were abducted. It is this type of tepid and conflicting messaging from the Nigerian government or its military that has showed the government as a bumbling desperado lacking believability and credibility.

Similarly, the government's attempt to demonstrate that it is on top of the security situation in the northeast, has also suffered serious setbacks. Just like the military's claim in 2013 and more recently in September 2014 that it had killed Abubakar Shekau (or the man that has been playing Shekau in Boko Haram videos) was punctured by a Shekau (or an impostor's) video, so also has the military been caught in many recent non-truths that have affected its image. For instance, immediately following the attack on Giwa barracks, the military claimed it successfully repelled the attack and killed hundreds of insurgents in the process. But that was before Boko Haram posted videos of the actual attack, which showed that the Islamists encountered very little resistance from the military. Even the claim that it killed retreating insurgents after the attack was repudiated by human rights organizations, including Amnesty International. The Nigerian military killed defenseless non-affiliated inmates who were forcibly released by Boko Haram and left stranded in the streets of Maiduguri. More recently, the military's claim that about 500 Nigerian soldiers who fled a fierce Boko Haram attack into Cameroon, did not flee but were tactically maneuvering, was punctured by new facts surrounding that attack.

Today, one year after the girls were abducted, the government has refocused from security generally and the girls particularly, to post-election issues, especially how to handover to the incoming civilian government of Mohammadu Buhari. The Goodluck Jonathan administration inherited a very strong economy but managed to squander the country's resources to the point that most states are unable to pay government workers. In addition, the country's external reserve has been almost completely exhausted from a balance of nearly \$60 billion at the inception of his government. In the last month of the presidential campaign, Jonathan and his party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) spent lavishly in attempt to lure voters. In the southwest, known to form some of the most ardent opposition to his rule, President Jonathan spent billions on traditional rulers and

others in attempt to buy their votes, to no avail. Known to be reticent, the president became uncharacteristically garrulous, boasting of the impending PDP victory at the polls., even when the reality suggested otherwise. But now, the president and his team are scrambling on how to handover a completely ruined economy to the incoming government without looking too bad. Others within the government are also busy mopping up money or looking for new jobs that the efforts to “bring back our girls” have been put on hold. What a shame.

Clearly, the inability of the government to rescue to the abducted girls must be one of the low points of the Jonathan administration. Of course there were many low points, but the fact that the government can rest easy while of its 300 teenage girls are stolen and are probably been used as sex slaves, suicide bombers, etc. is the lowest that any government can get. It is only a government that is insentient and completely lacking accountability that can afford to handover government to another without comprehensively addressing the issue of the missing girls. At least, the Jonathan government owes Nigerians a nationally televised address to tell the country what it knows about the girls, the efforts made over time to rescue them, and the status of the rescue efforts. To leave office without retrieving the girls or publicly addressing their continued abduction is simply irresponsible.

The ACCT believes that no self-respecting leader will allow 300 girls to go missing without deploying the full range of its military capability to bring them back and hold their captors to account. No self-respecting leader will go to sleep while “Rome burns.” At this point, President Jonathan should make the safe rescue and return of the girls the top national security priority, higher than his handover to Buhari. The rescue and return of the Chibok schoolgirls must be Nigeria’s top national security priority. Period! The president’s failure to respond appropriately by deploying as much covert and overt force as needed, should be interpreted as abdication of responsibility and should be investigated by the incoming Buhari government.