



U.S. to Aid Nigeria in Rescuing Schoolgirls Kidnapped by Militants

During a press briefing on May 6, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said Secretary of State John Kerry has called Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan “to reiterate our offer of assistance” in the rescue of the schoolgirls kidnapped by Islamist terrorists of the Boko Haram group.

The militants have kidnapped 329 schoolgirls in Borno State, of which 53 have escaped and 276 remain in captivity. The girls were abducted from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School during an April 14 raid.



Borno is located in far northeastern Nigeria, a stronghold of Boko Haram. The *New York Times* reported back on May 14, 2013 that President Jonathan had declared a state of emergency across much of the nation’s northeast, promising to send more troops to fight what he said is now an open rebellion. As noted by Agence France-Presse, Jonathan’s administration has sought to appear more engaged with the plight of the hostages in recent days, especially after Boko Haram chief Abubakar Shekau released a video threatening to sell the girls as “slaves.”

During a May 5 briefing, Carney said, “The president has been briefed several times and his national security team continues to monitor the situation there closely. The State Department has been in regular touch with the Nigerian government about what we might do to help support its efforts to find and free these young women.”

On May 6, President Obama described the kidnappings as “outrageous” and “heartbreaking” and said that Nigeria has agreed to accept U.S. law enforcement and military assistance.

“We’ve already sent in a team to Nigeria. They’ve accepted our help through a combination of military, law enforcement and other agencies who are going in, trying to identify where in fact these girls might be and provide them help,” the president told ABC News.

In an appearance on the BBC’s *Today* program, U.K. Foreign Office Minister Mark Simmonds said his government had offered “planning support” to Nigerian authorities and that British officials were in Washington to coordinate assistance efforts with the U.S. government. Simmonds told the BBC:

The forest area where the girls are rumored to be being held is 60,000 sq km [23,166 square miles]. It’s an area of hot dry scrub forest 40 times the size of London; it’s a wild territory, very difficult for land and air-based surveillance operations to take place ... you have extremely porous borders with neighboring countries — Chad, Cameroon, Niger — so there are very serious challenges.

The BBC posted an analysis of the ongoing abduction by Jacob Zenn, the African Affairs analyst at the Washington-D.C.-based Jamestown Foundation, who wrote that Boko Haram has been abducting girls



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for the past one and a half years, but the Chibok School kidnapping was on a much larger scale than anything the terrorists have done previously. "It should also be noted," wrote Zenn, "that Boko Haram began this tactic when the Nigerian security forces also began kidnapping, or rather taking as prisoners, the wives and children of Boko Haram members."

Zenn believes that Boko Haram will split up the girls and keep them in multiple camps for use as human shields to prevent the Nigerian air force from bombing those camps. This scenario, if played out, would complicate rescue efforts considerably.

Chibok has been described as an elite academy that educates both Muslim and Christian girls. The school was closed because of attacks by Boko Haram, but had reopened to allow senior students to take their final exams.

The school was likely targeted by Boko Haram because the extreme Islamic group is opposed to educating girls, as is indicated by its name, which means "Western education is sinful" in the Hausa language. The militant group has waged a campaign of terror against the people of Nigeria in an effort to impose sharia law and to divide the nation between Islamic and Christian territories. In January of 2012, Boko Haram demanded that all Christians immediately leave the northern states of Nigeria, which the Islamist organization believes should be inhabited only by Muslims.

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa with over 174 million inhabitants, and is almost evenly divided between Christians (who live mostly in the southern and central parts of the country,) and Muslims (found mostly in the north and southwest). Most Nigerian Muslims are part of the moderate Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Such peaceful Muslims have little use for the extremist, Taliban-style of Islam advocated by Boko Haram.

A July 29, 2009 Reuters News report headlined "Q+A-Who are the Islamic sect in northern Nigeria?" noted that Mohammed Yusuf, the group's late leader, who was killed by Nigerian security forces in 2009, was radically opposed to Western education and advocated the adoption of Sharia (Islamic law) in all of Nigeria. His followers claim he was educated in Iran. Boko Haram is based in Maiduguri, capital of the northeastern state of Borno, and also has followers in other northern states including Kano, Yobe, Sokoto, and Bauchi.

We noted in our 2009 article "Nigerian Forces Oppose Militant Islamic Sect" that moderate Sunni Muslims and Christians have traditionally been able to live in harmony and even govern together effectively. However, the stability of Sunni-Christian partnership governments has often been threatened by radical Islamic groups that wanted to impose their own Sharia rule in place of an Islam that is more accommodating to Christians and other Westerners. A perfect example is Lebanon, where Christians and moderate Muslims lived peacefully together for years, until the Iranian-funded, Shi'a Islamic militant group Hezbollah gained power within the nation. Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto had a definite anti-Western tone, listing its objectives as the expulsion of "the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon, putting an end to any colonialist entity on our land."

The comparison between Boko Haram and Hezbollah may be more than theoretical, asserted Nigerian Joint Task Forces Captain Ikedichi Iweha in a press statement released last May. In his statement Iweha described what his team found in a search of a house in Kano, an area of northern Nigeria where Boko Haram is strong. In January 2012, the militant group claimed responsibility for a series of bomb attacks in Kano that killed up to 162 people. Four police stations, the State Security Service, headquarters, passport offices, and immigration centers were attacked.



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Iweha stated that during the search of this house, belonging to Lebanese national Abdul Hassan Taher Fadlalla, the “search team uncovered an underground bunker in the master bedroom where a large quantity of assorted weapons of different types and caliber were recovered.”

A report of the incident in *Sahara Reporters* for May 30, 2013 noted:

These discoveries were not accidental but the out come of an ongoing robust counter terrorism investigation by the Department of the State Services Abuja in the past several months. The investigation also confirms the existence of a Hizbullah Foreign Terrorist Cell in Nigeria.

Another report of the discovery from BBC on May 30, 2013, quoted Bassey Ettang, director of the State Security Service in Kano, who said, “This is the handwork of Hezbollah. What has just been discovered is a cell of Hezbollah and what you have seen here is a Hezbollah armoury.”

Ettang added: “You can also be sure that if a group like this is existing then it may even lend support to some of the local terrorists we have on the ground.”

“Local terrorists” would be Boko Haram.

BBC continued the report:

There is a large business Lebanese community in Kano city, the commercial hub of northern Nigeria.

It is the first time that Nigerian authorities have alleged that Hezbollah has an operational interest in the country.

Kano and north-eastern Nigeria has suffered multiple attacks in the last three years since the home-grown Islamist militant group Boko Haram launched an insurgency.

BBC reported that “there has been growing concern that Boko Haram could be receiving backing from al-Qaeda-linked militants in other countries.”

If that is the case, then the abduction of the schoolgirls may be about much more than a local Nigerian religious dispute, but part of a concerted international effort to destabilized pro-Western governments around the world. The fact that Nigeria is a member of OPEC and is a major oil-producing nation only adds to its appeal as a target for radical terrorism.

Photo of protestors in front of the Nigerian Embassy in Washington, D.C., urging U.S. involvement: AP Images

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