



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on May 13, 2014

Nigeria: Boko Haram Demands Release of Fighters for Kidnapped Girls

Islamist terrorists from the Boko Haram group have demanded that Nigerian security forces release its fighters jailed by the government in exchange for the release of the girls the terrorist group kidnapped from a private school on April 14.

Speaking in a video recorded by the militant group, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said: "I swear to almighty Allah, you will not see them again until you release our brothers that you have captured."



In June 2013, the U.S. State Department offered a standing reward of \$7 million for information leading to Shekau's capture through its Rewards for Justice program. The Nigerian army has offered \$50 million Nigerian naira (approximately US\$300,000) for his capture.

About 100 girls, out of an estimated 276 still held by the terrorists, were shown in the video. Fifty-three managed to escape from their captors.

Speaking to reporters at a May 12 press conference, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney was asked if the United States had verified the video and if it gave any clues that could help find the girls. Carney replied:

We have seen the video ... and we have no reason to question its authenticity. Our intelligence experts are combing over every detail of it for clues that might help in the ongoing efforts to secure the release of the girls. As you know, President Obama has directed his team to do everything it can to support the Nigerian government's efforts to find and free these girls.... Our interdisciplinary team with representatives from the State Department, the Department of Defense, the FBI and others is up and running now at our embassy in Nigeria, helping to support the Nigerian government by providing military and law enforcement assistance as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support.

BBC reported a qualification to Shekau's demands ignored by most of the media: "that captured girls *who had not converted to Islam* could be swapped for jailed fighters." (Emphasis added.) Though exact figures are not available, reports indicate that the Chibok school from which the girls were abducted, which educated both Christian and Muslim students, had a predominately Christian student body. The village of Chibok is, itself, primarily Christian.

Shekau claimed that the girls shown in the video have been converted to Islam, saying: "These girls, these girls you occupy yourselves with ... we have indeed liberated them. These girls have become Muslims."

One girl singled out for questioning was asked: "Why have you become a Muslim?"

"The reason why I became a Muslim is because the path we are on is not the right path," the girl answered. "We should enter the right path so that Allah will be happy with us," continued the girl. She



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said her name had been changed to Halima because she had converted from Christianity to Islam.

AP reported that the girl appeared nervous, and as she spoke, she shifted her body from side to side, and her eyes darted back and forth. Like the other girls, she wore a hijab that covered her body from head to toe, revealing only her face.

If the report made by BBC is correct and only those girls who had not converted to Islam would be offered in exchange for jailed Boko Haram fighters, what is the prospect for those who “converted” — most likely under coercion? Ishaan Tharoor, who covers foreign affairs for the *Washington Post*, answered a rhetorical question in a May 6 report, “What is Boko Haram going to do to the girls?” His reply:

No one knows for sure, but many fear the worst. It’s been rumored the Christian girls in the group were forced to convert to Islam. A video released this week appears to show Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, declaring that the girls will be sold as brides — in effect, made into sex slaves. “God instructed me to sell them; they are his properties, and I will carry out his instructions,” says Shekau in the video. It’s unclear when the footage was shot.

Nigeria’s security forces and police have come under much criticism for their failure to prevent the abduction and for responding with too little, too late. A report from CNN noted that some residents of Chibok had received calls from friends and relatives in surrounding villages warning them that a convoy of militants was headed their way. After they reported this information to local authorities, police called for reinforcements but none arrived. In a cowardly response, most of the community — including the police, apparently — fled into the bush, leaving the girls asleep in their dorm rooms.

When the militants arrived, they overpowered the security guards assigned to the school and herded the girls onto their trucks. Some managed to escape, but the rest have not been seen since.

When CNN correspondents visited Chibok, they found that during the day, life in the village goes on pretty much as normal. But, wrote the reporter:

At night is when you see the fear and terror. The women, elderly and children go to sleep. And the young men stay awake, doing patrols, keeping vigil.

CNN’s team joined them, and discovered that one thing was clear: Chibok residents have stopped waiting for the government, they are protecting their own.

As for the girls, Nigeria and the rest of the world wait to see if an exchange can be worked out between the government and Boko Haram. At this point, a month after the abduction, and with the girls possibly being held at multiple camps in the bush, rescue by force seems unlikely.

Nigeria’s Special Duties Minister Tanimu Turaki told BBC that if Shekau is sincere, he should send representatives he trusts to meet the government’s standing committee on reconciliation.

Turaki told the BBC’s *Focus on Africa* program that “dialogue is a key option” in bringing the crisis to an end and that “an issue of this nature can be resolved outside of violence.”

While everyone who waits and prays for the safe return of the girls hopes that Turaki’s objective is realistic, it is also important to recognize that Boko Haram’s nature as a terrorist organization is to inflict *terror*, not peace. As we noted in our article last week, Nigerian security forces have found branches of Lebanon’s Hezbollah terrorist organization in the area of Nigeria where Boko Haram is strongest. BBC has also reported that “there has been growing concern that Boko Haram could be receiving backing from al-Qaeda-linked militants in other countries.”



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With militants having strong terrorist connections such as those in control of northeast Nigeria, the outlook for the kidnapped girls does not appear to be very promising.

Photo of Boko Haram and kidnapped girls: AP Images

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