



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 14, 2015

## On Anniversary of Schoolgirl Kidnapping, Nigeria Prepares for New Leadership

As Nigeria and the world reflects on the kidnapping of 329 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, on April 14, 2014, by militants from the radical jihadist group Boko Haram, the jihadists control large areas of northeastern Nigeria and reportedly killed at least 24 people on Easter Sunday in the Borno village of Kwajafa.

As he prepares to take office on May 29, Nigeria's President-elect Muhammadu Buhari, in an April 14 op-ed for the *New York Times*, recalled the mass kidnapping a year ago today and cast blame on outgoing President Goodluck Jonathan for his ineffectiveness in stopping the terrorists and for failing to rescue the girls. Buhari promised to "act differently" in his attempt to succeed where his predecessor has failed.



"This crime has rightly caused outrage both in Nigeria and across the world," CNN quoted Buhari. "Today is a time to reflect on the pain and suffering of the victims, their friends and families. Our thoughts and prayers, and that of the whole Nigerian nation, are with you today."

Nigeria's security forces and police received much criticism for their failure to prevent the abduction of the schoolgirls and for responding with too little, too late. A report from CNN at the time 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 on the night of April 14, 2014, they overpowered the security guards assigned to the school and herded 329 girls onto their trucks. Fifty-three managed to escape, but the remaining 276 have not been seen since.

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released a video a few weeks after the abductions, in which he demanded that Nigerian security forces release its fighters jailed by the government in exchange for the release of the girls: "I swear to almighty Allah, you will not see them again until you release our brothers that you have captured."

About 100 of the captured girls, whom Shekau claimed had been converted to Islam, were shown in the video. "These girls, these girls you occupy yourselves with ... we have indeed liberated them. These girls have become Muslims," said Shekau.



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Ishaan Tharoor, a foreign affairs reporter for the *Washington Post*, answered a rhetorical question in a May 6, 2014, report: “What is Boko Haram going to do to the girls?” His reply was:

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.

In an April 14 report, CNN reported the widespread belief that President Jonathan’s defeat in the March 28 election was attributed, in part, to his government’s failure to effectively combat Boko Haram. *The New American* noted in an [April 7 article](#) that this was the first time that a sitting president had been defeated in a Nigerian election, and that the peaceful transition came as a surprise to many observers who expected the change of government to provoke violence and unrest in Nigeria:

President Goodluck Jonathan’s handover of the government to Buhari and the peaceful transition that has ensued thus far has defied predictions of many analysts who saw post-election violence as all but inevitable, regardless of the outcome. Buhari, a Muslim, and Jonathan, a Christian, represent a religious divide that has been a growing source of strife in the almost evenly divided West African nation. Nigeria’s population of nearly 175 million people is divided between Muslims (about 49 percent), mostly in the northern part of the country, and Christians (about 49 percent), mostly in the south.

In his op-ed for the *Times*, Buhari started off by heaping strong criticism on Jonathan’s ineffective response to the schoolgirls’ kidnapping by the Boko Haram terrorists one year ago, writing, “... Millions of people joined [Nigerians] in asking: How was it possible for this terrorist group to act with such impunity? It took nearly two weeks before the government even commented on the crime.”

Buhari expressed cautious optimism that his new government would do better, but reflected the reality that locating and rescuing the abducted girls would be difficult after a year:

My administration ... will act differently — indeed it is the very reason we have been elected. This must begin with honesty as to whether the Chibok girls can be rescued. Currently their whereabouts remain unknown. We do not know the state of their health or welfare, or whether they are even still together or alive. As much as I wish to, I cannot promise that we can find them: to do so would be to offer unfounded hope, only to compound the grief if, later, we find we cannot match such expectation. But I say to every parent, family member and friend of the children that my government will do everything in its power to bring them home.

Buhari also outlined his proposed strategy for defeating Boko Haram, which operates not only in northeastern Nigeria, but also across the border in neighboring Chad and Niger. He noted that while those countries are “fighting hard to push the terrorists south and out of their countries, our military was not sufficiently supported or equipped to push north.”

The president-elect said that he welcomes cooperation with other nations in its war against Boko Haram, including coordinating operations with Chad and Niger, “so an offensive by one army does not see their country’s lands rid of Boko Haram only to push it across the border onto their neighbors’ territory.” He also favors resuming a military training agreement with the United States. But in the end, said Buhari, the solution to defeating the terrorist group must come from within Nigeria itself.

Buhari outlined his plan to deploy more troops to the northern front and “away from civilian areas in central and southern Nigeria where for too long they have been used by successive governments to quell dissent.”



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But Buhari went beyond accomplishing a military victory against Boko Haram. Noting that the group's name translates into English, roughly, as "Western Education Is Sinful," he observed that it pushed a radical fundamentalism that attempted to rob Nigeria's young people of the very tools they need to improve their standard of living. Buhari proposed taking this aspect of Boko Haram's campaign head-on, promoting education as "a direct counterbalance" to the jihadists' appeal.

Buhari has set an ambitious agenda for himself. Nigerians and the world will hope that he not only succeeds in defeating Boko Haram, but pray that the captured schoolgirls will be rescued as well.

*Photo of Nigerian demonstrators calling for the release of the kidnapped girls on April 14: AP Images*

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