

# Where Are Our Girls?

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The atavistic adoption of over 200 girls from a school in Chibok, Borno State, some months ago, by the Islamist fundamentalist group, Boko Haram, expectedly elicited international opprobrium as concerned members of the global community rose in one accord to condemn this abominably horrible act. Since the onset of this tragic saga, calls on the group to release the girls have been reverberating across the length and breadth of the globe. The slogan “Bring Back Our Girls” has become an international anthem of sorts as the world unites behind Nigeria and the families of these innocents to press for their release.

However, it is heartbreaking to note that several weeks since this tragic saga commenced, the girls are yet to be found or brought back. Despite all the elaborate search and rescue efforts that have been expedited by a combination of Nigerian security forces and their foreign allies, using the most advanced information gathering equipment available, the girls are light years away from being found. The Million Dollar questions bogging the minds of informed spectators of this macabre drama are: Where are our girls? How come after the entire hullabaloo that has been bandied around by the authorities about efforts to locate and rescue these girls, they are still in the custody of their captors? How far reaching have the so-called efforts, outside the usual rhetoric, by the country’s security forces and their international partners to locate these girls been? Who should be blamed for the failure to rescue these girls from the fiend called Boko Haram? What is wrong with all the search efforts that have so far being expedited to locate the missing girls, and what should be done to make them more effective? These are just a sprinkling of the several puzzling questions agitating the minds of most observers of this national embarrassment.

The Nigerian Government is constitutionally charged with the crucial task of ensuring the security of the lives and properties of its citizens – Section 14, Sub-Section 1(b) Chapter 11 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria under the Fundamental Objectives and Directives Principles of State Policy provides that:”the Security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of Government”. “Every person has a right to life and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life, save in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria” – a fiduciary responsibility that defines its relationship with all the individuals and groups domiciled within its borders.

However, the Nigerian Government has traditionally refrained from respecting the aforementioned constitutional provisions – in both their letters and spirit – that should normally compel it to perform its most fundamental national duty of protecting Nigerians and their properties from destruction, as demonstrated by its continued inability to – apart from the largely palliative, reactionary and consolatory measures it has so far adopted in its handling of the Chibok debacle – embrace other available and practicable options that would, probably, have resulted in a more

speedy resolution of the impasse; a puzzling development that smacks of rank irresponsibility on the part of government – one that has brought it out in bad light.

Since the buck of protecting the lives and properties of Nigerians stops on the table of those in authority, government should be held responsible for the continued incarceration of these girls over a hundred days after they were savagely adopted by the Bokites. If the use of force – a conflict resolution style that is favoured by the Nigerian Government – has failed, why not explore other available strategies? Why all the secrecy about what the government is purportedly doing to bring back these girls? Why does government continue hanging on to a fast-fading strategy when there are more effective solutions that can address this national emergency once and for all? Instead of being economical with the truth, why can't the Nigerian Government accept that it lacks the wherewithal to end this impasse?

Boko Haram has given conditions for the release of the abducted girls: the unconditional release of some of their comrades in detention. But the Nigerian Government has countered this gambit by rejecting any prisoner swap arrangement as conditions for the release of the adopted girls; a stance it has publicly held on to since the onset of the ongoing saga – one that offers no hope whatsoever for the girls and members of their families.

The truth is that Nigerian leaders are self-centered demagogues who don't give a hoot about the welfare of the citizenry; irresponsible characters whose goofs are legendary. Is it not hypocritical that the same set of people, who sometime in the recent past, paid millions of ransom money to effect the release of their kidnapped siblings, are the same ones foot-dragging on accepting an arrangement that will help in securing the release of the wards of other fellow Nigerians – taxpaying citizens whose only crime is that they are not of the same ancestry with their leaders? Is it not double standards for a government that is constitutionally charged with the sacred task of defending the country and its inhabitants from both external and internal threats of any kind, is the same one refraining from executing this sacrosanct mandate to the letter? Would they have maintained the same impassive stance if roles are switched and their relatives are the ones in captivity? The answers to these teasers are not farfetched for any impassioned observer of this macabre drama to glean.

In a country where the incidences of violent conflicts have become every day realities, one can be faulted for expecting too much from the system. The ugly truth that stands out like a festering sour is that the Nigerian State, having lost the capacity to be a state, can no longer guarantee the security of the lives and properties of its citizens. This, after all, is a country where the average individual's right to life exists only in the breach; a state of nature where only the fittest survives; a country where violence in all its monstrous ramifications is the order of the day; a society defined by fear in all its grotesque shades; a place where the lives of the people are daily threatened by violent groups of different hues. From religious fundamentalist groups, ethnic militias, kidnapping and assassination cartels, over ambitious politicians who prefer settling political scores extra-judicially,

restive youth groups, to other potentially destabilizing forces of violence, Nigeria fits the classic case of boiling cauldron of death.

But come to think of it, why should the Nigerian government shy away from what remains the most effective, long term solution to this impasse? Why can't those in authority face the truth and nothing but the truth in the face of the undeniable realities facing all observers of this international embarrassment – that truth being that the authorities must accept the prisoner swap proposal as the most feasible way out of the current mess? If the U.S, the world's global policeman, could turn around from its traditional practice of not negotiating with terrorists, due to pressing exigencies, to negotiate a prisoner exchange arrangement with the Taliban for the release of a captured marine – Army Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl – in exchange for five Taliban hatchet men being detained at the Guantanamo Bay detention center, the Nigerian government – a new entrant in the war on terror – has no excuse for staying action on embracing this option. Prisoner swaps are standard practices in negotiations between national governments and terrorist groups in sections of the world with similar threat indicators – the Nigerian government cannot afford to be an exception to this crucial rule, especially in the face of unfolding realities.

Strategically speaking, the heads of the country's security establishment – if they are well grounded in what they do – should know that the continued use of force, in trying to force the release of the girls, cannot achieve any tangible result. Rather, it could prove to be counterproductive, if care is not taken, considering the fact that the girls are still in the custody of their captors. Any attempt to forcefully rescue these girls will be suicidal, putting them at great risk, as the sect might decide to use them as human shields to buffer attacks against them – a worst case scenario that is better not imagined. Like the Americans did in the aforementioned case, the Nigerian government should go for the swap arrangement as it will afford its military more latitude to combat Boko Haram more effectively – once the girls are freed from captivity, the coast will then be clear for the military to up the scales in its efforts to checkmate the activities of this group.

Whether those in authority want to accept the truth – as painful as it seems -or not, the prisoner exchange arrangement remains the most reasonably feasible option out of the current quagmire. National pride aside, the Nigerian government must embrace the conditions proposed by the Bokites to effect the release of the girls. The clock is ticking very fast and time is no longer on anybody's side. Bringing back the kidnapped Chibok girls is a sacred duty the Nigerian government must perform with dispatch, using the most effective means available to it. It is non-negotiable. Please, Bring Back Our Girls!