

WITH KEBBI ABDUCTIONS, NIGERIA RETURNING TO DARK CHIBOK, DAPCHI DAYS

MONDAY'S seizure of at least 25 schoolgirls from the dormitory of the Government Girls Comprehensive Senior Secondary School in Maga, Danko/Wasagu LGA, Kebbi State, marks a grievous descent into Nigeria's disturbing slide to becoming a failed state. Bandits attacked the school around 4 a.m., killing the vice-principal, Hassan Makuku, who reportedly died defending his students. The VP is a national hero. A security guard remains hospitalized after suffering gunshot wounds. Despite a prompt and armed police response involving a shootout, the criminals escaped with their victims. This grim episode echoes the notorious Chibok Girls kidnapping on the night of April 14–15, 2014, when 276 girls were seized, and the brazen Dapchi Girls abduction of February 19, 2018, where 110 girls were taken. One, Leah Sharibu, remains captive. Five died. Eleven years on, at least 90 of the Chibok girls are still missing.

The Kebbi attack is part of a disturbing tally of 145 abductions in only four days across Kebbi, Niger, and Zamfara states. This highlights the normalization of banditry and mass kidnappings in Nigeria. Despite global scrutiny and even threats from US President Donald Trump of military intervention to deal with Islamist insurgency and banditry, Nigeria's leadership and military consistently downplay these incidents, seemingly entrenched in denial.

Meanwhile, politicians remain fixated on the 2027 elections, leaving citizens trapped in fear and helplessness. The Bola Tinubu administration must recognize that Nigeria is effectively at war and must respond with cohesion, resolve, and strategic focus. As usual, the government has pledged to rescue the girls. On Monday, the Minister of Information and National Orientation, Mohammed Idris, condemned the attack and affirmed Tinubu's commitment to safeguarding Nigerians. "Our security and intelligence agencies have clear directives to locate, rescue, and safely return the students, and to ensure that the perpetrators face justice," he said. Yet, such promises have a hollow ring among Nigerians who have largely lost faith in the state's capacity to protect them. This undermines the very purpose of governance.

Public outrage is swift and widespread. Former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar points out ongoing tragedies in Kano, Plateau, Benue, and other states, where violence displaces communities as residents flee for safety. This demands that the military urgently reassess, retool, and overhaul its campaign against Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other terror groups. It must reassert control and demonstrate an uncompromising ability to defend Nigerians. The military must take this war to insurgents in their strongholds, on the roads, from the air, and within seized communities, not wait until they strike. Effective asymmetric warfare hinges on precise intelligence. Nigeria clearly requires enhanced support and must actively seek cooperation from international partners and neighbouring countries to reclaim security. This attack is not isolated but part of a horrifying surge in mass kidnappings. Two of the Kebbi girls have reportedly escaped, but the fate of the others remains uncertain, echoing previous tragic abductions. Nigeria's schools have now become battlegrounds, vulnerable to exploitation by bandits and jihadists who take advantage of porous borders and under-resourced security forces. This nightmare began in earnest in April 2014 with the Boko Haram kidnapping in Chibok, sparking global outrage and leaving over 90 girls still missing ten years later. It intensified in February 2018 with the Dapchi abduction of 110 girls, and continued with the December 2020 kidnapping of 344 boys in Kankara, Katsina State, who were released only after negotiations.

In February 2021, 317 girls were seized from a secondary school in Jangebe, Zamfara State. That July, 140 students were taken from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna, many freed after alleged ransom payments. Most recently, on March 7, 2024, gunmen abducted 287 pupils in Kuriga, Kaduna State, illustrating the relentless threat. According to SBM Intelligence between July 2022 and June 2023, 3,620 people were abducted in 582 kidnapping cases, with about N5 billion paid in ransoms. This industrial-scale criminality is a war on Nigeria's future. The country must wake up and eradicate this evil.

Police and military forces demand urgent upgrades, including improved intelligence networks, modern surveillance drones, and combat equipment sufficiently powerful to counter well-equipped bandits. The new Service Chiefs and the Inspector-General of Police must prioritise national defence instead of patronage. Kayode Egbetokun should redeploy the approximately 100,000 police officers currently assigned to VIP escorts back to active field duties. Protecting political elites while children suffer is unacceptable. Security should instead be concentrated on critical assets and vulnerable regions, flooding the North-West with boots on the ground. Nigeria should set aside pride and seek critical external assistance. Colombia overcame its drug-insurgent crisis with US aid, intelligence sharing, and aerial interdiction, transforming from a failed state to a resilient one. Sri Lanka crushed the Tamil Tigers through decisive military action.

As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria cannot settle for half-measures. The government should establish a no-ransom policy, fortify schools with rapid-response units, and relentlessly prosecute anyone aiding terrorists. These abductions must stop immediately. With every child forced into the bush, Nigeria loses a piece of its soul. The world watches, and history will judge whether Nigeria protects its own. Nigeria is undeniably at war, overwhelmed by violence, crime, banditry, and mass kidnappings. The battle for Nigeria's soul has escalated. Therefore, the President and his team must stop living under the illusion that they control banditry and Islamic terrorism—they do not. Trump labelled Nigeria a "Country of Particular Concern," alleging Christian genocide. The violence, however, exceeds this narrow view. The United Kingdom has issued travel advisories warning against travel to 21 Nigerian states. Solutions require clear priorities. The President must set concrete targets for security chiefs and remove underperformers. Tinubu must overhaul the security system. The police are Nigeria's first line of defence but remain under-resourced and compromised. All police officers should return to active duty, ensuring at least a police presence in every community and village. More fundamentally, the country should decentralize the police force. Unlike other countries, Nigeria's unified police system has failed to protect its vast territory. The Kebbi abductions provide a stark wake-up call for reform. It is time for state police forces. State police will deploy more resources to protect civil infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, recreation centers, stadiums, shopping malls, and highways. State governors should unite in demanding the establishment of state police. The UK, a unitary state with 69.3 million people, operates 47 separate police forces. Nigeria, with 237 million people, has only one. This is an untenable situation, inviting chaos. Together with the National Assembly, stakeholders must urgently amend the 1999 Constitution to permit state police. In the South-West, the regional Amotekun security outfit has performed creditably. The law should empower other sub-national governments that wish to establish their own police forces to do so. Intelligence gathering remains critical. The self-styled DSS is underperforming and should shift focus from regime protection and harassment of critics to genuine intelligence operations. The overstretched military requires adequate resources to handle both symmetric and asymmetric warfare. Nigeria clearly needs external help. Tinubu should seek partnerships with countries experienced in similar conflicts. Instead of cold-shouldering neighbors, Nigeria must pursue peaceful cooperation with Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Burkina Faso. Ultimately, Nigeria must enforce accountability and bring criminals to justice. It took the US a decade to find and eliminate Osama bin Laden; so, Nigeria cannot afford to spare the enablers of terror. The risk of state failure looms, with non-state actors and Islamist militants threatening sovereignty. The government must go after bandit leaders, prosecuting or neutralizing them swiftly, not negotiating with them. The judicial system must be strengthened to try banditry cases promptly with the harshest punishment.