

Nigeria's Boko Haram Crisis: Abductions and Responses

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of an All Party Parliamentary Group on Nigeria meeting and questions-and-answers panel held at the House of Commons on 13 May 2014. This event looked at the domestic and international response to the recent attacks by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

More than 230 girls were abducted from their school in Chibok in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria, on 14 April 2014. More than three weeks later, most of the children remained missing. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the attack, to growing international condemnation.

An abduction of such scale, set against ongoing Boko Haram-related violence in Nigeria's northeast and reports of further child abductions, is drawing growing international focus and calls for action. This meeting explored the nature of the crisis, its implications and policy options for addressing the situation, for both Nigeria and its international partners.

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Elizabeth Donnelly

Elizabeth Donnelly gave an overview of the rise of Boko Haram and the escalation of the group's activities, and discussed policy options going forward for Nigeria and the international community in response to the case of the Chibok abductions and to the wider Boko Haram crisis.

The violence perpetrated by Boko Haram is becoming more extreme, and increasingly more indiscriminate in its targeting. This year alone, there have already been more than 1,000 deaths attributed to Boko Haram, including the killing of 59 schoolboys in February 2014. There have been multiple bomb attacks, striking as far south as Abuja.

She noted that the abduction of the schoolgirls in Chibok caught the attention of the global media. Following international protests and a mounting social media campaign, Boko Haram released a video showing more than 100 of the missing girls. Given the proficient public relations abilities of the self-aware organization, it can be surmised that the video release – showing Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau – was linked to the response of the international community.

Although Boko Haram previously reached a zenith of violence with a series of coordinated bomb blasts and shooting sprees across northern Nigerian and in the Federal Capital Territory in 2012, the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls has seen the international focus on Boko Haram and the crisis in Nigeria's northeast step up to a new, unforeseen level of interest. Soon after news of the abductions spread, the United States and the United Kingdom sent specialist teams to bolster the Nigerian authorities in their search efforts. France hosted President Goodluck Jonathan at a regional summit held this week, while other countries – including Canada, Australia, China and Israel – have also pledged support for the Nigerian government.

As the international response has intensified, so have the demands of the group, as revealed in subsequent video releases; including the demand to release imprisoned Boko Haram members in exchange for the release of some of the abducted schoolgirls.

Elizabeth Donnelly discussed the evolution and trajectory of Boko Haram leading up to the Chibok kidnappings. The turning point for the group was in 2009, when its ideology tipped from religious

radicalism into violent insurgency. Clashes with the Nigerian police force in Borno state escalated into violence across Bauchi, Yobe and Kano states in 2009, and the response of the authorities was harsh; there were reports of extrajudicial detentions and executions of Boko Haram members and suspects. The leader of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed in police custody, only to be replaced by the arguably more dangerous Abubakar Shekau. It was this event that truly pushed Boko Haram underground.

The state of emergency imposed on Borno and Adamawa states in 2013 forced Boko Haram sects to the rural fringes, but still with the capacity to carry out attacks on the Nigerian military. Civilians in rural areas were particularly vulnerable to Boko Haram as well as to government forces. The state response, which has included imposing strict curfews and the shutting down of mobile phone networks, has isolated rural communities and dampened the voice of civil society. The international attention caused by the Chibok kidnappings – including the social media campaign – is important in re-opening this space.

Elizabeth Donnelly noted that increasing international effort to address the wider crisis of Boko Haram must be coupled with an improved understanding of the group and an acknowledgement of its evolution since 2009. More was known about the group in 2009 than can be ascertained today. Despite the commonly cited short-hand translation of the name of the group in the media, Boko Haram is not just against Western education, but also rejects secularism and democracy. The group targets Christians and Muslims indiscriminately, regarding the version of Sharia law permitted in the northeast of Nigeria as un-Islamic. In its quest for what it perceives as a truly Islamic state, Boko Haram's methods have changed with time, corresponding with a change in leadership and membership. The proliferation of Boko Haram in the north is rooted in political and economic factors as well as religious extremism, criminality and fear. There are different moving parts and members of the group, and questions remain over its true size and how the group is funded.

Going forward, she stated that the immediate priority should be the safe release of the schoolgirls. Given the unpredictability of the group, time is of the essence. The offer to exchange the girls for Boko Haram prisoners as recorded in the video reveals a potential opening for progress. Continued surveillance of the area, including the Sambisa forest, is imperative.

The Nigerian response to the wider security crisis facing the country is to pursue a more holistic approach to countering violent extremism than has been used previously, incorporating force with counter-radicalization strategies and addressing injustice. Furthermore, gathering information will help to better understand the true nature of the group.

C. U. Gwam

C.U. Gwam discussed the ideology of Boko Haram and reiterated the Nigerian government's position on the group. He also spoke about the international response to the abductions.

He stated that Boko Haram began in 2002, originating in Maiduguri, Borno state. It has attacked Christians and Muslims, and can be ideologically linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). He stated that Muslims in Nigeria do not accept the extremist views of Boko Haram, as demonstrated by the retaliation of prominent preachers in the northeast who have publicly rejected the group's ideology.

The Nigerian government rejects Boko Haram as a faith group, seeing the organization as ideologically extreme. Boko Haram is opposed to democratic governance in Nigeria; the group has described the present government as 'infidels', and has rejected any calls for engagement from the Nigerian

government. Boko Haram aims to undermine the government, using poverty as a factor to exploit and recruit disadvantaged youths in northern Nigeria.

He stated that regionally, the activities of Boko Haram have permeated further than northern Nigeria; reaching Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Other countries are waking up to the serious threat of Boko Haram in Nigeria and beyond, and he noted that there must be a concerted effort by Nigeria's partners to combat it. He added that the assistance pledged by the United Kingdom, the United States and France, among other countries, is significant in achieving this goal.

Debbie Ariyo

Debbie Ariyo spoke about the Chibok abductions, evaluating the event within the wider trend of Boko Haram-perpetrated violence. She discussed the ongoing dangers faced by children and communities in the north of the country, and ways in which the government could respond to these issues.

She noted that although the Chibok case is shocking, Boko Haram has carried out a number of abductions over the past few years that have not been covered by the media to such an extent. This may be down to a number of factors, including poor information networks and the remote location of some attacks, as well as media fatigue on reporting constant attacks.

Boko Haram claim to hate Western education, and has repeatedly targeted schools in northern Nigeria. Cases include an attack on a school in Yobe state in July 2013, when more than 40 students were killed. In September 2013, Boko Haram killed around 50 students at an agricultural college. However, attacks are not solely directed at schoolchildren. Following the Chibok abductions, Boko Haram killed around 300 civilians in another attack in Borno state.

International assistance offered to the Nigerian government in the wake of the Chibok abductions is highly welcome, but Nigeria also needs to look after its own people. Refugees have fled from the worst affected northeastern regions to neighbouring Cameroon and Chad, but no assistance has been offered to these people from the Nigerian government.

In particular, Debbie Ariyo stated, there are few services offering support to refugee children and orphans. She added that when the abducted schoolgirls return, they will have no structures to turn to. Nigerians need to challenge their own government and to push it to do more on this issue. The response from the government to the Chibok kidnappings has been lacklustre and confused; conflicting reports were circulated including a statement from a military spokesman, the veracity of which has come under question.

An agency focusing on supporting victims of Boko Haram needs to be established, much in the same vein as other organizations such as the Niger Delta Development Commission. Structures need to be put in place to support orphaned children and broken communities in northern Nigeria in the wake of the crisis. She stated that Nigeria has the economic resources needed to start this process.

Summary of questions and answers

Questions and Comments

Does anyone – including the Nigerian government – know exactly how many girls are missing?

It was noted that Boko Haram is not the first case of radical extremism emerging from northern Nigeria. The Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s were cited as a prior case that may have set the precedent for unrest in the north.

Can you confirm what the military spokesman said following the kidnappings?

Is there a government strategy in place to counter illiteracy and ignorance to prevent radicalization?

Are there plans to link up committees established by the government to support victims of the unrest?
How will these organizations help young people?

C. U. Gwam

C.U. Gwam stated that around 200 girls were abducted. He added that Boko Haram and Maitatsine were separate movements; Boko Haram became prominent from 2002.

According to him, the military spokesman who gave statements on the case shortly after the news broke was misquoted. This in turn highlights the problematic nature of social media, which can spread inaccurate or misquoted information.

He stated that the government was working to establish mechanisms to support those affected by violence in the north. This will include rehabilitation for victims and the provision of basic services including access to housing and healthcare facilities. To combat illiteracy and ignorance, the government is looking into the state of education in the north, and has prioritized getting children into school. Government committees working on these policies have been working with NGOs.

It was noted that one key government policy is a de-radicalization initiative, whereby perpetrators of less serious offences can be rehabilitated into society. This initiative also seeks to prevent radicalization taking place in prisons and is part of the government's counter-terrorism strategy.

Questions

Why has this case attracted such global attention, and is there any significance to why the United Kingdom, the United States and other partners of Nigeria announced their support so publicly?

How can members of the diaspora community provide assistance to Nigerians affected by instability in northern Nigeria?

Elizabeth Donnelly

Elizabeth Donnelly noted that the uncertainty surrounding how many girls are missing emphasizes the inherent problem regarding the lack of basic facts on the workings of Boko Haram. Greater transparency and more reliable information are sorely needed.

The international focus on this case in particular may in part be due to recognition that something can still be done to locate the missing girls, if concerted action is taken in a timely manner. However, the general lack of media coverage indicates the perception that people may be becoming inured to the numbers of those killed in repeated attacks. In this sense, the current attention is invaluable.

She noted that it will be a challenge for the government to regain the confidence of the international community. There is heavy domestic pressure on decision-makers. Meanwhile Boko Haram is listening attentively to the response of the government and to that of the international community. This crisis needs to be approached with caution by all partners involved.

Members of the diaspora can support Nigerians facing instability in the north by supporting the efforts of civil society in Nigeria, and if possible, by providing direct support on the ground.

As drivers in the evolution of Boko Haram, Elizabeth Donnelly noted, poverty and the lack of access to education in northern Nigeria are contributing factors. These existing problems, added to other domestic and regional grievances, the current political economy and the import of foreign ideology have all played a part in the rise of Boko Haram.

Debbie Ariyo

Debbie Ariyo stated that Boko Haram has been exploiting disempowered, impoverished youths in northern Nigeria; there have been reports that it has even paid young people to join the insurgency. Young people who have become radicalized must be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society.

Any policies that the government has in place to facilitate the education of young people must be prioritized. It has been claimed that the Government Secondary School in Chibok is the only school in that Local Government Area. More schools must be established by the government in these areas.

She noted that committees set up by the government need to achieve direct results. There needs to be a broader strategy put in place to support communities affected by instability; skilled workers in social work and strengthened child protection laws are needed to support families. She asked: what is the government doing to support the parents of the girls who were abducted? There has been little response from the government to this latest event, and families need to know that they and their children are protected – across the whole of Nigeria.

Questions and comments

Are there plans in place to ring-fence British aid to Nigeria in order to directly tackle Boko Haram and help find the girls?

What is the Nigerian government doing specifically for the community, including parents and relatives at this time?

Debbie Ariyo

Debbie Ariyo stated that Nigeria should not need to rely on aid. It is Africa's largest economy, but its money is going to the hands of a few. The real issue is how to tackle corruption in Nigeria.

Elizabeth Donnelly

Elizabeth Donnelly noted that the government needs to reform and strengthen the police, and deal with capacity challenges and wider corruption. Localized violent conflict and a sense of insecurity can too easily spill over and become linked to grievances with democracy and governance in Nigeria. Now in the 50th year of independence, Nigeria is facing its most significant crisis since the return to democracy.

According to her, education will be the key to tackling the enormous youth bulge and the lack of economic opportunities in northern Nigeria. Furthermore, as civil society coalesces, there is a growing sense of frustration with the government and a widening gap between society and government.

She added that aid to Nigeria should be supportive of the development of institutional capacity. She noted that the government has been too reliant on oil revenues.

C. U. Gwam

C.U. Gwam noted that British aid to Nigeria is not sizeable, particularly in comparison to the aid Nigeria gives out to members of the African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states (ACP), notably in the fields of peacekeeping and medical assistance. Regionally Nigeria contributes the majority of military resources to Economic Community of West African States. This is important in shoring up defence against other insurgency attacks in the sub-region.

In response to the question of the government's response to the Chibok abductions, he stated that the government's emergency committee held a meeting after the news broke, and the minister of information and the defence minister spoke publicly on the government's position.

Elizabeth Donnelly

Elizabeth Donnelly noted that UK aid to Nigeria has reached almost £1 billion over the past four years, so is not insubstantial. Although this pales in comparison to government oil revenues, Nigeria accounts for one of the United Kingdom's biggest bilateral development programmes.

She concluded by noting that the spread of insecurity across the sub-region should be prevented. This is particularly pertinent in countries already facing significant security challenges, including Mali and Guinea. The international community needs to be cautious in its engagement in finding solutions to the wider crisis of Boko Haram, which goes back to the debate on transparency and information. The spread of misinformation only assists with fermenting distrust and confusion, which groups such as Boko Haram will exploit.