

Displacement crisis grows as Boko Haram increases exploitation of girls

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Two years after the abduction of nearly 300 schoolgirls by Boko Haram militants in Chibok, in northeast Nigeria, parents are still hoping their daughters will return home.

The same week as the anniversary of the kidnapping, UNICEF released a report titled *Beyond Chibok*, which called the conflict with Boko Haram “one of the fastest growing displacement crises in Africa,” with more than 1.3 million children displaced, 1,800 school closures, and 5,000 children separated from their parents.

The report states that suicide attacks involving children have increased in Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria and that girls were most often the attackers. Thousands of children have disappeared in those countries, the report states.

In Nigeria some church leaders are concerned that the authorities have not done enough to rescue the Chibok schoolgirls, who were ages 16 to 18 when they were kidnapped on April 14, 2014.

[Most of the girls’ families are part of the Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria). Many of the girls’ parents were killed, according to Rebecca Dali, executive director of a nongovernmental organization providing care alongside EYN. The Church of the Brethren U.S. reported that 57 of the girls have escaped. However, 219 girls remain missing.]

“The whole nation has failed these children, and we must repent,” said Tunde Bakare, a prominent Nigerian evangelical pastor, during a sermon to mark a global action week for the abduction’s second anniversary.

According to the UNICEF report, Boko Haram sent 44 children on suicide missions last year against civilians in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. That represented an elevenfold increase from 2014. The overall number of attacks across those countries rose from 32 to 151 in the same period.

Since Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari took office in March 2015, his forces have had some success in recapturing territory from Boko Haram and rescuing abducted girls and women. In December he announced that Boko Haram had been “technically defeated,” but that claim was followed by an escalation in suicide attacks.

“When these groups are losing—when they’re losing territory in particular—one of the ways to project that they’re relevant, they’re strong, they’re still a force with which to be reckoned, is to have these attacks,” said Mia Bloom, a professor of communication at Georgia State University and author of multiple books on terrorism, including *Bombshell: Women and Terrorism*. “Boko has been targeting cellphone markets, chicken markets, places where civilians congregate . . . the idea being that using the children against these targets is ideal because they fall under the radar screen. Nobody is going to be suspicious of an eight-year-old girl, a ten-year-old girl.”

Boko Haram’s exploitation of girls is precise, according to research by Bloom and her colleagues. Girls who are too young to bear children, and women who are too old, carry out many suicide attacks. Those in their teens to early twenties are most often sexually exploited by Boko Haram fighters; 91 percent who are released are pregnant.

But even if the girls are released or escape, they face challenges, according to the UNICEF report. They are often seen as security threats, which has proven justified on some occasions. The children born to women who’ve been impregnated by militants also face stigma when they return home and in the places they live after being displaced.

Manuel Fontaine, UNICEF’s regional director for West and Central Africa, said this is unjust.

“Let us be clear: these children are victims, not perpetrators,” Fontaine said in the statement accompanying the release of the report. “Deceiving children and forcing them to carry out deadly acts has been one of the most horrific aspects of the violence in Nigeria and in neighboring countries.”

There have been instances of girls halting suicide operations. The *New York Times* reported that a girl sent to bomb a village in northern Cameroon dropped her explosives at the last moment and instead ran to authorities and provided

information that led to a raid on Boko Haram.

On another occasion, three girls were sent to bomb an internally displaced persons camp in northeastern Nigeria. Two detonated their explosives, killing 60 people, but the third, after glimpsing her parents among those fleeing, threw her explosives in the bush. —Religion News Service; *The Christian Science Monitor*

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