

Nigerian school girl who escaped Boko Haram speaks in Washington

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Had the Washington event featuring the first US appearance of one of the Nigerian schoolgirls who escaped the terrorist group Boko Haram taken place months ago—at the height of interest in the fate of about 300 mostly Christian kidnapped girls—more people might have come to hear the soft-spoken girl identified only as "Saa" tell her harrowing tale.

Maybe some members of Congress would have come to vaunt the girl's bravery and rail against a brutal Islamist extremist group whose rampage across northern Nigeria and cleansing of the area's Christian communities proceed mostly unchecked.

Saa's appearance at the Hudson Institute think tank on Friday (September 19) marks the first time she has spoken publicly of the details of her capture. Saa told her story and answered a few questions, accompanied by a moderator and a Nigerian-American human rights lawyer.

When the men arrived just before midnight in the village of Chibok, the awakened schoolgirls first thought it was Nigerian soldiers. When the men ordered the girls out of the hotel where they were residing and to assemble under a tree, Saa called her father, a former pastor.

"He said pray so God will help us," said Saa, a white scarf obscuring her face. (Concerns about her Christian family being identified are a main reason Saa has chosen to use a pseudonym in public.)

But when the men told the girls not to scream or run or they would be killed, when they demanded to know where the school boys were—the boys lived in other quarters in town—and then when they set the school ablaze, the girls knew it was not the Army, but Boko Haram.

The girls were loaded into trucks, and driven for many hours, Saa said. When they entered a deep forest, with huge trees and dense vegetation on both sides of the

road, Saa saw her chance to escape.

"I told my friend, I'm going to jump down, I'd rather die" than stay with these men, she said. Saa and her friend jumped out of the truck, and although the friend injured her leg in the jump, the two managed to get to the cover of the forest, and the truck sped on.

Saa says she was not with Boko Haram long enough—less than 24 hours—to attest to any of the accusations against the group: the rapes, the forced conversions to Islam, the forced marriages, and selling of girls like cattle to suitors.

One of four of the escaped schoolgirls who received scholarships to finish up their secondary education in the United States, Saa is now in a small Christian school outside the Washington area where she is completing her senior year.

But she says two experiences from her kidnapping by Boko Haram have stayed with her.

First, she can't forget the men demanding to know the religion of some of the girls, and how sad she felt when a girl she knew to be Christian told the men she was Muslim.

"I was shocked and feeling so bad," Saa said. "I was thinking, if they killed us at that time, what was she going to say to the Lord in heaven?"

And then she remembers the man—a shepherd who turned out to be Muslim—who saved Saa and her friend with the injured leg. Reluctant and fearful at first of involving himself, the shepherd finally gave the girls a ride on his motorbike to the closest village and safety.

Five months later, Saa finds herself in the U.S., but the fate of most of the girls remains unknown. Emmanuel Ogebe, the human rights lawyer who shared the dais with Saa, concluded this summer from an investigation he carried out in Nigeria that a rash of suicide bombings by young females had a gruesome link to the mass kidnapping.

"We have determined that a young girl" whose body was identified after a suicide bombing at a school "was a school girl abducted in Chibok," Ogebe said.

Ogebe, who last week testified on Boko Haram before the House Oversight Committee's Subcommittee on National Security, is impassioned about the impact the terrorist group is having on Nigeria, about what he says is the accelerating "cleansing" of the northern part of the country's Christians—and about the West's loss of focus on a group he says is "empowered and inspired by ISIS," also known as the Islamic State.

Saa, who quietly wept as she concluded her story, offered much simpler answers to audience questions. Asked what message she would have for President Obama if she met him, she said, "If I can speak to him [I would ask] anything he can do just to bring back our girls to us."

Obama ordered military assistance for Nigeria, including a team of experts and surveillance flights to help with locating the girls, but little has come of the effort.

"We don't know their condition, what is happening to them," Saa said. "Anything they can do to bring back our girls is good."