

# It's time for Nigeria's government to tell the truth about the missing Chibok girls

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Two years on from Boko Haram's mass kidnapping, the whereabouts of the 219 girls is still a mystery

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When I'm asked my thoughts about Nigeria, I have to admit that my initial comment is often: "Truth is optional." It may sound pessimistic, but time and again information circulated in the form of official government statements has proved to be blatant lies to the media and Nigerians on matters of national security, or the rescue of the 219 schoolgirls still missing from the town of Chibok in Borno. The tide has turned, and the truth can no longer be optional, because the truth will save lives.

So what is the truth? On 14 April 2014, 276 schoolgirls were kidnapped. None of the girls who escaped and returned to their families were rescued by the Nigerian forces. That leaves 219 of the Chibok schoolgirls still missing, and the Nigerian government has yet to coordinate a rescue mission to successfully retrieve them from their captors. Earlier this year, and well before Boko Haram released a video this week showing some of the kidnapped girls, President Muhammadu Buhari had held a meeting with families of the missing and their advocates. During it, he admitted that his administration had no credible intelligence on the location of the schoolgirls. His honesty is both refreshing and worrisome.

Buhari had also publicly declared that his administration would defeat Boko Haram by the end of 2015, and later announced that the insurgents had been "technically defeated". And yet despite its technical defeat last year, the Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker indicates that so far this year the number of people killed by Boko Haram has exceeded 200. The multinational joint taskforce of troops from Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Nigeria has made progress with counter-insurgency, but more needs to be done not only in defeating Boko Haram, but in protecting communities that remain vulnerable to possible further attacks.

Thanks to a recent article in the New York Times, "Boko Haram turns female captives into terrorists", we have confirmation of what many have suspected. The piece clearly depicts the strategic plan to use women and girls as weapons through food deprivation, rape and promises of eternal life if they fulfil suicide missions. The tactics described mirror the stories from women kidnapped and raped by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda.

This detailed account of what a victim endures at the hands of Boko Haram is more reliable than any information previously publicly offered by the Nigerian security forces or federal government.

Last year, I visited an internal displacement camp in Abuja and witnessed the devastation experienced by communities due to Boko Haram's insurgency and ongoing regional conflict. What I saw was a situation worse than I had realised. While the world has stayed vigilant in its call for the rescue of the Chibok girls, a humanitarian crisis has emerged that needs our urgent attention.

According to the Internally Displaced Monitoring Center, since sectarian violence has escalated in northern Nigeria, nearly 2.2 million Nigerians have been internally displaced and at least another 100,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring Chad, Niger, or Cameroon. These are the highest numbers of displaced persons in Africa, surpassing South Sudan. The most alarming part is that 58% of the internally displaced population are children - children in need of food, shelter, healthcare, security and education.

In 2013, Unesco reported that Nigeria had the highest number of out-of-school children in the world, with an alarming figure of more than 10.5 million. The attacks on schools have been part of Boko Haram's strategy, further devastating an already compromised academic system. Hundreds of schools have been attacked across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger and more than 2,000 schools remain closed due to the conflict. In Nigeria alone, about 600 teachers have been killed since the start of Boko Haram's insurgency, according to Unicef.

I witnessed many children growing through this trauma, and every child I spoke to shared their hope of returning to school. As one child said: "I miss my classmates and having textbooks to learn. Over here, we share books and many of the pages are torn." This is what the Chibok schoolgirls represent. This is why we must continue to demand their rescue. This is why we must ask the Nigerian government and ourselves this important question, "What are we returning them to?" This time is now and truth is no longer optional.

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