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IN FOCUS

The kidnapping spree in Nigeria

AFRICA IN BRIEF

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COMMENTARY

Nigeria's new wave of Kidnappings: Who, why and what fallout

Although there has been a lull in abduction attacks in the past few months, the new events have raised the concern of a new wave of abductions. If so, a weak government response, threat of a regional spill over and international apathy will be major challenges.

Anu Maria Joseph



Image source: EPA-EFE

On 3 April, at least ten secondary school students were abducted by armed men in Kaduna state in northwest Nigeria. The victims belong to a government school in Awon. The state commissioner of security, Samuel Aruwan, said: "The exact location of the incident is yet to be ascertained but detailed reports being awaited will clarify whether the incident occurred within the school premises or elsewhere."

On the same day, two female students were abducted from a university hostel in Zamfara state. The armed men broke into the private hostel and locked up the guards before kidnapping the students.

1. The record abductions in Nigeria.

Kidnappings of students from schools have increased in frequency in northern Nigeria since 2014, when Islamist militants abducted over 200 schoolgirls in the Borno state. According to a UN report in 2022, (Anu Maria: Can we hyperlink this report?) more than 1000 students were abducted in the northwest and northeast regions during 2020-21.

In February 2022, nearly 300 schoolgirls were abducted in Zamfara state. In May 2022, over 200 students were kidnapped from an Islamic school in Niger state. In

April 2022, 14 students were abducted from Greenfield University. In August, 15 students were abducted from an agricultural college.

2. Perpetrators and causes

Criminal gangs known locally as 'bandits' carry out kidnappings using motorcycles and keep victims in the forests and release them when the ransom is paid. Many groups belong to mostly ethnic Fulanis, including pastoralists and mercenaries from the region and neighbouring Chad and Niger. Some are displaced by decade-long violence, climate change and livelihood challenges.

Another section is herders tired of cattle rustling and has found more lucrative options for revenue. The bandits also include opportunistic criminals who exploit the vulnerabilities. Some are said to be remnants of the Abubakar Sheku faction of Boko Haram in the northeast.

3. Weak government responses

Abductions have become indiscriminate in northern Nigeria, especially in Kaduna, Zamfara and Niger states. The bandits exploit the government's ignorance and ineffective policies. Corruption, incompetent leadership, and economic and political marginalization have left people, especially the youth, to seek abductions as an easy option to make money.

Parents refuse to send their children to schools over security concerns. In 2022, UNICEF estimated that nearly 10.5 million children between the age of five and 14 are out of school in Nigeria. The state has failed to manage a security

infrastructure. The governors have little influence over security in their state, as the federal government controls the police and the army. Lack of coordination between the above has made mass abductions a lucrative source of income. Various state governors have sometimes tried negotiating with the bandits by paying ransoms as collateral, including expensive cars and other commodities. In 2022, the government introduced new currency notes and limited cash withdrawals partially to stop the abductions, which backfired on the economy.

Although there has been a lull in abduction attacks in the past few months, the new events have raised the concern of a new wave of abductions. If so, addressing the issue will challenge the new government under Bola Tinubu.

4. The threat of a regional spill over

The spill over effect of the issue is vast. In January, 50 women were abducted by the Boko Haram Islamist insurgent group in Burkina Faso. Though the victims were released later, the first mass kidnapping in the country has raised a new concern that it will be a developing tactic by Islamist insurgent groups. Similarly, 19 soldiers

were abducted by a rebel group in the Central African Republic in February. Further, insecurity in West Africa is currently in the worst shape. The threat of spreading abduction as a tactic is a larger concern.

5. International apathy

In 2014, the Chibok girls' abduction attracted global attention bringing hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls. Following the incident, the UN special envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown, announced USD 20 million for a three-year project. However, there has not been significant global attention or efforts to curb other abductions. Sufficient international efforts are essential to quell the spill over effect.

Note: The above commentary was originally published as a short note in the NIAS Conflict Weekly.

AFRICA IN BRIEF

5 April-18 April

By Anu Maria Joseph

SUDAN

Civilian transition misses the deadline

On 11 April, BBC reported on Sudan civilian groups and the military junta missing the deadline for a civilian transition amid disagreements on security reforms and other issues. A civilian government was meant to be established on 11 April, according to the timeline set up by the parties previously. The deadline lapsed after the parties failed to sign a final transitional deal amid disagreements on integrating the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the army. (“Sudan misses deadline to form civilian government,” *BBC*, 11 April 2023)

Anti-government protests turn violent, injuring dozens

On 7 April, BBC reported that many people were injured after the security forces used tear gas to disperse the mass protests against the military rule. The protests were against the delays in signing a final agreement to re-establish civilian rule in the country. It also marked the fourth anniversary of the Sudanese uprising in 2019 that overthrew former dictator Omar al-Bashir. Hundreds of protesters blocked the roads in the capital, Khartoum; they carried placards and chanted slogans denouncing the army’s involvement in politics. (“Injuries as mass anti-junta protests dispersed in Sudan,” *BBC*, 7 April 2023)

Army accuses rival faction of mobilising troops across the country

On 13 April, the Sudanese army warned that Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a major paramilitary group in Sudan under Deputy President Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, is mobilising its troops in cities across the

country. In a statement, the military accused the group of breaking the law. There are growing concerns of a fully escalated confrontation between the two sides. The developments came after the transitional leaders failed to meet the deadline for a civilian transition and breakdown of talks between the rival military factions. (“Tension as Sudan's army accuses rival force of mobilising,” *BBC*, 13 April 2023)

Heavy fighting erupts between rival military faction killing 50 civilians

On 17 April, BBC reported that more than 50 civilians were killed in Sudan following heavy fighting between rival military factions. The clashes erupted between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under General Hamdan Dagalo and the military leader Abdel Fattah-al-Burhan. The UK, the US, the EU, China and Russia have all called for an immediate ceasefire. The UN’s Secretary General Antonio Guterres has urged both the leaders to end the violence. (“Sudan: Army and RSF battle over key sites, leaving 56 civilians dead,” *BBC*, 17 April 2023)

SOMALIA

“Somalis great victims of climate change,” says UN secretary general

On 11 April, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres arrived in Somalia’s capital, Mogadishu. Local media reported that he discussed the country’s worsening humanitarian crisis and supported its fight against extremism. He said: “Although Somalia makes virtually no contribution to climate change, the Somalis are among the greatest victims.” He added: “So I call on donors, and I call on the international community to step up their support to urgently fund

the 2023 humanitarian response plan, which is currently just 15 per cent funded." The UN estimates that more than eight million people in the country are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance, followed by worse famine after a five consecutive failed rainy season. ("UN chief Guterres arrives in Somali capital," BBC, 11 April 2023; "Somalis are climate change victims - UN chief," BBC, 11 April 2023)

ETHIOPIA

Protests in Amhara amid the government's plan to dissolve the regional force

On 10 April, BBC reported on continuing protests in Ethiopia's Amhara region for the fifth consecutive day against the government's decision to dissolve the Amhara regional force. The previous week, the federal government announced that it wanted the special forces to be integrated into the federal army or police force to protect the borders and to fight rebels. However, the protesters claimed the decision would make them vulnerable to attacks by neighbouring regions. Later, a partial curfew was imposed in the region after the protests turned violent. On 9 April, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said that the government will go ahead with the plan even if "a price had to be paid." ("Ethiopia's Amhara region hit by protests over move to dissolve regional forces," BBC, 10 April 2023)

KENYA

Opposition demands review of the constitution

On 6 April, Kenya's opposition Azimo coalition demanded a review of the constitution to be a part of the discussion the government had proposed to end the protests in the country. Opposition leader Raila Odinga stated that they will demand a review of the constitution "to remove the last vestiges of an imperial presidency." He mentioned Kenya's "winner-take-all culture." In February, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua was criticised for

referring to the government as a company having large stakes and others none at all. Later, he defended claiming that he was referring to government appointments, which he said must be given to people who support the president's agenda. ("Kenya opposition demands review of constitution," BBC, 6 April 2023)

SOUTH AFRICA

Government to revoke the national state of disaster

On 5 April, the South African government decided to revoke a national state of disaster that it declared in February to address the power crisis. There had been popular concern that the decision would further corruption in the state-owned power company, Eskom. It has been facing scandals and is more than USD 20 in debt. The government says that it can deal with the crisis through existing legislation. The opposition criticised the decision as an acceptance of corruption in the power sector. ("South Africa revokes state of disaster over power," BBC, 5 April 2023)

BURKINA FASO

Military ramps up mobilisation to re-capture territories under militants

On 14 April, Burkina Faso's military government set a target of regaining 40 per cent of its territory which were captured by militant groups previously. It announced a "general mobilisation" to give them "all necessary means" to follow the same. The decision comes after at least 44 people were killed following an attack on the village of Kaourakou and Tondobi in the north-east of the country. Defence Minister Col Maj Kassoum Coulibaly stated that the new measures would give "a legal framework to all the actions to be implemented to deal with the situation that Burkina Faso is experiencing." ("Burkina Faso 'mobilisation' ramps up terror response," BBC, 14 April 2023)

At least 42 people including soldiers killed in two jihadist attacks

On 17 April, Africanews reported that at least ten soldiers and 32 civilian auxiliaries were killed on 15 and 16 April in two attacks in the northern region. The attacks come after the government declared a “general mobilisation” against the escalating jihadist violence. On 13 April, the military government declared a “general mobilisation” to “give the state all the necessary means” to deal with the jihadist attacks in the country. The military statement added that those measure will have in particular “the right to request people, goods and services and the right to call for defence employment, individually or collectively.” (“42 soldiers and soldiers' aides killed in two more attacks in Burkina Faso,” *Africanews*, 17 April 2023)

NIGERIA

China Development Bank new financier of rail project

On 5 April, Nigeria’s senate approved the China Development Bank as the new creditor for a one billion worth rail project. Another Chinese company was due to fund the line between Kaduna and Kano, but it pulled out in 2020. Funding has been a major constraint during former President Muhammadu Buhari’s term, though he prioritised upgrading the poor transport network and power supply. As president-elect Bola Tinubu takes over in May, he has to deal with a raft of challenges including double-digit inflation and widespread insecurity. (“Chinese bank approved to finance Nigeria rail project,” *BBC*, 5 April 2023)

At least 51 people killed in gunmen attack

On 7 April, BBC reported that at least 51 people were killed in a gunmen attack in the village of Umogidi in Benue State. The attack is speculated to be motivated by a herder-farmer clash that had happened before. Clashes between nomadic herders and settled farmers are common in the region. Farmers accuse herders of

destroying their fields and the herders accuse farmers of raiding their cattle. (“Nigeria gunmen kill dozens in rural village in Benue State,” *BBC*, 7 April 2023)

At least 33 people killed in gunmen attack

On 17 April, Africanews reported that at least 33 people were killed following a gunmen attack in the village of Runji in northwest Nigeria. The State Commissioner of Security, Samuel Aruwan said: “Troops had a fierce encounter with the attackers and are still in the general area.” No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. However, bandits who are accused of recurring attacks and kidnappings are suspected to be behind the attack. (“At least 33 people killed by gunmen in northwest Nigeria,” *Africanews*, 17 April 2023)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Rebels refuses to disarm and demobilise

On 14 April, M23 rebels in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo said that they will not disarm or demobilise until a direct political dialogue with the government. A spokesperson from the rebel group, Lawrence Kanyuka, stated that the Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi refused to hold negotiations with the rebels. Previously, Tshisekedi said that under an agreement negotiated by regional states, the M23 rebels are expected to demobilise. (“Rebels refuse to disarm in DR Congo conflict,” *BBC*, 14 April 2023)

MALI

Jihadists take control of villages in northern region

On 13 April, BBC reported that jihadists affiliated to the Islamic State took control of a village in Ménaka, Mali. The capture was reported days after another village, Tidermene, was seized by the militants. Since 2022, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has launched a major offensive in northern Mali. Apart from that, clashes

with Al-Qaeda-linked fighters as well as former Tuareg rebels are destabilizing the region. (“Jihadist group takes over village in northern Mali,” *BBC*, 13 April 2023)

REGIONAL

Egypt accuses Ethiopia of delaying talks on GERD dispute

On 13 April, Egypt’s deputy foreign minister on African affairs accused Ethiopia of “buying time” through talks while continuing to fill the GERD dam without an agreement. He condemned the statement by Ethiopia that accused him of “politicising” the Nile dam dispute.

Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt have been in a years-long dispute over the sharing of Nile river regarding the construction of the GERD, with Sudan and Egypt raising concern that the dam would reduce their share of water. (“Egypt accuses Ethiopia of ‘buying time’ in Nile dam row,” *BBC*, 13 April 2023)

About the author

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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