

International

By targeting schools, Nigerian kidnappers put country at risk

\$11 million paid to kidnappers between January 2016 and March 2020

LAGOS, Nigeria: Jihadists in northeastern Nigeria have long outraged the world with mass abductions of schoolchildren but now armed gangs in search of income are using the same tactic in other parts of the country, sparking warnings that no school is safe. More than 300 schoolgirls were snatched from dormitories by gunmen in the middle of the night in northwestern Zamfara state on Friday, in the third known mass kidnapping of students since December. Until lately, such attacks were the hallmark of jihadists who have waged a decade-long insurgency in the northeast, and where the kidnap of 276 girls in Chibok in 2014 sparked global outrage.

But mass abductions of civilians—including schoolchildren—for ransom are now on the rise in northwest and central Nigeria. “The easiest way to get money from the government is now to kidnap schoolchildren,” warned Idayat Hassan, director of the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development think tank, after the abduction of 27 students last week in Kagara in the central Niger state.

‘Blackmail by bandits’

“When kidnappers see they are not being sanctioned, that they are given amnesty in a grand ceremony, it becomes a good opportunity for them,” said Yan St-Pierre, consultant with the Berlin-based Modern Security Consulting Group. He referred to the case of a gang leader behind the kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in northwestern Katsina state in December. He gave himself up, with officials

saying they had struck an amnesty deal and denying a ransom was paid. But “whatever the government says”, St-Pierre argued, “ransoms are paid, whether it is by families of victims or the authorities”. “The government wants to avoid a second Chibok and so they do everything they can to facilitate the release of those kidnapped.”

President Muhammadu Buhari insisted in a statement on Friday that the government would not “succumb to blackmail by bandits... in the expectations of huge ransom payments”. One of the problems is that there is a lack of coherent strategy, said Nnamdi Obasi, Senior Analyst for Nigeria for the International Crisis Group (ICG). “The president talks about crushing armed groups but then some governors call for dialogue and amnesty,” he said. Another problem is that kidnapping for ransom is already a widespread national problem, with businessmen, officials and ordinary citizens snatched from the streets by criminals hunting for ransom money.

At least \$11 million was paid to kidnappers between January 2016 and March 2020, according to SB Morgen, a Lagos-based geopolitical research consultancy. Organized gangs in the northwest could be receiving kidnap money from other parts of the country, Obasi said, enabling them to purchase weapons and vehicles to stage large-scale attacks and mass kidnappings.

Jihadist infiltration

Northwestern Nigeria has been wracked by years



CHIBOK, Nigeria: In this file photo taken on April 12, 2019 Musa Maina holds a picture of her kidnapped daughter, Hauwa, in Chibok. — AFP

of insecurity involving armed groups from rival communities who clash over land and resources. “No one has an accurate count of these groups,” Obasi said, but they “have grown in numerical strength”. Another key factor to the groups’ increased capabilities has been the “availability and cross-border flow of arms from Libya and other countries experiencing violence”, analyst Chitra Nagarajan pointed out.

The Nigerian military deployed to the area in

2016 and a peace deal with bandits was signed in 2019 but attacks have continued. Security analysts have further warned of possible infiltration by jihadists from the northeast-Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province. While links between jihadists and the northwest remain uncertain, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said his group were behind the abduction of 334 students from a school in Katsina state in December. —AFP

News in brief

Colombia launches ‘elite force’

BOGOTA, Colombia: Colombia on Friday launched a 7,000-strong elite force to fight rebels financed by drug trafficking and other illegal activities, and which allegedly operate across borders. Surrounded by helicopters, tanks and hundreds of soldiers at the Tolima military base in central Colombia, President Ivan Duque described the launch as “historic”. The force, he said, will be tasked with “subduing, beating and subjecting the structures of drug trafficking and the... threats linked to the illegal exploitation of minerals, trafficking of species, of persons and, of course, to any transnational form of terrorism.” —AFP

New York mayor demands inquiry

NEW YORK: New York City’s mayor on Thursday joined a growing chorus of politicians calling for an investigation into sexual harassment allegations made against Governor Andrew Cuomo. Lindsey Boylan, a former aide to Cuomo, accused the governor of sexually harassing her when she worked for his administration from 2015 to 2018 in a blog post published Wednesday. She says Cuomo kissed her on the mouth without consent, suggested they played strip poker during a flight and went “out of his way to touch me on my lower back, arms and legs.” Cuomo’s office said in a statement that Boylan’s “claims of inappropriate behavior are quite simply false.” —AFP

Call to stop demolitions

UNITED NATIONS: The United Nations and European members of the Security Council on Friday called on Israel to stop demolitions of Bedouin settlements in the Jordan Valley, and for humanitarian access to the community living in Humsa Al-Baqia. In a joint statement at the end of a monthly session of the Security Council on the conflict in the Middle East, Estonia, France, Ireland, Norway and Britain said they were “deeply concerned at the recent repeated demolitions and confiscation of items, including of EU and donor funded structures carried out by Israeli authorities at Humsa Al-Baqia in the Jordan Valley.” —AFP

Trump will seek revenge

WASHINGTON: Former US president Donald Trump has signaled he will seek revenge on fellow Republicans who voted to impeach him last month, and he followed through Friday, endorsing an ex-aide against an Ohio congressman. Trump threw his “complete and total” support behind Max Miller, a 2020 deputy campaign manager and White House advisor challenging Representative Anthony Gonzalez, one of 10 Republicans who voted to impeach Trump after the deadly January 6 riot at the US Capitol. —AFP

60 fighters killed in Marib clashes

ABU DHABI: More than 60 fighters were killed in clashes in Yemen Friday between Iran-backed Houthi rebels and government forces in the strategic northern province of Marib, government sources said. Earlier this month, the Houthis resumed a push to capture Marib city, 120 kilometers east of the rebel-held capital Sanaa. The city lies close to some of Yemen’s richest oil fields and its capture would be major prize for the rebels. Friday’s dead included at least 27 pro-government forces and 34 Houthi rebels, a government source told AFP, adding it was the “most violent” day of clashes since fighting erupted on February 8. —AFP

Prince Harry: British press were ‘destroying my mental health’

NEW YORK: Britain’s Prince Harry said in a rare one-on-one interview that he left royal life because the British press was “destroying” his mental health, and revealed he watches “The Crown.” Harry gave an intimate insight into his young family’s new life in Los Angeles during an open-top bus tour of the city with “The Late Late Show” host James Corden. “We all know what the British press can be like, and it was destroying my mental health,” said Harry, who relocated to the United States with wife Meghan Markle last year. “I was, like, this is toxic. So I did what any husband and what any father would do. I need to get my family out of here.”

Harry and Markle’s shock announcement in January 2020 that they were stepping back from royal duties rocked Britain’s royal family, with British newspapers dubbing it “Mexit.” Earlier this month,

Buckingham Palace announced that the couple had permanently quit royal duties following a one-year review of the new arrangement. Queen Elizabeth II ordered the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, to relinquish their honorary titles and patronages. “It was never walking away,” Harry, 36, told Corden. “It was stepping back rather than stepping down. It was a really difficult environment.”

Harry has long had a difficult relationship with Britain’s tabloids, blaming press intrusion for contributing to his mother Princess Diana’s death in a car crash in 1997. Earlier this month, Markle won a high-profile privacy claim against Associated Newspapers for publishing a private letter that she wrote to her estranged father. Harry said he was “more comfortable” with the portrayal of the royal family in the hit Netflix series “The Crown” than he is with newspaper stories written



LONDON: In this file photo (From left) Britain’s Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, Britain’s Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II, Britain’s Meghan, Duchess of Sussex and Britain’s Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, stand on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to watch a military fly-past to mark the centenary of the Royal Air Force (RAF). — AFP

about him and his family. “They don’t pretend to be news. It’s fictional,” Harry said of the show.

“It’s loosely based on the truth. Of course, it’s not strictly accurate, but it gives you a rough idea about what that lifestyle, what the pressures of putting duty and service above family and everything else, what can come from that.” Harry, who remains sixth in line

to the throne, revealed that he would like to see actor Damian Lewis play him in future series. The prince admitted during the relaxed chat that it was the first time he had ever been on an open-top bus. Harry and Corden visited the house from hit 1990s US TV series “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” They voice-called Markle, who referred to Harry as “Haz.” —AFP

Hunger drives displaced Mozambicans to risk going home for food

PEMBA, Mozambique: Brutal jihadist violence forced them to flee their homes, but now hunger has driven some in Mozambique to risk their lives by sneaking back to their old residences to gather food or even resume farming. Nearly 670,000 people have been displaced by an extremist insurgency that has raged for three years in northern Mozambique. Some have moved in with host families, some are living in temporary shelters, while others have resettled in newly-created safe villages. But a critical lack of food has led to a brave few returning to their old homes to forage for whatever they can. Lal Dady said that one day he left his new home in the Metuge resettlement camp to scour his granaries in Quissanga, a district in Cabo Delgado province where the Islamists are waging their bloody campaign.

“I got chestnuts and other food products to feed my family,” said the 22-year-old father of one. Some are even more daring. Mussa Cesar, 43, confessed that he goes back to Quissanga—an eight-hour walk-to work on his old farmland. “I have been going to Quissanga for my field. I stay there around three days, cultivating and then come back,” he said, sitting under a tree and playing a traditional draughts game with friends. “And I bring back manioc for my family here,” he said. “We just don’t do the fishing, because we are afraid.”

Eritrean troops killed ‘hundreds’ in Ethiopia massacre: Amnesty

NAIROBI, Kenya: Eritrean soldiers fighting across the border in Ethiopia’s northern Tigray region killed hundreds of civilians in a massacre in a likely crime against humanity, Amnesty International said Friday. The rights watchdog spoke to survivors of the atrocities and used satellite images to piece together bloody events that unfolded last November in the ancient town of Axum, a UNESCO World Heritage site. “The evidence is compelling and points to a chilling conclusion. Ethiopian and Eritrean troops carried out multiple war crimes in their offensive to



PAQUITEQUETE, Mozambique: Adolescents look on in Paquitequete, a neighborhood of Pemba City where thousands of people have been displaced in the last year as a result of attacks by armed forces. —AFP

take control of Axum,” said Amnesty’s Deprose Muchena. “Above and beyond that, Eritrean troops went on a rampage and systematically killed hundreds of civilians in cold blood, which appears to constitute crimes against humanity.”

UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said she was concerned “by reports indicating the participation of Eritrean troops in the conflict in Tigray alongside the Ethiopian army, and allegations of their implication in cases of serious human rights violations.” But Eritrean Information Minister Yemane Gebremeskel attacked Amnesty for what it called “a fallacious report.” “Eritrea is outraged and categorically rejects the preposterous accusations leveled against it,” he said on Twitter. Tigray has been the theatre of fighting since early November 2020, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced military operations against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), accusing them of attacking federal army camps.

vouchers in December and January which locals use to buy food from shops. But Cristina Graziani, head of the WFP field office in the provincial capital Pemba, said that program was now “difficult to sustain because the stores are facing the same difficulties to restock commodities in Palma”. Even before the insurgency struck, Cabo Delgado was already one of the poorest provinces in Mozambique, itself ranked among the world’s poorest countries. The UN announced this week that 1.3 million people in Cabo Delgado and neighboring Niassa and Nampula provinces are in need of humanitarian aid, with 950,000 facing “severe hunger”. —AFP

He declared victory after pro-government troops took the regional capital Mekele in late November, although the TPLF vowed to fight on, and clashes have persisted in the region. The presence of Eritrean troops in Ethiopia in the Tigray conflict has been widely documented but has been denied by both countries. Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a brutal border war in 1998-2000, back when the TPLF dominated the government in Addis Ababa. Tensions eased after Abiy initiating a rapprochement, a policy that helped him to win the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, but Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and the TPLF remain bitter enemies. Amnesty said it had spoken to 41 survivors and witnesses who said that on November 19, Ethiopian and Eritrean military forces took control of Axum “in a large-scale offensive, killing and displacing civilians with indiscriminate shelling and shooting.” —AFP