

The Guardian

Boko Haram returns more than 100 schoolgirls kidnapped last month

Four of the girls kidnapped from Dapchi, north-east Nigeria, are still missing, says Amnesty



A police officer stands guard at the premises of Government Girls' Science and Technical College, where 110 girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram. Photograph: Aminu Abubakar/AFP/Getty Images

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Boko Haram has released more than 100 of the schoolgirls it abducted last month, returning them to their village in north-east Nigeria.

Waving the black and white flag used by the Islamic State and wearing balaclavas, military fatigues and ammunition belts, members of the group released most of the girls they had abducted in Dapchi early on Wednesday morning.

On 19 February armed militants pretending to be soldiers herded the girls into trucks and escaped. The Nigerian government was initially slow to act but then said it would negotiate with the group for the girls. It has denied any ransoms were paid.

Witnesses said the militants pulled up near Dapchi police station on Wednesday and

shouted that parents should pick up their daughters. Initially, villagers ran away fearing another attack. But when they realised what was happening, they began to cheer and wave at the militants, chasing after their pickup trucks, some recording videos on their phones.

“Dapchi is full of joy,” said Mohammed Mdada, who saw the girls being whipped as they were driven away a month previously. He said the militants apologised to some of the girls’ parents in their language, Kanuri, and shook their hands before driving off.

“They said that if they knew they were Muslim girls they wouldn’t have abducted them,” Mdada said. “They warned the girls that they should stay away from school and swore that if they came back and found any girl in school, they’d abduct them again and never give them back.”

One of the goals of Boko Haram - which has kidnapped thousands of girls, boys and women, forcing some of them to blow themselves up, killed thousands of others and displaced millions - is to stop children receiving what it perceives as western-style education.



Boko Haram has released many of the 110 schoolgirls it abducted from the town of Dapchi, Nigeria, the government said in a statement. Photograph: Aminu Abubakar/AFP /Getty Images

Usman Mataba, whose niece was among those returned, said she had talked to the militants. “I approached them and they told me that they had brought all the girls except six - that five had died on the day they were taken,” he said. “They said they discovered they were dead when they arrived at their destination, so they buried them.”

Mdada said he had been told the five girls were trampled to death. The sixth had “refused to cooperate” with them, Mataba said.

Amnesty International later said four girls were still missing. Locals said Boko Haram also dropped off a boy who had apparently been kidnapped by accident.

Hafsat Abdullahi phoned the Guardian to say her 16-year-old sister Fatima, who had been taken, had been dropped off in Dapchi. She put her sister on the phone.

“It took us three days to get back to Dapchi,” said Fatima. “We were divided into three groups and flown in planes, and taken over rivers in boats.”

Soon after arriving back in Dapchi, the army told Fatima and her schoolmates to assemble at the village hospital.

“They took all of them to the hospital, Fatima is in the hospital now,” Hafsat said later, waiting at home to see her sister. “I heard that the chief of staff of the army is here and wants to take the girls with him to Damaturu. I don’t like that – I want her to stay.”

Their parents were not allowed in to see them, and the girls were soon put into vehicles and driven away. Their destination was Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, where they were to meet the president, Muhammadu Buhari.

In the aftermath of the Dapchi attack, Buhari said his government would negotiate with the militants, but in a statement released on Twitter on Wednesday he claimed there had been “backchannel” negotiations and that no ransoms had been paid.

This raises the question of what was offered to secure the girls’ release. The Nigerian government held several Boko Haram commanders who could have been handed over as barter.

Other aspects of the abduction and release remain murky. According to an Amnesty International report, the army and police had been warned that Boko Haram would abduct the girls and made no attempt to stop them.

They also had been warned that they would be brought back on Wednesday morning, according to Dapchi residents, and positioned themselves at the school they had been taken from, thinking that they would be dropped off there.

However, their kidnappers drove them into the centre of the village, close to the police station.

Neither the military nor the police attempted to apprehend the militants, who even stopped to change a tyre before leaving Dapchi, according to Mataba.

Parents of the Chibok girls, kidnapped four years earlier in a neighbouring state to worldwide condemnation, happened to be in Dapchi to commiserate with their counterparts and urge them to be patient.

The Chibok girls were taken before Boko Haram split into several factions, when it was led by Abubakar Shekau, a notorious militant who vowed to “sell them in the market” and who is still believed to have some 100 of the girls in his custody, having traded others for vast sums of money, according to an investigation by the Wall Street Journal.