

# US hostage rescue in Nigeria triggers concerns

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Last week's rescue of an American hostage in northern Nigeria by the United States has led to renewed calls on the Federal Government to ensure the release of Nigerians who have been held by the Boko Haram terrorists in their camps for months and years, OLALEYE ALUKO writes

In a commando operation last Saturday, the United States of America rescued its citizen from the jaw of bandits in Sokoto State.

The US Naval Special Warfare group, often addressed as SEAL Team Six, rescued 27-year-old Philip Walton, who was reportedly kidnapped in Niger Republic.

The rescue mission, which was a joint operation, was adjudged successful and did not escape the attention of the US President, Donald Trump.

In a tweet, Trump said Walton's rescue was "big win for our very elite US Special Forces."

Also, the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, praised the operation, saying, "The United States is committed to the safe return of all U.S. citizens taken captive. We delivered on that commitment late last night in Nigeria, where some of our bravest and most skilled warriors rescued a U.S. citizen after a group of armed men took him hostage across the border in Niger."

Although Pompeo gave credit to American soldiers, the Pentagon Chief Spokesman, Jonathan Hoffman, acknowledged that the US got international support for the mission.

"No US military personnel were injured during the operation. We appreciate the support of our international partners in conducting this operation," Hoffman said in a statement.

The northern Nigeria region, where Walton was rescued, is notorious for banditry and terrorism. The Boko Haram insurgents are the main

and perennial attackers; the terrorists have abducted and sometimes murdered Nigerian and foreign captives over the years.

Nigerian military intelligence, which played a key role in that operation, revealed that the abductors, who swooped on Walton in his Niger Republic home, brought him to a hideout in the Illela Local Government Area of Sokoto State.

The two countries in the incident – Nigeria and Niger – were working on this information when on October 28, 2020, the US government reportedly wrote the Federal Government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requesting permission to carry out the mission.

The Minister of Defence, Maj Gen Bashir Magashi (rtd.), on Tuesday confirmed that the government granted the US necessary permission to carry out the military operation.

In the usual rhetoric, the minister did not fail to add that Nigeria would explore the current partnership with the United States to tackle the Boko Haram insurgency in the country.

Nigerians have had a big, unpleasant share of the fatal consequences of the reign of terrorists, bandits and kidnappers in the North-East and North-West regions– with the military seeming helpless to curtail the situation.

Security experts say it is ironical and a sad commentary that the regime of the President, Maj Gen Muhammadu Buhari (retd.), which threw its weight behind the rescue of Walton, failed for many years to secure the release of priced targets such as Leah Sharibu and humanitarian workers still in the captivity of the Boko Haram insurgents.

The most vicious attacks by the insurgents dated back to the night of April 14, 2014, when Boko Haram abductors invaded the town of Chibok in Borno State and carried away at least 276 girls – an incident which became a global movement typical of the 2020's Black Lives Matter.

It was not surprising that the international community rose to make a point on the need for collaboration to bring back the girls.

Canada, China, Israel, the US and the European Union at this time assured Nigeria of the needed technical and intelligence to rescue the Chibok girls.

The collaboration perhaps yielded efforts evidenced by the release of about 57 of the girls months later in 2014.

Meanwhile, in October 2016, 21 girls were rescued, while in May 2017, 82 more girls also were released.

Presently, about 112 of the girls are still believed to be with the Boko Haram elements.

While the country still grapples with the global embarrassment in Chibok, the insurgents invaded Dapchi in Yobe State in February 2018 and escaped with another 110 schoolgirls.

The schoolgirls, aged between 11 and 19 years, were abducted from the Government Girls' Science and Technical College by the Boko Haram terrorists.

While five of the schoolgirls died on the same day of the abduction, the others were released in March of same year except one of them,

Leah Sharibu, who is reportedly being held because of her Christian faith.

Dapchi town is approximately 275 kilometres North-West of Chibok, the Borno State community where the 2014 abduction took place.

Despite several calls by Nigerian opinion leaders, socio-cultural groups, human rights organisations and assurances from the Federal Government over the years, the girls are still in the terrorists' den.

A security expert, Mr Ben Okezie, in an interview with *Sunday PUNCH*, said the Nigerian military had been politicised and its efficiency had therefore been affected.

Okezie noted that the Federal Government needed more international collaboration in the light of the recent American's rescue to get Nigerian captives out of the grip of the insurgents.

He said, "The Nigerian government should be humble; we should be humble enough to solicit the assistance we need from other countries. Our military has been largely politicised. Once an institution of the government has been politicised, it is as if its wings have been clipped. This is the same problem we have with the police force.

"The Federal Government should talk with the US and other world powers in the interests of Leah Sharibu and other captives. What distinguished the US forces? They have advanced technology in terms of intelligence gathering. They had already got the whole information before they entered our country; but they just came, shared a little with their Nigerian counterparts and concealed the other parts and they went for what they wanted. The Nigerian military also provided assistance.

“For the fact that the US did not hand over the mission to rescue their citizen to Nigerian military us suggests a trust issue, and there is a problem with that. You could see that the US President was monitoring that mission, as little as it seemed, and he was giving kudos where necessary. Can we have that supervision in Nigeria? Before our President would even know about it, it would be after two or three days.

“You see a situation where the Department of State Services would have information and they are not willing to share with the police or the military. We are battling with a lot of inter-agency rivalry. We have to be able to build trust within our country and with other countries.”

Also, the President of a civil society organisation, Campaign for Democracy, Mr Usman Abdul, scolded the Federal Government for “not showing enough sensitivity to the plight of Nigerians” concerning the Boko Haram abductees.

The CD leader said, “For me, I think it is deliberate insensitivity on the part of the government. It also portrays that we still have a colonial mentality whereby we value foreigners and neglect our own citizens. I believe that the same urgency should be applicable to our citizens in captivity.

“It is an act of insensitivity to the plight of Nigerian citizens. The Federal Government should engage such collaborative efforts in intelligence gathering as we have seen in the American’s rescue. The tactics employed by the US should be replicated by our government. All over the world, best practices are learnt from militaries which have high technologies and sophisticated weapons.”

The Nigerian military has repeatedly promised to get the Nigerian captives out of the terrorists’ enclaves, but most Nigerians believe that going by the years of waiting without results, the military are either underequipped, sabotaged or in dire need of international support.

For example, the Nigerian Army in September 2018 noted that it had “ongoing operations” to rescue the lone Dapchi schoolgirl, Sharibu, the remaining Chibok schoolgirls, and other victims with the insurgents.

Maj Gen Attahiru Ibrahim, who was also a former Theatre Commander of Operation Lafiya Dole, had stated this in an interview on the Nigerian Television Authority.

“We are going to have them back. I can assure you about that. There are a whole lot of non-kinetic operations that are ongoing. The government is also making tremendous efforts on not only Leah Sharibu, but other Chibok girls. Very soon, they will be joining tier families. I am very optimistic about that,” he had said.

Two years after on, the military operations are still ongoing, much to the depression of the families of the victims and bewilderment of security experts.

Apart from schoolgirls, another category of Nigerians that the Boko Haram insurgents have targeted are humanitarian workers, who are mainly working in the three most affected states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe.

In some cases, after months of abduction and pleading with the government without results, the terrorists had gone ahead to execute some of their captives to the horror of Nigerians and the international community.

In December 2017, 10 persons were killed after the terrorists ambushed a convoy of humanitarian workers and soldiers at Maula village along Dikwa-Ngala highway in Borno State.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs had condemned the attacks, saying that “violence against convoys carrying humanitarian aid was unacceptable.”

In March 2018, the terrorists attacked Rann community in the Kala-Balge Local Government Area of Borno, which led to the abduction of three aid workers and left three others dead.

In July 2019, the Boko Haram fighters attacked another convoy of vehicles conveying aid workers in the Damasak area of Borno State, killing one of the drivers and abducting six others.

The abducted persons, said to be two drivers and three health workers, had included workers of an International Non-Governmental Organisation, Action Against Hunger.

After weeks of plight from the workers, one of them was executed by the insurgents on September 25, 2019, in a brutal video clip released



by the insurgents.

The United Nations Humanitarian Office in Nigeria condemned the murder, while calling on the Nigerian authorities to “ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice.”

A Second Republic lawmaker and elder statesman, Dr Junaid Muhammed, said in an interview with *Sunday PUNCH* that the rescue mission for Nigerians in the Boko Haram captivity had lingered due to monetisation of the Boko Haram insurgency war, poor leadership in the military, among other reasons.

Muhammed said, “I believe that it is in the interests of Nigeria and Nigerians, if and when a government is alive to its responsibilities.

The primary responsibility of any government and especially a democratic government, is the maintenance of law and order, and the protection of lives, property and dignity of its people – in this case, Nigerians.

“And because the people who are now the subject of this discussion are Nigerians, it becomes an even more serious responsibility. The government will stand to be condemned if it is seen as giving more efforts to protecting other citizens than its citizens.

“Intelligence is very key unless you know a lot, and the only way to know a lot is by penetrating the Boko Haram camps. You cannot penetrate them unless your own security forces have proper and professional leadership.

“So, if fighting an insurgency has been reduced to a money-making venture by the generals and other critical stakeholders in the rescue

efforts, you can see why this problem is not likely to end soon. Sadly, these generals are also involved especially in the banditry in the North-West.”

A security expert and former Director of the Department of State Services, Mike Ejiofor, said Nigeria must seek greater collaboration with the international community to ensure the release of the abductees in the Boko Haram camps.

Ejiofor said, “Terrorism is a global war and it needs collaborations among countries. I believe Nigeria should approach America and other countries for help. If we don’t have the technological capabilities to fight the insurgents and ensure the release of these kidnapped victims, then we have to seek help.

“Again, look at the timeline between when the American was abducted and when the forces swooped into action, it was close and this made the rescue mission easier. The Chibok girls and Leah Sharibu have had a long spell and to start tracking will need assistance.

“Nigeria has to make a formal request for foreign elements to assist us in the fight. But before we approach them, do we have the enabling structure to bring in the forces? If we collaborate effectively, we can achieve better results.”

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