

With 187 Girls Still Missing, Nigerian Churches Urge Global Prayer, Fasting

Nigeria's largest church network, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), has called for prayer and fasting for the safe release of 230 teenage school girls abducted last week.

“The CAN leadership, especially our president, has called that all Christians pray and fast [on Friday, April 25] because of the security situation in the country: the recent bomb blast in Nyanya in Abuja, and then the abduction of students in a girls' secondary school in Maiduguri, and all the challenges of security that are going on,” the Rev Musa Asake, the General Secretary of CAN told World Watch Monitor.

“The security people are doing their best, the leadership of the government is doing their best, but these things seem not to have an end. So the leadership of CAN feels, now let's talk to God. So the CAN President says God has answers to everything. Let's go to Him in prayer.”

The local chapter of the CAN in Borno State, where the girls were abducted, also decreed three days of prayer and fasting.

On Monday, April 14, at around 10 p.m., suspected members of Boko Haram swooped into Chibok in seven Hilux Toyota pick-ups. While some of the attackers set government and other buildings ablaze, others went to the senior secondary school where they overpowered the security guards before herding at least 230 of the female students onto trucks, and drove the girls (who were between the ages of 16 and 20) deep into the nearby Sambisa forest.

Chibok is a Christian enclave in the predominantly Muslim Borno State, in North-Eastern Nigeria and most of the affected

families are members of EYN Church (Church of the Brethren). So for many, the abduction of the schools girls is an attack against Christians.

“Such an attack where girls were taken away has never taken place. Even recently when they [Boko Haram militants] attacked a federal government college in Buni Yadi, the boys were killed but the girls were told to go away and leave the school. They never took them away. This is the first time they are taking such a number of girls in a school. So we are assuming they did so because most of the girls are Christians,” says a local church leader, whose identity could not be disclosed for security reasons.

State Gov. Alhaji Kashim Shettima first announced that 52 girls had escaped, leaving 77 still missing. But the head teacher at the school, Asabe Kwambura, refuted his claims and said parents reported 230 girls were abducted, with 40 having escaped. All schools in the state were closed due to the insecurity.

The federal government has challenged Borno security agents to do everything possible to rescue these girls. Shettima has since offered a reward of 50 million Naira (about \$50,000) for any information leading to the rescue of the girls. But this is not enough to calm parents’ anger, and criticism of the military’s handling of the crisis is mounting. It particularly angered them that the governor visited in a convoy of more than 50 vehicles, but then said he lacked resources to tackle the kidnappers.

Speaking through a senator accompanying him because he himself was too emotionally upset at the parents’ distress, the governor’s message was, “You should know our limitations here in the state concerning the security deployment. It is very obvious that neither the governor nor I has control over our security. We can only plead with the federal government to assist us. But be assured that we are doing our best to see

that these girls are freed in one piece.”

The parents have been very confused and have been wondering why the government has been delaying in doing something about affected families feel hopeless and most of them are focused on praying, hoping that God will do a miracle.

The Rev. Samuel Dali, president of EYN Church, spoke to World Watch Monitor a week after the kidnaps: “We haven’t heard anything that the government is planning. Even some in the state government who are supposed to direct us are starting to complain that the Federal government needs to do something. We just hear people saying we need to do something, we need to do something, but we just don’t know what needs to be done.”

Some parents have decided to take things into their own hands, and have pleaded with Boko Haram to release the girls, in vain. Others have also ventured into the Sambisa forest to look for their daughters, without the support of the military.

About 60 km into the forest, locals advised them not to proceed any further because it was too dangerous, as Boko Haram is equipped with much more sophisticated weapons than the sticks and machetes the parents were carrying.

“We call on President Goodluck Jonathan to take the necessary measures to free our children. We really feel neglected. I am convinced that if these abducted girls were their own daughters, they would have done something,” a grieving father of one missing girl told World Watch Monitor.

“We call on the kidnappers to listen to our cry and sorrow and let our children come back home,” he added in despair.

A worker with Open Doors International, which partners with churches in Northern Nigeria, added: “The abducted girls will most probably be responsible for cooking and cleaning for the insurgents. But there is every possibility that these children could be forcefully converted to Islam and married off to

members of the group or other Muslim men.”

So far the affected parents have not received any psychological or medical assistance. Moreover, the girls who escaped have been already recalled to sit their examinations again. Some parents accused local authorities of attempting to prevent these escaped schools girls from retelling their ordeal to the media.

Meanwhile, the thoughts of the stunned Nigerian nation are with the girls who still remain in the forest. One commentator described to the BBC the mood of the nation as one of “present, continuous agony.”