

Slavery Report: Nigeria

Latest Reports

Among the most disturbing aspects of the long-running civil war in Nigeria has been slavery. Conflicts between the Muslim majority and the 40% Christian minority have led to the growth of terrorist violence in which the taking of Christian slaves has become a source of compensation for Islamic fighters.

The recent rise of *jihad* organizations like ISIS affiliate Boko Haram has been the main source of contemporary slave [raids](#). The most infamous incident of a slave raid was Boko Haram's [abduction](#) of 276 Christian schoolgirls in the town of Chibok on April 14, 2014 which inspired Michelle Obama's "[#BringBackOurGirls](#)" hashtag. Most slaves are young girls, kidnapped and kept as the [concubines](#) of the Islamic soldiers.

Though the U.S. State Department's 2018 [report](#) on Nigeria mentions that the number of slaves captured and owned by Boko Haram terrorists today could be in the thousands, the full number is as of now "unknown."

The human rights organization Open Doors USA has also [ranked](#) Nigeria as *no. 12* on its list of the countries most guilty of persecuting and [massacring](#) Christians.

History and Background

Nigeria has been a major center of black slavery for centuries. The Portuguese and Spanish plied the coast hunting for slaves and making deals with both black and Arab slave raiders as early as [1471](#). But with the spread of Islam centuries earlier, slavery spread as well, as Islamized blacks enslaved non-Muslim blacks. While Europeans likely encouraged the growth of slavery through increasing overseas demand, decades after all white nations banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery persisted on an enormous scale within the Muslim caliphates. By the nineteenth century, it is estimated that in the northern Nigerian province of Kano alone — the most prosperous within the powerful Sokoto caliphate — as much as [half](#) of the total population were slaves.

Once Nigeria was conquered by the British and all caliphates defeated, slavery was officially abolished in 1916, and then again (in the north) in 1936. With independence in 1960, much subsequent anti-slavery legislation was passed, but, as in [Mauritania](#), most government action has proved fruitless. Decades of *jihad* on the part of the Muslim population against non-Muslim blacks inevitably caused the slave population to be on the rise once again. In fact, today, Nigerians living in the foothills of the Mandara Mountains near the border with Cameroon [fear](#) the slave raiders of Boko Haram just as much as their ancestors feared [Hamman Yaji](#), the Fulani Muslim chieftain who terrorized the Magdali region in the beginning of the last century, regularly kidnapping and selling his non-Muslim subjects into slavery.

Experiences of the Slaves

As *The Guardian* [reported](#) on October 27, 2014, women captured by Boko Haram tell stories of horrendous treatment:

Testimonies from girls who escaped their captors — along with others abducted in separate incidents who fled or were released — and gathered by Human Rights Watch have built a picture of violence and terror inside Boko Haram's camps....

The women and girls were held in eight different camps for periods ranging from two days to three months, after being taken from their homes, while working on farms, fetching water or at school. The report said that abducted women and girls held by Boko Haram ranged in age from infancy to 65.

“They and many others they saw in the camps were subjected to physical and psychological abuse; forced labour; forced participation in military operations, including carrying ammunition or luring men into ambush; forced marriage to the captors; and sexual abuse, including rape,” [Human Rights Watch's] [report](#) says. “In addition, they were made to cook, clean and perform other household chores. Others served as porters, carrying the loot stolen by the insurgents from villages and towns they had attacked.”

A 15-year-old girl who was held in a Boko Haram camp for four weeks in 2013 described being forced to marry a militant more than twice her age. “After we were declared married I was ordered to live in his cave but I always managed to avoid him. He soon began to threaten me with a knife to have sex with him, and when I still refused he brought out his gun, warning that he would kill me if I shouted. Then he began to rape me every night. He was a huge man in his mid-30s and I had never had sex before. It was very painful and I cried bitterly because I was bleeding afterwards.”

A social worker who has dealt with victims of Boko Haram violence told HRW that the rape of abducted women had been underreported because of the stigma and shame attached to sexual abuse in northern Nigeria.

A 19-year-old who was raped said: “I could not tell anyone what happened, not even my husband. I still feel so ashamed and cheated.” Another woman with her, who was also raped, “vowed never to speak of it again as she was single and believes that news of her rape would foreclose her chances of marriage.”

In fact, not only are the girls Boko Haram abducts enslaved as concubines, they are also deployed as human bombs in the *jihad* against the government in Abuja. As the Japanese national daily *Mainichi* [reported](#) on April 4, 2018, some slave-girls see becoming a suicide bomber as a merciful release from a hopeless life of sexual slavery:

“Which are you interested in? Marrying the commander or becoming a slave?”

That was the question asked of a girl, Hajja (not her real name), who was taken from her village along with six other girls to a Boko Haram camp in a forest along the Nigerian border with Cameroon in 2014 when she was 16 years old. The choice was given to her by a soldier, and there were no other options.

Thinking that it was better than being a slave, Hajja went with marriage, becoming the fourth wife of the commander. It was then she began her forced married life with the man.

...After two months at the camp, the commander was killed in a Nigerian military airstrike. Hajja was pushed to marry again, but this time she refused. Believing it to be her only chance to escape, she asked to become a suicide bomber. The bombers gathered in a house and listened to lectures about the group's ideals over and over again. When a soldier asked them if they were ready to work for Allah, the girls would fight to be the first to raise their hands. Hajja said it was like the other girls were brainwashed by the words of the soldiers into believing that if they laid down their lives for Allah, then they most certainly could go to heaven.

At the end of December 2015, Hajja and some 15 other girls headed for the city of Maiduguri, a central city in northeastern Nigeria, which was under the control of the government, with a heavy belt of explosives strapped around her hips. Right before the girls were about to carry out the terrorist attack, Hajja thought, "It's now or never!" and ran. She asked for help from a local civilian patrol officer. However, while Hajja was rescued, over 30 people died as a result of the other girls' bombs that day. The 10 girls who had been with Hajja right up until her escape were shot dead by soldiers.

..."Boko Haram is brainwashing innocent girls," said Hajja, covering her face with her hands. "They are forcing innocent girls to explode their body and destroying their lives. The girls are not suicide bombers — not perpetrators. The girls are purely victims."

In addition to their brainwashing tactics, suspicion is growing that Boko Haram is also administering drugs to the girls and others to turn them into suicide bombers. According to Aisha (pseudonym), a 23-year-old girl rescued by government forces three years ago, a ritual is carried out for those chosen to be suicide bombers. During this ceremony, girls were forced to eat a date fruit pickled in some kind of "cloudy water." After eating it, Aisha said, "They had changed. They were euphoric and began to do whatever the militants said."

Of all the Nigerian schoolgirls Boko Haram has kidnapped over the years, the most famous single case is that of [Leah Sharibu](#). Captured along with 109 of her classmates in a slave [raid](#) on her village of Dapchi on February 19, 2018, Sharibu (now 16) has been held as a slave ever since. Because many of her 104 surviving fellow students were already Muslim at the time of their

capture, or decided to accept Islam afterwards, Boko Haram [released](#) them all (minus five girls killed in the attack) once the government had paid a ransom.

Sharibu, however, has steadfastly refused to trade her Christian faith for her freedom. Therefore, her captors will not release her, even threatening to murder her in the months after her abduction. Then, in October of 2018, Boko Haram [announced](#) that she would instead be a “slave for life” in light of her refusal to submit to Islam.

Sonja Dahlmans, an expert on the persecution and enslavement of Christians in Nigeria, recently [described](#) Sharibu’s superhuman courage in the face of such horrific circumstances:

According to the witness [*sic*] testimony of the other girls, Leah is still the hostage of Boko Haram because she refused to renounce her faith in Christ. This tells us that Leah is a very strong, brave young lady with a rock-solid faith in Jesus.

For such a young girl under such circumstances not to give up your faith, staying true to what she believes in spite of the horrible consequences it has had for her, is mind-blowing to me.

In a message given via one of the other girls that was released [*sic*] in March 2018, Leah [said](#) this to her mom: “My mother, you should not be disturbed. I know it is not easy missing me, but I want to assure you that I am fine where I am. ...I am confident that, one day, I shall see your face again. If not here, then there at the bosom of our Lord Jesus Christ [*sic*].”

Notice that in this message Leah does not even talk about how she misses her mother, as any 15-year-old girl obviously would under these circumstances. No, she is comforting her mother instead. This says it all, doesn’t it, about who Leah Sharibu is.

Recently, Leah’s mother Rebecca and her translator Dr. Gloria Puldu spent several days in Washington, [begging](#) the Trump administration to [help](#) free Leah and stop the terrorist assaults on Nigerian Christians and their daughters. The Muslim-led government of Muhammadu Buhari [promised](#) to do all it could to free Sharibu, but it has done nothing since — implying tacit support for co-religionists over law-abiding Nigerian citizens.

In addition to young girls, Boko Haram is known to [abduct](#) and recruit young boys for use as child [soldiers](#) and suicide bombers.

Nigeria is also unique in that slavery extends not only to those blacks living within its borders, but also many hundreds of miles away. Nigerians, among many other populations, seeking economic opportunity in Europe are often enslaved by African or Arab traffickers in Libya while they wait to cross the Mediterranean. (See Libya [report](#).)

A January 2, 2018 BBC [report](#) interviewed Nigerians who were eventually deported back to Nigeria after being detained in Libya:

“It’s because of money,” ...said [Agen Akhere], pleading and craning his neck to get closer to the microphone. “My friend, he’s still there. His name is Samson. He’s still there, in Gharyan.”

Gharyan is a prison in the mountains about 100km (60 miles) south of Tripoli. And it is a place where all of the migrants we spoke to were taken before they made it home.

Again and again they tell the same story, of detainees horrifically abused by prison guards, starved, beaten, raped — and traded as slaves.

“They come to our caravans [cells], they pick six persons to do their dirty jobs to do farming, brick-laying work,” says Lucky Akhanene. He returned in the same group as Mr Akhere and was held in Gharyan for four months.

“They give us out to their friends. They don’t pay us. It’s just hard labour, if you’re not fast with your job you get beaten.”

Three separate people spoke about being leased out by the prison for day labour like this. Others said they were sold.

Jackson Uwumarogie and Felix Efe were arrested “on top of the sea,” off the coast of Libya and taken to Gharyan.

They said one night a prison guard came and counted out 20 men, he took them outside and blindfolded them.

Mr Uwumarogie overheard the men talking about a price — 1,000 dinars (\$735; £550). They were put into a van and taken to a farm.

Political Developments

In response to the enslavement of Nigerians in Libya, on August 29, 2018, former British prime minister Theresa May [announced](#) a plan which included emergency funding to combat slavery and provide counseling services for former slaves deported back to Nigeria. No nation, including Nigeria, has yet announced measures to free the slaves already within the country, or to stop *jihad* gangs like Boko Haram from continuing to capture new slaves.