



5.8.14

## **NIGERIA | Al-Azhar Mosque Condemns Abduction of School Girls**

Sunni Islam's foremost authority, Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque, has condemned the activities of Boko Haram as un-Islamic and demanded the immediate release of at least 180 school girls abducted by the group on April 15.

In a statement issued May 6, Al-Azhar said, "This action does not relate to the noble teachings of Islam in any way." Given it is one of the oldest Sunni institutions and is highly respected throughout the Islamic world and particularly in Africa, Al-Azhar's intervention constitutes an authoritative and significant riposte to Boko Haram's claims of divine sanction.

In a disturbing video released May 5, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau said the kidnapped girls were "slaves" and he would sell them "in the market", claiming, "It is Allah that says I should sell human beings" and "instructed us [to] soak the ground of Nigeria with Christian blood and so-called Muslims contradicting Islam."

The total number of children kidnapped April 15 from the Government Girls Secondary School (GGSS) in Chibok remains unclear. Some sources stated over 300 were abducted and around 276 are still missing. On May 3, the Borno State Police Commissioner said 276 girls were captured by the group and 53 had managed to escape. However, on May 5, the Northern States Christian and Elders Forum issued a list containing the names of 180 missing girls.

Several local sources have expressed dismay that a national tragedy may have degenerated into a point-scoring exercise due to political differences between the state and federal authorities and that this was distracting from the key issue. A perceived tardiness on the part of the Federal Government in responding to the mass abductions generated much anger at the Jonathan Administration, while many, including the head of the examination board's national office in Nigeria, have highlighted the Borno State authorities' refusal to relocate students to a safer area for the exam and the inadequate protection provided to the school, despite assurances to the contrary.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon has said, "The targeting of children and schools is against international law and cannot be justified under any circumstances." The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights warned there is no statute of limitations for grave international crimes such as slavery and sexual slavery, pointing out the sale of the girls could constitute a crime against humanity. France, the United States and the United Kingdom are providing specialist assistance, while the Twitter hashtag #BringBackOurGirls has gone viral, drawing support from a host of celebrities and occasioning protests on behalf of the missing girls in cities throughout Nigeria and across the world.

Since its initial uprisings in 2003 and 2004, Boko Haram has attacked Christian and Federal targets in a campaign that has included bombings, beheadings, razing entire communities and abductions. In 2010, it began conducting targeted assassinations of key Muslim figures who had criticized its dogma and activities. More recently, as well as continuing its efforts to cleanse areas of Borno and Yobe States of indigenous Christian populations, the group has increasingly conducted collective punishment attacks on Muslim communities where vigilante groups work with the Nigerian security services.

In separate developments, on May 5, Boko Haram gunmen abducted eight more girls aged between 12 and 15 during an attack that included house to house searches of Warabe Village in Borno State, which is located close to Sambisa Forest where the group has a stronghold. On the same day, Boko Haram militants reportedly destroyed most of Gamboru Town in Borno State, killing at least 250 people.

The Nigerian Police Force has offered a reward of around \$304,874 for anyone with credible information on the whereabouts of the girls.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes this timely and extremely significant intervention by Al-Azhar. The statement is an authoritative condemnation which should leave Boko Haram, its supporters and any residual apologists in no doubt as to the true nature of the sect's dogma and actions. The manifold, egregious and indiscriminate violations committed by Boko Haram cannot be justified on any grounds, and CSW welcomes the fact that the perpetrators of these horrors will be brought to account before an international tribunal regardless of how long this process may take. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the abducted children, whose possible plight is far too horrendous to imagine, and with their parents, who must be suffering immeasurably. For their sakes, Nigerians must unite as a matter of urgency in order to address a common and deadly enemy effectively. Fragmentation on political, religious or any other lines will only serve the interests of a malevolent sect that seeks to destroy their nation and force the Nigerian people into abiding by their warped ideology."