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## NIGERIA | Abducted Girl Returns

A minor, allegedly abducted from her home state in southern Nigeria and transported to a northern state seven months ago, was reunited with her mother March 2 at a police station in the capital city, Abuja, and flown home.

Fourteen-year-old Ese Rita Oruru from Opolo in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State was allegedly abducted Aug. 12 by Yunusa Dahiru, also known as “Yellow,” who was a regular customer at her mother’s food store. Dahiru reportedly sold his three-wheel taxi and used the proceeds to transport Ese, then aged 13, over 800 miles north to Kano State, where she was obliged to change her religion and name and was “married.”

Ese was released Feb. 29, 24 hours after the local newspaper Punch launched a #FreeEse campaign that resonated with Nigerians across social media both at home and abroad. Her family sought the assistance of the press and local NGOs after failing to secure her release on several occasions. During the first attempt on Aug. 15, her mother, Rose Oruru, travelled to Dahiru home area in Kano State, where the village chief insulted her, informing her that her daughter had converted to Islam, changed her name to Aisha, was now “married” and was in the custody of the Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi II. At the emir’s palace, Rose Oruru was insulted and assaulted on at least two occasions by irate youth, was refused direct access to her daughter despite being accompanied by police officers and was eventually told by the Kano Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to return to her home and report the situation to the Yenagoa CID.

Subsequent attempts to secure Ese’s release proved abortive until the campaign went viral. On March 1, she was flown to Abuja and reunited with her mother the following day. Dahiru is currently under arrest and likely to face trial in Yenagoa. In a briefing to the Governor of Bayelsa, her father, Charles Oruru, confirmed Ese is five months pregnant.

Under Nigerian law, anyone below the age of 18 is a minor. Additionally, Nigeria’s Child Rights Act stipulates a fine of \$2,551, a five-year prison sentence, or both for anyone involved in child

betrothal and child marriage. The Act also specifies a 10-year sentence for abducting a child from lawful custody if the abductee remains in Nigeria and a maximum life term for sexual relations with children.

In a statement issued March 1 calling for Dahiru's immediate prosecution, the NGO Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) pointed out that "attempting to marry off the girl without her parent's permission is not only a breach of common law but also a violation of the Shari'a provision on the need for the parents' approval before nikah (Islamic marriage) can be deemed valid." The group added that under Section 38 (ii) of the Constitution Ese is "deemed to be an adherent of her parents' religion until she attains maturity", and described her alleged conversion as "null and void and of no consequence whatsoever." Commenting in a tweet issued on 29 February, Senator Aisha Jummai Alhassan, Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development stated that "no culture, religion or personal conviction supersedes the laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria."

Ese's case has highlighted longstanding concerns about the abduction, forced conversion and forcible marriage of non-Muslim minors, which is particularly prevalent in rural areas of Shari'a states. Parents seeking the release of abducted daughters are generally informed they have converted, married and are in the custody of local traditional rulers. Appeals to law enforcement agencies for assistance generally prove ineffective amidst assertions by abductors that the girls are not minors.

In the wake of the publicity surrounding Ese's case, another has emerged involving 15-year-old Patience Paul, who was allegedly abducted Aug. 12 by two neighbors accompanied by the Hisba (Shari'a enforcement) group in Gidan Kukah in the Runjin Sambo area of Sokoto. Nigerian media sources report that following a complaint lodged by her brother, her abductors reportedly informed the police they had taken Patience to the palace of the Sultan of Sokoto, and the family was advised to "go away and maintain the peace." Following publicity, the Sokoto State Human Rights Commission reportedly initiated an investigation into Patience's disappearance and was asking her family to make contact "for a detailed briefing" into the allegations.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We applaud Ese Oruru's release and return, and urge Nigerian authorities to also expedite the release of Patience Paul. It is alarming that Ese's release occurred seven months after her alleged abduction was reported and that Patience Paul reportedly remains in the hands of her alleged captors months after her disappearance was reported to authorities. Moreover, allegations that police effectively told her family to forget about their loved one instead of securing her immediate release, and that Mrs. Oruru was turned away despite being accompanied by law enforcement officers, suggests an inequality before the law that is unacceptable in a multi-

religious and multi-ethnic nation. The only difference between such abductions and those committed by Boko Haram is that instead of trafficking girls to ungoverned spaces, these abductors attempt to hide behind traditional authorities who may or may not have condoned their actions. We urge the Nigerian authorities to be proactive in ensuring the swift return of all abducted minors and to take firm action against the individuals, local authorities or organizations that are complicit in such activity, that disregard rule of law or that fail to fulfil their duty. We also call for the consistent prosecution of all who are involved in such cases to the fullest extent of the law, in order to combat the seeming impunity with which children are seized from their families and subjected to abuse.”