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NIGERIA | Another Abducted Girl Rescued

Patience Paul, a minor abducted in Sokoto State in 2015, forcibly converted and “married,” was rescued and returned to her family.

The 15-year-old was 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.”

As her case garnered increasing publicity, the Sokoto State Human Rights Commission initiated an investigation into Patience’s disappearance, which uncovered she had been “married” to a man who had taken her over 497 miles away to Bauchi State. She was eventually traced to the home of a man named Malam Ibrahim, also known as the *Sarkin Baki* (king of strangers), on the evening of March 4. At least three people are now under arrest in connection with her abduction and are being held at the Sokoto Criminal Investigation Department.

Patience’s family approached the media for assistance after the case of Ese Ouru, a 14-year-old who was also abducted Aug. 12, trafficked to Kano State in the North and forced to change her name, religion and “married,” went viral on social media. She was released 24 hours later. Reportedly a promising student, Ese is now five months pregnant and her abductor, Yunusa Dahiru, is facing trial in Yenagoa.

The increasing publicity surrounding these cases has shed a light on 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,” are not minors and are in the custody of local traditional rulers or Shari’a institutions. Appeals to law enforcement agencies for assistance generally prove ineffective, with parents being advised to forget about their children. Those who persist face threats to themselves and to their remaining children and are

often obliged to flee the area.

The publicity has also galvanized campaigns for other abducted minors, causing parents who gave up hope to renew their demands for their children's freedom. On March 6, Punch, the newspaper that broke Ese's story, ran a front page calling for the Inspector General of Police to ensure the release of 13-year-old Progress Jacob, 13-year-old Blessing Goes and 16-year-old Linda Christopher, who were abducted in Bauchi State between August 2015 and January 2016, and of Lucy Ejeh, 20, who was 16 when she was abducted in Zamfara State in October 2009.

Another case making the headlines is that of 14-year-old Ifeoma Ndubuisi, who was allegedly abducted, re-named Aisha and transported from her home in Zaria to a Da-rul Islam school in Kaduna City. In addition, there are email reports of an unconfirmed case involving Blessing Nimjir Siman, who was reportedly abducted in September 2010 at the age of 14.

Under Nigerian law anyone below the age of 18 is a minor.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, "While we are heartened to hear of the return of Patience Paul, we urge the competent authorities to continue securing the release and return of all abducted children and ensuring the arrest and prosecution of all involved in such activities. This appalling phenomenon, which is fueled and sustained by impunity, will only come to an end when those involved are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law without fear or favor. We call on the Nigerian authorities to put into place effective policies to protect minors from abduction and to prevail on all states to adopt and adhere to the provisions of the Child Rights Act. We also urge state and traditional authorities to respect the role and responsibilities of parents, and to uphold their right to oversee the religious and moral education of their children, in line with African tradition, with the federal constitution, and with international legislation to which Nigeria is party.