

Speech to the House of Commons by Hon. Deepak Obhrai, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and for International Human Rights

On the kidnapping of girls by Nigerian terrorist group.

May 12, 2014

Mr. Speaker, it is with a sense of urgency that I take the floor to speak about the brutal and despicable abduction of over 250 schoolgirls in northeastern Nigeria.

I would like to extend the solidarity of the Canadian people and their government to the families of these young girls who have been kidnapped and taken from their loved ones. We are all shocked by the scale of this atrocity.

On the night of April 14-15, heavily armed Boko Haram militants dressed as Nigerian soldiers attacked the government secondary school, in the town of Chibok, northeastern Nigeria. The girls, mostly between the ages of 16 and 18, had gathered from various regional schools to take their secondary certificate examination. The terrorists murdered the guards, burned the village, and left with over 300 young girls in a convoy of trucks. The girls were separated into small groups and dispersed to terrorist strongholds in northern Nigeria. The dispersal of the girls over a large area would challenge any government in mounting a successful rescue operation.

During the kidnapping process, about 50 girls managed to escape, but the rest remain captive. Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, says that he will sell them into marriage and slavery. The kidnappings have not stopped there, and a further 11 girls were kidnapped, on May 6, from the town of Gwoza, also in northeastern Nigeria.

Boko Haram started as an extremist but largely non-violent Islamist group in the early 2000s. In 2010, the group started attacking police, other security forces, and government officials, as a response to a strong government crackdown against the group in 2009, which left its leader and hundreds of its members dead. Since 2010, the violent attacks have continued to escalate. The group has succeeded in capturing weapons from Nigerian forces, to such an extent that the group is now well armed, including with armoured vehicles.

More recently, Boko Haram has adopted a new tactic of going into villages and conducting large-scale massacres. This was most gruesomely demonstrated by its attack on the town of Gamboru Ngala, which killed over 300 civilians, many of them burned to death when Boko Haram set fire to houses in which civilians had taken refuge from the slaughter. This brings Boko Haram's death tally for the year to over 1,000 Nigerians.

According to Africa's Human Rights Watch, with regard to Boko Haram's activities, "The killing and mutilation of ordinary Nigerians, the abduction and rape of women and girls, and the use of children for fighting are horrifying human rights violations".

The Nigerian government has been combatting this revisionist group for several years. Nigerian President Jonathan established a state of emergency, in May 2013, in the three northeastern provinces where Boko Haram is most active.

However, as military operations have been ramped up, the Nigerian military has been accused by credible sources of major human rights violations, which have resulted in the

deaths of a large number of civilians and alienated many others from the government cause. These accusations are a continuing challenge for Nigeria, and we call upon all, including Nigerian security forces, to respect international norms for human rights.

Boko Haram's attacks on civilian population targets are increasing, and it is important that the government of Nigeria receives international support to counter this terrorism. In December 2013, the Canadian government labelled Boko Haram as a terrorist organization.

Nigeria, as we know, faces many challenges. Its huge population, of over 170 million, amounts to one half of the population of West Africa. Its economy is listed by the IMF as the second largest in Africa, after South Africa. Nigeria is also a strong international player and was elected, for the fifth time, to a two-year seat on the UN Security Council, starting in January of this year. It has also contributed troops in support of several UN and African Union peace forces.

However, within the country, there remains inequality, poverty, corruption, failure to protect, and excessive use of force, attacks on religious freedom, violence against women, and early and forced marriages.

Nigeria's neighbours, particularly those bordering on the northeast part of the country, are watching this growing security problem with concern, particularly as their borders are porous. Nigeria's international partners are also watching the security developments with concern. Quite simply, a Nigeria with a major domestic security problem is a problem for all of us.

Canada joins its allies in offering assistance to the Nigerian government and its people at this time of need. Our American, British, and French allies are sending experts and search teams to assist the Nigerian security forces in locating and eventually returning the girls. Other countries, including China and Israel, have made offers of assistance.

Others who will speak after me will elaborate further on what Canada has been doing over the years to support the people of Nigeria and those in West Africa, including efforts in addressing profound challenges, which have been crystallized by the abduction of these girls. Canada has made it a priority to end child, early, and forced marriages, and while the problem is widespread around the world, some projects have taken place in Nigeria. Canada remains committed to supporting Nigeria's most wonderful people, particularly in the area of maternal, newborn, and child health. My colleague from the development side of DFATD will expand on this.

The Government of Canada has offered assistance to the government of Nigeria in providing tools aimed at finding the abducted girls and bringing them home. This measure is in addition to a series of projects funded by the Canadian government and designed to support the Nigerian government's efforts to stamp out terrorism. Through the Global Counterterrorism Forum, with its inclusive membership and action-oriented mandate, we are helping in the fight against those who resort to terror to undermine freedom and peace in all corners of the world. At the same time, we are fostering important ties between Canada's law enforcement agencies and military forces with their counterparts.

Since 2010, Canada's counterterrorism capacity-building program has committed \$28.4 million in concrete programming initiatives in the Sahel that are focused on training and equipment for law enforcement, military, and intelligence bodies. Specifically, Canada's

global partnership program is funding two active biological security projects in Nigeria, to secure potentially lethal pathogens kept for research and medical purposes against misuse.

In addition to counterterrorism capacity, Canada is active in building bridges among Nigeria civilians to reduce tensions and violence. The Office of Religious Freedom, of DFATD, funds a project in Nigeria of close to \$733,000 Canadian, with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, to promote intercommunity dialogue and conflict mediation in the central part of the country. While not directly linked to Boko Haram, it will develop local mediation capacity and create dialogue opportunities between communities and religious leaders.

In short, we are standing steadfast with the people of Nigeria and with our allies to fight terrorism.