

The Pornography of Moral Outrage: The Chibok Girls and Nigeria's Boko Haram

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If the militant group Boko Haram can be deemed a virus, then it has rich material to feed off. The cells of its enrichment remain those complicit in its achievements within Nigeria and beyond. Even as there remains a continued fascination with the girls kidnapped by the group six months ago from the village of Chibok (of whom over 200 remain in captivity), the question of Nigerian capabilities to rescue them remains at the forefront of discussions.

Even individuals like Matt Schiavenza would note that another, more traditionally described virus – that of Ebola – had been combated with supreme effectiveness. “For Nigeria’s embattled government, October 20 is a date worth circling on the calendar: That day will mark 42 days since Nigeria’s last confirmed Ebola case, which, at twice the 21-day incubation period, will allow the country to declare itself free of a disease that has ravaged its West African neighbours.”[1]

Adotei Akwei, managing director of Amnesty International USA, sees the issue of the girls as “symbolic”. “They’re part of a larger human rights catastrophe, a bad situation in Nigeria.”[2] While Boko Haram fulfils the role as celluloid gangster and psychic monster, it does not detract from the brutalities of the Nigerian military, which is no angel in this fight. “There’s no transparency, no accountability whatsoever.”

The group itself operates in three of the country’s north-eastern provinces, all controlled by the opposition All People’s Congress. The Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan, doesn’t tend to hold sway there, areas which have proven impregnable to the advances of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). While Boko Haram is not a palatable option, the soil it thrives in has been one of neglect from the more affluent, mainly Christian South.

The APC has proven aggressive with its suggestions that Goodluck Jonathan’s PDP is, in fact, behind the activities of Boko Haram.[3] Much of this involves the usual name calling and allegations, but they serve to show that Boko Haram, the virus, is very much established, with a distinct lack of antibodies to combat it.

National Chairman of the APC, Chief John Oyegun was left in no doubt. He pointed the finger at a former governor of Borno State as a mole, the PDP’s grand connection with Boko Haram. Then came grand assertions about having to involve the International Criminal Court in targeting crimes committed by the militants. “There is no doubt that Boko Haram has committed crimes against humanity in its scorched earth campaign against unarmed citizens, and the most appropriate body to investigate and try the sect’s sponsors is the ICC.”

Boko Haram also has bases of operation in Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Representatives of

various countries have had to busy themselves with a campaign of dissuasion – that they are not, in fact, connected to the group. Cameroon’s minister for communication, Issa Tchiroma Bakary, held a press conference in September to state that exact point. Accordingly, it was argued that such attacks were being carried out by “foreign assailants who after penetrating the country to cause havoc, immediately flee to the other side of the borders.”[4]

A long dance of sorts between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram has taken place, a curious ritual that suggests a blend of feigned courtship and scorn. Extravagant claims of rescue were already being suggested by the Nigerian authorities the day after the girls were abducted. In May, the authorities professed to knowing the whereabouts of the abductees, but refused to deploy force in any rescue attempt. In Air Chief Marshal Alex Badeh’s words, “Nobody should say Nigerian military does not know what it is doing: we can’t kill our girls in the name of trying to get them back.”[5] To disprove Badeh’s point, the Nigerian military proceeded to kill a few of its own troops in air strikes aimed at Boko Haram.

Over time, the girls themselves became idealised in gushes of sentimentality, a focal point of moral outrage that could be blown up without considering the enormity of the Nigerian problem. The social media campaign “Bring back our Girls” suggested the absurdity of responding the problem, with developing countries hitting the rooftops with calls of outrage just as wilful ignorance existed of countless other cases of violent deaths. Had the children been “white European girls, countries would do something.”[6]

Such hash-tag activism rapidly degenerated into its own celebrity debauch, with witless rapper Chris Brown feeding his moral core by tweeting a picture featuring a girl, Jenabu Balde, from Guinea Bissau. Never mind that she wasn’t one of the kidnapped girls, or that the photo was taken in 2000 by Ami Vitale, or that she was from another country altogether – it was an African image of vulnerability, with photo shopped tears to boot. This was the pornography of moral outrage. In the words of Naunihal Singh, writing in *The New Yorker* (Jul 10), “A viral hashtag, it seems, is a fever that breaks quickly.”

The latest chapter in this tale of woe lie in reports of another round of discussions between the usual participants – Boko Haram and the Nigerian military – this time mediated by Chad. Again, the monumentally inept Badeh has featured, announcing a truce with the group, who, as yet, has not corroborated his claim. Nigerian government spokesman Mike Omeri also suggests that, “We are inching closer to release of all groups in captivity, including the Chibok girls.” Omeri’s use of the term “inching” is probably truer than most, and we are bound to see this macabre dance continue.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/why-nigeria-stopped-ebola-but-not-boko-haram/381442/>

[2] <http://time.com/3510365/nigeria-kidnapped-girls/>

[3] <http://www.nguardiannews.com/news/national-news/177532-apc-alleges-pdp-members-complicity-in-boko-haram-sponsorship>

[4] http://www.crtv.cm/cont/nouvelles/nouvelles_sola_fr.php?idField=13741&table=-nouvelles&sub=art

[5] <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/26/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapped-girls/>

[6] <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-bring-back-our-girls-campaign-is-working--boko-haram-should-be-scared-of-a-hashtag-9360830.html>

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