

Washington Sends Military Personnel to Nigeria

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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The Pentagon announced Wednesday that it is dispatching a team of US military advisers to Nigeria to aid the government of President Goodluck Jonathan in rescuing over 200 schoolgirls kidnapped by the Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram, which has threatened to sell them into slavery.

British officials told the media that the UK is prepared to send SAS Special Forces units and intelligence-gathering aircraft to the West African country if asked for assistance.

With 174 million people, Nigeria is Africa's largest country and boasts the largest gross domestic product (GDP) on the continent. It is also Africa's largest oil producer, ranking eighth in the world in terms of petroleum exports and accounting for 5 percent of US foreign oil imports. It also ranks number four in terms of liquefied natural gas exports.

The deployment of military advisers—who are to be accompanied by FBI and CIA agents and other US officials—was worked out Tuesday in a discussion between President Barack Obama and President Jonathan. It marks a major advance in the steadily escalating military intervention of Washington and its allies throughout the region.

There have been calls from members of Congress for a more aggressive US intervention, including from Senator Susan Collins (Republican of Maine), who demanded that US Special Forces troops be sent to rescue the girls.

Obama, in an interview with ABC News, suggested that the US intervention against Boko Haram would expand, declaring that “this may be the event that helps to mobilize the entire international community to finally do something against this horrendous organization that perpetrated such a terrible crime.”

To promote such an escalation, the US administration and the corporate media have mounted a major campaign around the kidnapped girls, seeking to exploit the natural indignation and horror over their fate.

There is an unmistakable similarity between this campaign, with its use of social media around the hash tag #BringOurGirlsBack, and the one organized in 2011 around the demand for the capture of Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, which was responsible for abducting hundreds of children across Central Africa.

That campaign, which attracted the support of everyone from Christian fundamentalists to “humanitarian” imperialists like Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, has resulted in the deployment of hundreds of US special operations troops in Uganda and neighboring countries, which were reinforced and backed up last March by advanced CV-22 Osprey

warplanes, capable of vertical takeoffs and landings. After two-and-a-half years of US military operations, Kony remains at large.

What is inevitably glossed over in such moral appeals for imperialist intervention is why one or another atrocity has been selected for the full-bore media propaganda treatment and a military response, and what is the social and political context in which such horrific acts take place.

Washington, for example, has been able to turn its back on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where some 5 million people have been slaughtered, in large measure as a result of the predatory interventions there by one of Washington's closest allies on the continent, the Rwandan regime of President Paul Kagame.

The Nigerian reaction to the kidnapping of the schoolgirls was tepid, to put it mildly. President Jonathan waited for three weeks before making a significant public statement on the girls' fate. In the course of it, he placed blame on the girls' parents for failing to provide enough information about their identities. The president's wife, Patience Jonathan, first declared her support for rallies in support of the girls, but then questioned whether the entire affair was a fabrication aimed at undercutting her husband's administration and ordered the arrest of protest leaders.

The government's initial reaction to the kidnapping was symptomatic of its attitude toward the country's predominantly Muslim north, Nigeria's most impoverished region. With a majority Muslim population—as opposed to the predominantly Christian south, the oil-producing region where Jonathan is from—it has been subjected to increasing marginalization and repression since the Boko Haram insurgency began five years ago.

The government has sought to manipulate regional, religious and ethnic divides in the country in order to divert mass social unrest and defend the monopoly of wealth and power exercised by a narrow wealthy layer.

Despite the rapid growth of the country's economy due to energy exports—GDP nearly doubled from \$263 billion in 2012 to \$510 billion in 2013—the majority of the population is worse off than before independence in 1960. Social inequality is as stark in Nigeria as anywhere on the planet. While the looting of the country's oil earnings has created some 20 billionaires, 99.5 million people, or over 60 percent of the Nigerian people, subsist in absolute poverty, with an income of less than a dollar per day.

Fighting in the north, which has been placed under a state of emergency since last year, has claimed the lives of over 6,000 Nigerians since it began in 2009 and over 1,500 just since the beginning of this year. The majority of the victims are civilians who have lost their lives both to Boko Haram terrorist attacks and brutal repression directed against the population by Nigerian security forces.

The US military has already involved itself in the bloody operations of Nigerian government forces, providing some \$20 million in security assistance and intelligence from a drone base in nearby Niger. Last November, the Obama administration formally declared Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization, clearing the way for US military action against it.

The drive to escalate the US intervention in Nigeria, using the kidnapping of the schoolgirls as a pretext, is part of a steadily increasing US military buildup on the African continent. The

Pentagon is currently involved in a \$750 million expansion of the main AFRICOM (African Command) base in Djibouti, where thousands of US troops are stationed. It has set up forward operating bases scattered across the continent and has carried out military activities in at least 18 African countries.

The most notorious US military intervention in Africa—also carried out in the name of a humanitarian “responsibility to protect”—was the US-NATO war in Libya, which succeeded in toppling the Gaddafi regime and plunging the country into armed chaos. It has destabilized the entire region, with some analysts suggesting that Boko Haram has itself been strengthened by Islamists spilling over from the fighting that erupted in Mali following the Libyan war.

US military “advisers” are directing operations by African troops across the continent. This includes Ugandan, Ethiopian and Kenyan forces fighting against Islamist Al Shabab in Somalia, and Ugandan troops fighting to suppress rebel factions in South Sudan. And the US Air Force recently airlifted Burundian and Rwandan soldiers to the Central African Republic.

US operations have been supplemented by those of its NATO ally, France, which has recently intervened in both Mali and the Central African Republic.

In congressional testimony last March, AFRICOM Commander Gen. David Rodriguez explained that the US intervention was largely about oil and other mineral resources. He noted that “Africa’s increasing importance to allies and emerging powers, including China, India and Brazil, provides opportunities to reinforce US security objectives in other regions through our engagement on the continent.”

In other words, if the US can gain military control over the flow of strategic resources from Africa, it can exert greater pressure on other powers, particularly China, which is poised to supplant Europe as the continent’s number one trading partner and is engaged in massive investment in infrastructure. Fully one third of China’s oil imports now flow from Africa.

While the US was preparing to send military personnel to Nigeria, China’s premier, Li Keqiang, was already there, scheduled as the keynote speaker at this week’s World Economic Forum on Africa conference being held in the capital of Abuja. He brought with him a deal for a \$13.1 billion upgrade of the country’s rail system and also offered China’s aid in finding the kidnapped schoolgirls.

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Articles by: [Bill Van Auken](#)

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