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Preliminary Report

Mass Abductions in Kankara, Katsina State, Nigeria

11 December 2020

Incident

On Friday, 11th December, 2020, gunmen on motorcycles estimated to be over 100 stormed an all-male Government Science School in *Kankara, Katsina State* and abducted more than 300 students. The victims were captured, split into groups and taken away. The gunmen engaged security forces that responded to the attack in a fierce gun battle for several hours before retreating. Several other students flee to nearby bushes for safety.

Following the attack, a joint rescue operation was launched on Saturday 12th December by the Nigerian police, air force and army in an attempt to locate and rescue the victims. However, on Monday, 14th December, the leader of Boko Haram, *Abubakar Shakau*, claimed responsibility for the incident without elaborating. In a voice message released by the terror group, its leader noted, *"I am Abubakar Shekau and our brothers are behind the kidnapping in Katsina."*



Analysis

The attack on the school that led to the kidnapping of the over 300 male students, was initially blamed on armed bandits who are active in the Northwest region where kidnappings for ransom are common. The scale of such kidnapping marks the first of its kind in Northwest Nigeria and the claim of responsibility by Boko Haram marks a major turning point in the advance of the terrorist group in the restive region.

While Boko Haram and a splinter group the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), have been waging an insurgency in Northeast Nigeria and other parts of the Lake Chad Basin, their presence in the Northwest was marginal. Concerns only begun to grow after fighters claiming to be in the Northwest released a propaganda video in early 2020, pledging

allegiance to Abubakar Shekau. The claim by Boko Haram has therefore confirmed fears of the group's expansion of its operations to the Northwest region of the country.

Meanwhile, the incident has also brought back memories of the 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from a Government school in *Chibok, Borno state*, about 100 of whom are still missing. The Northwest region had been challenged by armed bandits who engaged mostly in attacks on farming communities and cattle rustling. They are also involved in kidnapping for ransom. Towns close to forests stretching across Northwest Nigeria and into Niger have been the most vulnerable to these attacks. Data from Amnesty International indicates that 1,126 people were killed by bandits in Nigeria between January and June 2020. This exceeds the 986 people killed by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the country for the same period collated by the ACSRT.

While there is doubt over Boko Haram's direct involvement in the attack due to the lack of details in Shekau's statement and reports that officials in Katsina state have already received ransom demands from a group of bandits, the confirmation of the direct involvement of the terrorist group will significantly change the dynamics of the terrorism landscape in Nigeria and the larger region. The expansion of Boko Haram's terrorist activities in the Northwestern region comprising *Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi, Sokoto, Jigawa and Zamfara states*, if confirmed, will be in line with the Boko Haram's objective of restoring the *Sokoto Empire* and will exacerbate the already volatile insecurity situation in the area that is bedeviled by banditry and inter-communal clashes.

Additionally, if it is determined that it is the doing of Boko Haram, it might indicate a new form of mass forced recruitment by the group, or their possible use as human shields in CT operations against them. In Both scenarios, this would indicate that Boko Haram has been considerably impacted by the CT operations against it.

The latest attack taking place in President Muhammadu Buhari's home state will put additional pressure on authorities to find the abductees for their parents who feel the Government is not doing enough to curb violence and lawlessness.

Conclusion

The expansion of terrorist attacks by Boko Haram into the Northwest will put a further strain on the already overstretched security services that are battling the insurgency in the Northeast and banditry in the Northwest. This mixture of the two criminal activities – terrorism and banditry - will make it even more difficult for the security services to distinguish who is involved in what activity. It is therefore very crucial for the Nigerian authorities to conduct a thorough investigation to establish the level of Boko Haram's direct involvement in the attack and to take all measures to ensure that the group does not establish a foothold in the region.