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Kidnapping for Ransom: Nigeria's Flourishing Industry, but Worst Nightmare

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Abstract
Kidnapping for ransom is a worldwide phenomenon and Nigeria is not an exception. The problem, now endemic, is a phenomenal substitute for robbery, and one of Nigeria's biggest challenges. Nigeria today tops the global scale of kidnapping for ransom cases, with 2,371 incidents recorded in the initial six months of 2021. The victims include foreign workers, school children, traditional rulers, clergymen, politicians, and ordinary Nigerians. Apart from the physical, psychological and hysterical impact on victims, it has adversely impacted the economy. The paper examines factors behind the upsurge and the government's inability to arrest the drift. It has been established that crime is fuelled by a plethora of economic, social, political, and security-related factors, principally unemployment, poverty, and the availability of small arms. Given the current spate of kidnapping and the helplessness of the government, Nigeria is at a crossroads, facing a monster that can consume it anytime. It is recommended that the government should adopt policies to end official corruption, alleviate poverty and fight unemployment. It should also create a responsible and well-motivated security apparatus to tackle kidnapping, in addition to stiff punishment to serve as deterrence.
Keywords: Nigeria; Kidnapping for ransom; Poverty; Unemployment; Corruption.

1. Introduction

Kidnapping is a bedrock crime in Nigeria perpetrated by criminal groups and armed bandits (Okoli, 2019). Human traffickers engage in kidnapping for commercial purposes. Terrorists kidnap people to pursue their goal of inflicting terror and fear on their target societies. People are also kidnapped for rape and rituals; and others for the sole aim of demanding ransoms. The history of kidnapping is as old as humanity (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017). Once common in Latin America, it has become a global phenomenon (Kuo, 2013). The reasons and motivations for kidnapping vary in different countries, though the dominant factors are economic and political.

An endemic problem in Nigeria, with tens of people being abducted every day across the country (Abdulkabir, 2017), kidnapping is a pitfall to national security and "the most pervasive and intractable violent crime in the country" (Allafrica, 2019; Okoli, 2019). A consultancy firm, Control Risks, ranks Nigeria first in kidnapping in Africa (Daily Trust, 2020). The country has thus acquired notoriety as one of the leading countries, where people are kidnapped for ransom (Okoli, 2019). The alarming rate of abduction for ransom needs far more immediate attention than the activities of Boko Haram (Campbell, 2020). This paper interrogates the intractable and endemic nature of crime in Nigeria and the apparent helplessness of the political and security establishment. It inquires into the possibility of curbing a menace that has paraded itself as a social malady and is well taking the nation into the abyss.

2. Abductions for Ransom in Nigeria: A Monster from the Niger Delta

Kidnapping is the coercive act of seizure and wrongful confinement of a person (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017; Inyang and Abraham, 2013). It is also the seizure of an individual or a group of individuals, for various reasons, by force or fraud (Ekechukwu and Osaat, 2021; Fage and Alabi, 2017). The reasons or motivations may be political or economic. In most cases, however, the act may be perpetrated primarily to extract ransom (Bello and Jamilu, 2017). In this paper, kidnapping refers to "the unlawful detention of a person through the use of force, threats, fraud or enticement" to get financial gains (Okoli, 2019). The perpetrators seek economic or material benefit in return for the freedom of the hostage (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017; Okoli, 2019; Uzorma and Nwanegbo-Ben, 2014).

Kidnapping is one of Nigeria's biggest security challenges that have attracted global attention and interest (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017; Ngwama, 2014). The plague is traceable to the Niger Delta militants and their agitations (Albert *et al.*, 2020; Mohammed, 2016). In the recent past, some groups in the Niger Delta had used the kidnapping of foreign oil workers to protest against the environmental damage caused by oil spills and the oil industry, as well

as demand for more local ownership of the extraction of natural resources (Hazen and Horner, 2007; Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017).

Hostage-taking for ransom soon became a business venture for jobless youths, as they started abducting foreigners, with promises of their safe release if the ransom was paid (Simpson, 2009). The number of foreigners abducted for ransom in the region in 2009 was above 60 (Simpson, 2009). Militants soon made the area the hub of abductions for ransom, generating millions of naira from the government and oil companies. Kidnapping had been dominant in the South-South and South-East regions, becoming a recurring decimal since the 1990s (Hazen and Horner, 2007). From the Niger Delta, other parts of Nigeria became unsafe for foreign workers, with a sizeable number of them abducted every year for ransom (Daily Trust, 2020). Recently, kidnapping has spread to all the states of the federation; and victims now cut across all strata of society (Abdulkabir, 2017).

3. Magnitude of the Problem

Kidnapping for ransom is the order of the day in Nigeria and now makes frequent national and international headlines (Ibekwe and Alabi, 2021). At the inception of kidnapping as a commercial enterprise in the Niger Delta, foreign oil workers were the main victims (Albert *et al.*, 2020). Now the list of victims has widened tremendously to include wealthy Nigerians, politicians, government officials, celebrities or their relatives, businessmen, and employees of big companies (Okoli, 2019). Other categories of victims are religious leaders, doctors, teachers, school children, traditional rulers or their family members, and ordinary Nigerians (Abdulkabir, 2017). Even poor villagers are abducted from their farms and forced to pay for their freedom (Campbell, 2020).

The flurry is largely driven by new entrants into the venture, among them, insurgents, armed herders, organized gangs, bandits, and armed individuals. The statistics of kidnap cases in Nigeria over the years have been alarming (Ezemenaka, 2018). The UN Office on Drugs and Crime provides a grim picture of kidnapping in Nigeria between 2007 and 2012: 277 in 2007; 309 in 2008; 703 in 2009; 738 in 2010; 600 in 2012 (Canada Information and Refuge Board of Canada, 2014). Kidnapping witnessed an upsurge following the appearance of insurgency in northeast Nigeria. Boko Haram kidnapped people, mainly women, and girls, and used them as a bargaining chip. Millions of dollars were generated by the group, which they used in funding their operations (Campbell, 2014). The entry of armed herders and bandits has escalated the problem.

Nigeria's sacred traditional institution has not been spared the ordeal of abduction for ransom. The in-law of President Muhamadu Buhari, who is also a traditional ruler in Daura, the President's hometown, was kidnapped in May 2019, and freed after two months (Omilana, 2019). The Emir of Kajuru, Kaduna State, and some of his relatives and aides were kidnapped at his palace (Wuyo, 2021). The Emir of Bungudu, Zamfara State, was kidnapped along the Kaduna-Abuja road (Babangida, 2021). Prominent businessmen have been taken hostage and only regained their freedom after payment of millions of naira (Oyelere, 2021). A Kano-based businessman paid N15 million to secure his freedom (Ashaolu, 2020). Another Kano-based businessman paid N80 million for his release (Muhammed, 2010). However, another businessman was not as lucky as he died in captivity after a ransom payment of N5 million (Maishanu, 2021).

In the initial six months of 2021, SBM Intelligence deduces that 2, 371 people were abducted for ransom all over Nigeria; and the demand made by them is put at US$24.33 million (Reuters, 2021). Most of the victims were schoolchildren. The second half of 2021 is also recording daily incidents of abduction across the nation, with demands of varying sums from the perpetrators. On 18 August, two suspects were arrested in Lagos for kidnapping a neighbor, an eight-year-old boy, and demanding a ransom of N2.5 million. The minor spent six days in captivity before he was rescued (Akomolafe, 2021). The number of abductions may be higher than the official figures because many are not reported to keep the police out. In most cases, the kidnappers warn that involvement of the police could lead to fatality, preferring to negotiate directly with relatives or representatives of the victims (Daily Trust, 2020).

A new and extremely dangerous trend soon emerged, namely, the abduction of schoolchildren for ransom (Adeniran and Castradori, 2021). This trend would invite public attention and government participation, as well as generate substantial ransom payments (Orjinmo, 2021). More than 1000 students were abducted in northern Nigeria in a few months (BBC, 2021). Parents and school administrators have sold possessions to pay the ransom. Bandits attacked Government Science Secondary School Kankara, Katsina State on 13 December 2020 and seized 344 boys. The boys ended up in Rugu forest in Zamfara State, where they were eventually released (Aljazeera, 2020). Just a few days after gunmen released more than 300 schoolboys, more than 80 students and five teachers were kidnapped when bandits attacked the Federal Government College in Kebbi State (CBS News, 2021; Obiezu, 2020). They demanded a million naira for each of the kidnapped students (Reuters, 2021)

On 26 February 2021, more than 279 students of Government Girls Secondary School in Jangebe, Zamfara State were abducted, and later freed on 2 March 2021 (Shehu, 2021). Gunmen seized 39 students of the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization, Kaduna on 11 March 2021 (Iroanusi, 2021). They were held in the forest for two months before freeing 29, after payment of ransom. Armed bandits kidnapped 140 students of Bethel Baptist School, Kaduna (BBC, 2021; Obiezu, 2021); and demanded 500,000 Naira for each student. On 25 July, they freed 28 of their captives (Associated Press, 2021). They also kidnapped 27 students and 15 officials in Kagara, Niger State (Oluwafemi, 2021).

In May 2021, gunmen kidnapped 136 students from Salihu Tanko Islamiya School in Regina, Niger State, and demanded N100 million for their release (BBC, 2021); and freed them in batches, according to how payments are made. On 27 August, 91 of the students were released; while one of them, a six-year-old, died in captivity (Premium Times, 2021b; UNICEF, 2021). The bandits allegedly received N70 million before their release. On 1 September 2021, bandits invaded Kaya Day Secondary School, Zamfara, during lectures in the morning and made away with 73

students including teachers to an unknown destination (Obinna, 2021; Punch, 2021). In response, the state government shut down all schools in the state.

Kidnapping for ransom flourished in Nigeria in 2022. In some parts of the northwest, the problem had become endemic, with thousands of people randomly abducted from villages, farms, and many other locations (Reuters, 2022). In a report issued by SBM Intelligence titled 'The Economics of Nigeria's Kidnap Industry,' between July 2021 and June 2022, not less than 500 cases of kidnapping occurred (Sanni, 2022), The victims numbering 3,420 paid N650 million to secure their freedom (Sanni, 2022). In the remaining half of 2022, numerous incidents of mass kidnapping made the situation chaotic (Collins, 2022). This involved abduction of passengers almost on daily basis (Okoli *et al.*, 2022), including those traveling with armed police escorts (Africanews, 2022).

4. Methods of Operation

Kidnappers employ a variety of methods in carrying out their operations, which oftentimes involve careful planning before victims are picked up (Daily Trust, 2020). Kidnappers disguise themselves; appear in misleading attire; dress like security operatives; and use fake identity cards to persuade or threaten their victims to go with them (Okengwu, 2011). They may wear a mask and use lethal force to scare away people before snatching their victims. Others are seized randomly on the highways, farmlands, or just anywhere they are found (Emanemua and Akinlosotu, 2016). The Abuja – Kaduna highway is a hotbed for kidnapping for ransom, as bandits set up false roadblocks and checkpoints and seize travelers (Alabi, 2021; Lere, 2021). From a nearby bush, they launch attacks on motorists, making away with the passengers to a nearby forest (Neil Munshi). The incessant abduction of travelers led to protests by communities located along the highways (Oluwafemi, 2021). Mass abductions are carried out by bandits on motorbikes, shooting sporadically to scare away people before transporting their prey into the forest (Daily Trust, 2021).

Kidnapping for ransom is measured as the easiest profit-making venture, to the extent that some people stage their kidnap (Omilana, 2019). Self-kidnapping or fake kidnap involved a pastor, who arranged his kidnap in Kaduna in January 2020 for the ransom of N5 million to be paid by family members (Vanguard, 2020). In 2021, several persons have been arrested for staging self-kidnap for ransom. In an incident, a pastor engineered a fake kidnap for N10 million from his family and sympathizers (Utulu, 2021). A 16-year-old girl was arrested for self-kidnapping and demanding N500 thousand from her family (Olafusi, 2021). The Niger State police command arrested a man and his wife for self-kidnapping (Premium Times, 2021a).

5. Why Kidnapping Industry Thrives in Nigeria

Abduction for ransom is a flourishing industry in a fragile economy, propelled by population explosion, monumental unemployment, and banditry (Munshi, 2021). Economic gains, however, remain the main incentive for crime (Gupta, 2021). It is a multi-million dollar industry, with a multiplicity of players. From 2011 to April 2021, about $18.34 million had been paid to kidnappers to procure freedom for victims of abduction (Campbell, 2020; Oloyede, 2020). Many people take to kidnapping for financial gain and economic benefit (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017; Mbah, 2017). It is more profitable to abduct an individual than a secure a blue-collar job, work on the farm or engage in petty trading. It is quite profitable and cost-effective and represents a good substitute for armed robbery (Abdulkabir, 2017; Inyang and Abraham, 2013). The Nigerian economy has been struggling, in and out of recession, making kidnapping an easy source of income (Gupta, 2021). The impact of Covid-19 and the plunge in oil prices have exacerbated poverty and unemployment and created fertile grounds for jobless graduates as well as idle youths to embrace the lucrative industry (Campbell, 2020).

Unemployment is a major factor when discussing abduction for ransom in Nigeria (Inyang and Abraham, 2013). Every year, thousands of Nigerian youths graduate from tertiary institutions without finding jobs. They come to join the teeming population of unemployed Nigerians who are already frustrated by the lack of jobs in the country. The frustration of these unemployed persons lures them into heinous acts such as the abduction of wealthy people for ransom. The unemployment factor in Nigeria, with its alarmingly increasing rate, is among the country's top five headaches. It breeds in young Nigerians negative thoughts and ideas on how to make fast money, through criminal and unethical means (Okoro, 2010).

Poverty remains one of the primary factors that propel young Nigerians into Kidnapping for profit. Most people lack the basic requirements to live a rational life. This demoralizes the less privileged and lures them into criminality (Okwuagbala, 2019; Suleiman, 2016). A country richly endowed with enormous oil and gas reserves, Nigeria has been described as the poverty capital of the world (Borgen Magazine, 2020), overtaking India in extreme poverty (Adebayo, 2018); and the majority of `its citizens living below the poverty line.

Other socio-economic elements accountable for the current upsurge in kidnapping include parental neglect; lack of proper counseling; poor skill acquisition; and drop-out-of-school syndrome. Moral decadence and a downward trend in the value system are largely to blame for youth delinquencies (Inyang and Abraham, 2013). Nigerian society is inundated with an infatuation for wealth and materialism, without corresponding engagement in economic activity or productive ventures. The get-rich-quick syndrome has pushed many Nigerians into dubious means of livelihood, including internet fraud and obtaining by pretenses popularly known as '419'. Neglect by the government and politicians has created an atmosphere of hatred for them in the minds of citizens, ultimately resulting in anger, agitation, and violent crimes against the state by some individuals and groups (Nwagboso, 2012).

6. The Consequences and Costs

The business of abduction for profit has had dire consequences for the nation and the people (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017). The cost to the nation has been enormous in terms of human, material, and economic losses. Hundreds of lives have been lost in the process of abductions and ransom payments (Okoli, 2019). Some kidnapped victims died in detention or during the rescue (Daily Trust, 2020). On several occasions, the victims are killed even after the ransom had been paid (Muvunyi, 2021). Some of those who escaped death have been injured. Members of the security establishment suffered casualties during the rescue mission.

The financial cost is humongous, as various sums have been paid to kidnappers by way of ransom. This short-term and long-term leads to declined economic productivity and unemployment. It acts as a threat to the federal government's recent successes in wooing investors into the country (Ngwama, 2014). The menace of Kidnapping threatens the very foundation of the Nigerian economy. Not only does it have a negative impact on the economy, but it also constitutes a serious threat to the Nigerian labor market which is already fractured. Businesses and investors are being discouraged by the incidence of kidnapping in Nigeria, and this has created an unhealthy investment environment in the country.

The adverse and entirely regrettable consequence of kidnapping is that it does not only affect the psychology of the victims but also spreads fear among the populace (Mbah, 2017). Victims suffer from psychological trauma and stress (Ibrahim and Muktar, 2017). Family members and friends also experience the trauma (Okoli, 2019). Traveling on most highways is scary and dangerous, as the passengers can never be sure of reaching their destinations. On 19 October 2021, marauding bandits kidnapped at least 30 passengers traveling through Niger State (Ahmad, 2021), and took them to Kundu forest in the Rafi Local Government Area of the state (Dennis, 2021).

Kidnappings have had a negative impact on education in Nigeria. Female children are mostly affected by the frequent attack on schools. Apart from the mental and psychological stress inflicted on the girls, parents are afraid to return their daughters to school (Chukwu, 2021). This has aggravated the issue of scanty enlistment of girls in schools in the north (Abayomi, 2018; Donald, 2021). Several schools have been closed in northern Nigeria due to abductions. Under pressure from parents and members of the public, the governors of the northern states decided to shut down schools pending improvement in the security situation in the area (Abiodun, 2021). The government of Kaduna State shut down 13 schools, following the kidnap of 140 students at Baptist High School (Obiezu, 2021). The Governor of Zamfara ordered the indefinite closure of all schools in the state after the abduction of 73 students from a school (Sahara Reporters, 2021). The incessant closure of schools further compounds the educational problem of the region, being host to the highest number of out-of-school children in Nigeria (Adeniran and Castradori, 2021; Iwara, 2021). It is for this reason that the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) petitioned the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 4 September 2021, imploring it to hold as a crime against humanity the methodical seizure of students; frequent shutdown of schools; and the inability of the government to apprehend the perpetrators (Channels Television, 2021; Olabinta, 2021). The ICC Prosecutor has sought the permission of the Pre-Trial Chamber to open an investigation into the petition submitted by SERAP (Nwokoro, 2021). This is good news for the future of education in northern Nigeria, which is being jeopardized by the nefarious activities of kidnappers.

7. Combating the Menace: Issues and Challenges

The federal and state governments have initiated measures to curb banditry and kidnapping. Registration of mobile sim cards, which are linked to National Identification Numbers, is now compulsory. The security forces have played a crucial role in combating the marauders, resulting in some arrests and the killing of notorious kidnappers (Premium Times, 2020; Vanguard, 2018). In 2009, the police authorities announced new counter-kidnapping strategies to bridge the gaps in their procedures (Nigerian Police Force, 2019).

Several states have enacted laws to combat kidnapping, most of which prescribe the death penalty, for offenders. The Terrorism Prevention Act 2011 classifies kidnapping as an act of terrorism, punishable by 10 years behind bars. In 2020, the Senate adopted a bill prescribing a life sentence for kidnapping. The stiff sanctions have failed to deter them, as the problem assumes a vicious dimension (Okoli, 2019). The harsh penalty has very little effect as security agencies often fail to arrest and prosecute perpetrators. Some of the bandits implicated in the heinous acts are forgiven by the state government, instead of being prosecuted. Another punitive action of the government is the demolition of houses belonging to kidnappers, just as proceeds of kidnapping are forfeited to the government.

In Zamfara State, the government adopted the carrot-and-stick approach, to negotiate with the bandits while keeping the option of force open (Abdullahi, 2021). Some notorious bandit leaders were granted amnesty and jobs. This approach yielded little results, as their romance was short-lived. In September 2021, the military launched a comprehensive ground and air offensive in Zamfara State, destroying the dens of kidnappers and freeing many abductees in the process. In addition, the government shut down communication lines and banned motorcycles (Reuters, 2021). Several members of the gangs were killed, a handful arrested, while others fled into neighboring states. The bandits responded by attacking military bases in Zamfara State, killing 12 soldiers (Ayitogo, 2021). They also raided two police stations, carting away arms (Abdulaziz, 2021). The bandits have not been subdued by the use of force, as the illicit business continues unabated, especially in villages and on major highways (Babangida, 2021). The Governor of Katsina State, Aminu Masari, in a desperate measure, urges residents to take up arms in self-defense against kidnappers (Olaide, 2021).

The fight against abductions faces several stumbling blocks. The kidnapping industry is driven and sustained by a multiplicity of factors. The availability of small arms essentially accounts for the persistence of crime in Nigeria

(Munshi, 2021). Bandits, criminal gangs, and individuals have access to cheap guns, with which they attack and abduct their victims (Munshi, 2021). These weapons are easily procured from war-torn countries and shipped into Nigeria through porous borders (Parkinson and Akingbule, 2021). Some of the arms are also fabricated locally. Corrupt officers in the military and the police sell arms and ammunition to criminals. A soldier, in the company of his girlfriend, was found supplying guns to bandits (Obajemu, 2021).

The rampant incidents of kidnapping are also attributed to government incompetence and corruption in the management of security matters (Wahab, 2021). The popular belief is that bandits involved in abductions for profit are aided by state officials (Gupta, 2021). Corruption within the security services, aids, abets, and heightens the activities of kidnappers, as many of them have been accused of collusion. In 2009, three policemen masterminded the abduction of a woman in Bayelsa State and were paid a ransom of $20,000 for her release (*VOA News*, 2 November 2009). Apart from their complicity and inefficiency, the security establishment is plagued by a lack of manpower, equipment, logistics, training, and funding (Munshi, 2021).

The willingness to pay ransom has sustained the industry; it encourages more kidnapping. The government has adopted a new policy to stop forthwith any payment of ransom to kidnappers. This has not stopped the practice as parents, relatives, and friends of victims have taken over this responsibility. The National Assembly is considering a bill to criminalize the payment of ransom to kidnappers. This move has been condemned by lawyers (Onyekwere, 2021).

8. Any Hope for Nigeria?

Kidnapping is a socio-economic predicament that has traversed every nook and cranny of the country and must be solved nationally (Ezemenaka, 2018). There is a need to invest all it takes, and ensure all hands are on deck, in the fight against kidnapping. If the menace is to be curbed, the nation must strive for good governance. The fact remains that good governance is key if the nation's socio-economic stability must be guaranteed, including engaging idle youths in productive concerns, as against their involvement in dishonest and criminal activities. The issue of moral decadence can be addressed through curriculum review, to emphasize religious and moral studies (Okobia, 2017). The young generation of Nigerians must be taught that wealth and success are achieved only by virtue of hard work.

Government should formulate policies to address factors that encourage or lure people into kidnapping, as a means of livelihood. This includes diversification of the economy to ease overdependence on oil revenue, considering Nigeria's abundant solid mineral and agricultural resources. A permissive ambiance for investment, and economic opportunities for the populace, should be created as a matter of urgency. The nation's resources should be fairly distributed to ease chronic poverty and inequality. The inauguration of the National Social Investment Programme (Onah and Olise, 2020) and other policies of government to alleviate poverty and create employment is commendable (Premium Times, 2021a). The government should tackle corruption beyond rhetoric and lip service (Gupta, 2021). In the corruption perception index, Nigeria is ranked 149 out of 180 countries (Transparency International, 2021). Efforts need to be directed at creating a more responsible and corruption-free security apparatus. Security personnel should be trained, retrained, and well-equipped with current techniques for combating the plague (Wahab, 2021). Apart from training, locals should be encouraged to participate in policing their communities, since they know the terrain and hideouts of the criminals.

The prosecution and punishment of captured kidnappers should be stepped up because the problem has reached a 'crisis point' (Muvunyi, 2021). This appears not to be a priority for the government, as it is still treating them with kid gloves, and resisting persistent calls to categorize them as 'terrorists.' Recently, a 'billionaire kidnapper', popularly known as Evans, has been undergoing trial for various acts of kidnapping and extortion. However, the trial is slow and often stalled by technicalities and frivolous adjournments.

9. Conclusion

There is no doubt that abduction for ransom has reached an alarming proportion in Nigeria. It has evolved into a menace that threatens national security and creates an unstable socio-economic climate. The implications of kidnapping are far-reaching. Citizens do not feel safe, businesses are threatened and international investors are scared to do business in an unsafe environment, which further worsens the problem of unemployment and poverty. Since the act is majorly influenced by socio-economic elements, which are by-products of a dysfunctional economy and lame-duck government, solving the problem requires that the factors fuelling it are attended to. In the case of Nigeria, the monster is gradually driving the nation into the abyss and the government must act fast to overturn this trajectory.

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