

Nigerian Christians begin three-day fast after schoolgirls kidnapped

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(RNS) Christians began a three-day prayer and fasting period after Islamist Boko Haram militants kidnapped hundreds of schoolgirls in Nigeria and desperate parents joined the search in a remote forest.

The girls were abducted last week while at school in the Chibok area of Borno State. Initial reports said about 200 were kidnapped, but government officials lowered the figure to 130. On Monday (April 21), school officials said 234 were abducted and 40 girls had managed to escape.

“We know no religion (that) prescribes abduction or infliction of pain as a way of devotion,” said the Rev. Titus Pona, an official with the Christian Association of Nigeria. “We are calling on them to sheathe their arms and pursue their case in dialogue with the government.”

Boko Haram translates to “Western education is forbidden,” in the Hausa language. For five years, the insurgents have unleashed violence in northern Nigeria, but the girls’ abduction is viewed as the most terrifying so far.

More than 1,500 people have been killed in the insurgency so far this year, compared with an estimated 3,600 between 2010 and 2013, according to The Associated Press.

“This violence continues because the militants have support from powerful people in Nigerian society,” said the Rev. John Bakeni, a Roman Catholic priest in Borno.

Nigeria’s top Muslim leader, the sultan of Sokoto, Al-Haji Sa’ad Abubakar III, condemned the abduction.

“We sympathize with the victims and their teachers and families,” he said in a statement. “We call on the authorities to put all the needed efforts to free these innocent girls and get them continue with their studies.”