

Militant Nigerian leader calls captives 'our slaves'

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In his first public claim acknowledging that Islamist Boko Haram militants abducted more than 200 teenage schoolgirls in Nigeria, Abubakar Shekau said in a video he would sell the girls because "they are our slaves."

The majority of the abducted girls, ages 16 to 18, were from the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria, although the group included both Muslim and Christian girls, said a letter on May 6 from the Brethren headquarters in Elgin, Illinois.

The denomination has contributed more than \$100,000 over the last year to support the Nigerian Brethren affected by the ongoing violence.

The Nigerian church leaders now have "asked us to engage in prayer and fasting," said General Secretary Stanley J. Noffsinger and Global Mission and Service executive Jay Wittmeyer.

Included with their letter is a list of 180 names of abducted girls—both Christian and Muslim. "We are not making a distinction between them in our prayers." Each name on the list is being assigned to six congregations for focused prayer.

"We know no religion (that) prescribes abduction or infliction of pain as a way of devotion," said Titus Pona, an official with the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Boko Haram translates to "Western education is forbidden" in the Hausa language. For five years, they 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 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 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 to continue with their studies.” —RNS/added sources