The Changing Dynamics of Kidnapping in Nigeria and Implications for National Development

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Abstract: **Kidnapping for ransom before the 1990s was not a very prominent form of criminality until the Niger Delta militants began using it to press home their demands for redress to perceived injustices done their region. Ransom payment made kidnapping a very attractive crime and it spread from the Niger Delta region to all parts of Southern Nigeria. From Southern Nigeria, kidnapping for ransom spread to the Northern part of the country and was embraced by criminal gangs and terrorist groups such as Boko Haram; an Islamic group fighting a war of insurgency in the North East. This opened a new vista of criminality in Nigeria. Since then it has grown in proportion to a much sought after criminal act by criminally minded persons due to the high monetary gains involved. With the aid of mainly secondary sources, the paper uses both narrative and analytical tools to dilate on contours of the problem. It argues that kidnapping has festered in the country due to the introduction of ransom and this is generating damning implications for national development. The paper makes suggestions on ways to contain the hydra headed act of criminality currently ravaging the country.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Kidnapping before the 1990s was seldom in Nigeria. Nigerians held about it in either the electronic or print media. However, kidnapping made its debut in the Niger Delta area in the early 1990s. The people of the Niger Delta had long agitated against injustices melted out to the region despite the fact that it contained oil, the main source of the country's wealth. The agitations led to the formation of militant groups. It was these militant groups in the Niger Delta that introduced kidnapping in the country. They kidnapped expatriate staff of multi-national oil companies working in the area to supposedly draw international attention to their agitations. The victims were kept for a period of time and released without any ransom payment. This strategy was meant to draw attention to their plight. However, when oil companies began to pay ransom for their kidnapped members to be released, a new dimension to kidnapping was introduced in the country. The payment of ransom to kidnappers made it a very attractive business and many youths took to it since it offered an avenue for instant wealth.

In order to contain youth restiveness especially kidnapping in the Niger Delta region, the government of late President Umaru Yar'aAdua introduced an amnesty programme. But kidnapping persisted in the area due to the huge money gains from the payment of ransom. From the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, kidnapping for ransom spread to all parts of the South- South geo-political zone. Kidnapping for ransom

gained ascendency in the South- Eastern part of the country and became a booming business for perpetrators. From the South-East, the menace spread to all parts of Southern Nigeria where it further extended to the Northern part of the country where it is currently booming.

In Northern Nigeria, several criminal gangs embraced kidnapping due to the illicit wealth it offers. Terrorists at different times abducted large number of secondary school girls and were paid huge sums of money in foreign currency as ransom. Aside Boko Haram terrorists, other criminal elements have turned the North-West part of the country into a hot bed for kidnapping. While some of the criminals kidnap their victims on busy highways, others abduct students and teachers in educational institutions. In the North-Central, kidnapping exists in all the states but is more pronounced in Niger state. The menace of kidnapping in the country has become a regular occurrence. Ransom payment appears to have emboldened many criminally minded persons. In fact, it is a booming business. The government is yet to neither contain the vagaries of this development nor eliminate it. It is in this connection that this paper espouses the changing dynamics of this ugly development; weigh the implications and advance possible solutions.

Kidnapping in Nigeria: A Delineation of the Context

To properly situate the ramifications of the discourse in a clearer context, it is important to delineate the sense in which kidnapping is deployed. Okolo (2010) identifies three elements which must be established in any act of kidnapping. These elements include; taking a person away without his consent, holding a person in false imprisonment/confinement and lastly, extortion of the victim through ransom payment or forced acquiescence. Clearly, this captures the intentions of kidnappers. In some sense kidnapping could also be viewed as a social enterprise. This is perhaps why perpetrators of this crime choose their victims based on their perceived capacity to pay ransom (Tzanelli, 2006; Abati, 2010). In the Nigerian context, economic dimensions of kidnapping find expression. The criminality emerged as a strategy to draw attention to the environmental degradation and injustices in the Niger-Delta. It soon snowballed to a means for financing militancy and gaining easy wealth. The economic motive is therefore a dominant factor in understanding the problem in Nigeria.

Nonetheless, a political motive could also be inferred. Kidnapping has also been used as a political tool to coerce, intimidate and crudely outsmart political opponents. Nseabasi

(2009) argues quite instructively that most of the top kidnapping operations are masterminded by top government officials, opposition groups, unrewarded or uncompensated members of election rigging militant groups, amongst others. He contends further that kidnapping is also used as an instrument for political vendetta. In Nigeria, a sitting governor was once kidnapped and pressurized to resigned but the situation was botched by security agents. Another example is that of the kidnap of a gubernatorial candidate's father in Anambra State by aggrieved opponents of a political party (Chidi, 2014).

Another causal dimension of kidnapping could be ascribed to the unending crisis between herders and farmers, youth unemployment, escalating poverty, and the existence of so many ungoverned spaces in Nigeria. Wogu (2010) agrees that this has also led many to take to kidnapping as a means of livelihood. Kidnapping for ransom appears to be the most lucrative form of criminality in contemporary Nigeria and this explains why it is a booming business.

Manifestation of Kidnappings and the Changing Dynamics of Criminality in Nigeria

The first recorded case of kidnapping in Nigeria as earlier indicated was from a gang of Niger Delta youths in 1998 when armed men demanding job creation and electricity from the oil companies in the region abducted eight Chevron and Texaco workers of British, American and South African origins (Ogbuehi, 2018). The victims were kept for a few days and released after a press conference which was broadcasted by CNN and BBC. The trend continued and brought the desired publicity to the Niger Delta issue. The aim of the kidnappers was to compel oil companies to deliver on their social responsibility in the area by offering employment to qualified indigenes. This development laid the stage for kidnapping for ransom. The introduction of ransom transformed the objectives for kidnapping remarkably. The focus now was to kidnap to finance militancy and also gain accompanying material benefits. Kidnap for ransom proved very lucrative as companies began to pay large sums to get their men freed. The trend continued compelling the federal government under President Umar Yar'Adua to introduce the amnesty programme (Saheed, 2016). The introduction of an amnesty programme simmered the development but did not halt it. Kidnapping continued and spread from the Niger Delta to the entire South- South geo-political region.

The ease with which the act of kidnapping was carried out and the bounty that regularly ensued with little or no resistance from law enforcement agencies led to the expansion of kidnapping across Southern Nigeria and Abia state became the major theatrics (Odoma, 2019). In the South-East, kidnapping was big business. It was the quickest way to acquisition of wealth by the perpetrators of the criminal act. According to the former Inspector General of Police, Sir Mike Okiro, N15 billion had been paid as ransom to kidnappers between 2006 and 2009 (Okorie, 2018). The sum of N15 billion is by all standards a colossal sum that would have been used to finance basic infrastructure for a large number of people in Nigeria.

In Northern Nigeria, kidnapping became prominent as from 2014. The abduction of over 276 school girls in the North-Eastern State of Borno, the hub of a decade long insurgency by Boko Haram in 2014 was the first major imprint of kidnapping in Northern Nigeria in recent history. The girls were abducted from their school premises in a remote town called Chibok. And up till date, about 100 of those school girls are still in the custody of their abductors. The BBC reported that the federal government paid Boko Haram 2 million Euros in cash and freed some Boko Haram prisoners to secure the release of 82 Chibok girls in 2017(Amachree, 2017).

Similarly, on February 19, 2018 at 5.30 pm, 110 school girls aged between 11-19 years were kidnapped by Boko Haram terrorists from Government Girls Science and Technical College (GGSTC), Dapchi, located in Bulabulin, Yunusari local government area of Yobe State in the North-East part of Nigeria. Even though the federal government denied ever paying ransom to Boko haram terrorists, a United Nations' report revealed that the Nigerian government paid huge sums of money in ransom to secure the release of the over 100 school girls kidnapped in February 2018 by Boko Haram (Obia, 2018).

Apart from the epicenter of the war on insurgency in the North- East, several criminal gangs have taken to kidnapping in the other states of Northern Nigeria. For instance, In April 2019, a Takum (Taraba state) based businessman, Usman Mayo was held captive even after his family paid N100 million to the kidnappers who insisted on another N100 million before they could release him. The abductors eventually released him after collecting another N5 million. In Adamawa state alone, 13 professors and 287 persons were kidnapped in 2019. In Kaduna state, gun totting criminals usually in military uniforms either kidnap their victims on busy high ways such as the Abuja- Kaduna express way or abduct people in large numbers in rural settlements. They also pick up students and teachers from educational institutions. In Katsina, Zamfara and Sokoto states, kidnappers operate in large numbers usually armed and on motorcycles. They operate in commando style, shooting sporadically to instill fear in the people. They abduct mostly women and children and also rustle animals and move them to hideouts in forests. For example, more than 50 people, including pregnant women and children were abducted in a raid on Wurma, a village in Katsina state (Odoma, 2019).

It is clear from the foregoing that kidnapping has transformed from a criminal mechanism for seeking attention to a booming criminal business. The severity of the challenge particularly in Northern Nigeria could be attributed to a number of interrelated factors. The Northern region has the largest quantum of ungoverned spaces which lends ample space for criminal gangs to organize effectively. Secondly, the prolong insurrection in the region has dismantled settled communities

thereby creating conditions favorable for hideous operations. Thirdly, the perennial conflict between farmers and herders has created a scenario that has aided the proliferation of small arms and ammunitions. Added to this is the affiliation of criminal gangs with international terrorist organizations. More importantly, there exist a seeming failure in intelligence gathering due to the mistrust between communities and the government. This has given room for ideological brainwashing. The complexity of the ruling elites in this form of criminality and the Boko Haram insurgency frustrates attempts at mitigating the challenge. The realities in Southern Nigeria where it gained prominence are not any better. Though the scale of the problem in the Southern region in contemporary times is relatively less; violent agitations for secession has assumed a heighten tempo. The vortex point is therefore that the introduction of ransom in kidnapping has transformed it to a burgeoning criminal business with concomitant implications for national security and development.

The Implications of Kidnapping on National Development

The implications of kidnapping on national development are manifold. The foremost point that need be stressed is the fact that the challenge is undermining national security in ways that are not only detrimental to economic development but threatens the fabric of the Nigerian society. More so, kidnapping is frustrating attempts at sustainable development in that, public safety is on daily basis been threatened, it is incentivizing capital and investment flight; it is undermining trade, tourism and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and so on. The impact of these variables on economic development is clear; the Nigerian economy is the greatest victim.

Aside the economic impact, the psychological effects on victims also affects national productivity profoundly. The trauma associated with kidnapping leaves indelible imprints on the lives of victims. This could lead to depression, anxiety and in fact Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the long run, this affects the productivity levels of victims. When those kidnapped are children, the impact on parents is even more devastating.

Kidnapping is undermining educational development of the country and generating consequences that trigger even more damaging developments. From the kidnap of the Chibok girls in 2014 to the mass abduction in Dapchi, the kidnapping of school children in Kankara, the kidnapping of another set of school children at Jangebe and many other school kidnappings; kidnappers are undermining the educational development of the country especially in Northern Nigeria. It without doubt represents the greatest existential threat to the future of education in Northern Nigeria. Kidnapping for ransom has combined with Boko Haram's retrogressive ideology of Western education is evil to further bleak futuristic educational advancement of Northern Nigeria in particular. This point is better appreciated when understood in the context of a Northern Nigeria already beleaguered by endemic poverty, cultural and religious practices that do not bode well for Western education. The catastrophic consequences will not only affect Northern Nigeria but the whole country. Peterside (2021) is therefore on point in his submission that:

> The social cost is even far more disturbing. Lack of education, literacy and opportunities are among the root causes of criminality, banditry and terrorism in Northern Nigeria. Having a mass unemployment and unemployable youths in the future will make things worse and may destroy Nigeria. Statistics show that in the next 15years, barring any wars or natural disaster, the Nigerian population will be heading to 300 million, with many young people. This population size should be a blessing if these young people are educated and have the requisite skills to compete in the post pandemic, technology-driven world. Imagine what will happen if a large proportion misses out on education now; it will be a lost opportunity and a recipe for disaster.

Clearly, the consequences of a prolong attack on the school system is grave not just for Northern Nigeria where the challenge is more pervasive but for the whole country.

Additionally, the growing ethnic profiling of kidnappers in the country is a threat to nation building especially in a country still struggling with statehood. It is a considered view that, if this challenge is allowed to fester, it might create conditions that could generate inter-ethnic conflicts or even ignite a civil war. The increasing spate of inter-ethnic squabbles in parts of the country is indicative of the danger kidnapping can simulate.

Suggestions on how to curb Kidnapping for Ransom in Nigeria

Government at all levels should create the enabling environment for job creation. Many of the moribund industries scattered across the country can be resuscitated to give employment to the large army of unemployed youths. Added to this is the granting of certain waivers to serve as incentives for the establishment of new industries. Both the resuscitated and newly established industries can employ a large number of youths many of whom have taken to kidnapping.

There should be continuous improvement in the capabilities of Nigerian security agencies. This can be in the form of training and re-training of the officers and men of the Nigeria police force to keep them up to date with current crime profiles. The officers and men should be provided with up to date crime fighting equipment and gadgets to counter the sophisticated arms and ammunition in the hands of criminals. The security agents should also be provided with adequate incentives to motivate them perform their duties effectively. This can be by payment of regular salaries and allowances. There is also the urgent need for an increase in the number of the Nigeria police force which is the main agency responsible for internal security in the country. A situation where less than half a million police men are charged with the duty of policing the

country with a population of over 200 million is grossly inadequate to say the least.

Kidnapping can be made less attractive if the payment of ransom is discouraged. This is with particular reference to cases where government pays huge sums of money to secure the release of kidnapped students. Ransom was said to have been paid by the federal government of Nigeria for the release of the over 100 school girls of government science and technical school Dapchi in Yobe state from the hands of Boko Haram Terrorists. The recent case of the abduction and release of over 300 boys of government Science school Kankara in Katsina State in which government denied paying ransom are clear examples of incidents which have rather raised the stakes of criminal elements.

There is the urgent need for relevant agencies of government in charge of information dissemination to embark on vigorous enlightenment campaigns to change the public perception of security agencies especially the Nigeria Police Force. Many would-be informants do not trust the Nigeria Police Force. This stems from the fact that information given out to them often leak to criminal elements thereby endangering the informants.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper examined the spate of kidnappings for ransom in the country. It established that kidnapping was made prominent in Nigeria by Niger Delta militants. It was first used as a political tool to draw both international and national attention to the injustices done to the area by oil prospecting companies. However a new dimension to kidnapping emerged when the oil companies began to pay ransom for the release of their workers. The payment of ransom made it very attractive to criminal elements and it began to spread to all parts of the country. The paper contended further that the manifestation of kidnapping began to assume frightening dimensions in Northern Nigeria following the kidnap of Chibok girls. The region is currently the hottest bed for kidnapping in Nigeria. A number of implications for national development have been highlighted and solutions suggested.

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