



SITREP NIGER STATE
TERRORISTS
TAKE OVER

FEBRUARY 2021






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Our researchers employed desk research to collate the available data. Our editors sifted through the data and prepared the report, using various proprietary tools to fact-check and copy edit the information gathered.

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INTRODUCTION

Terrorists in the wee hours of Wednesday, 17 February, abducted more than 50 students, according to early reports, from Government Science College, Kagara in Niger State, just two months after the kidnap of at least 300 students from a similar school in Kankara, Katsina state. In a video shared by private Nigerian broadcaster AIT on Twitter, some terrorists (the government refers to them as “bandits”) were seen celebrating the successful abduction of travellers off the Kontagora-Minna road a few days earlier.

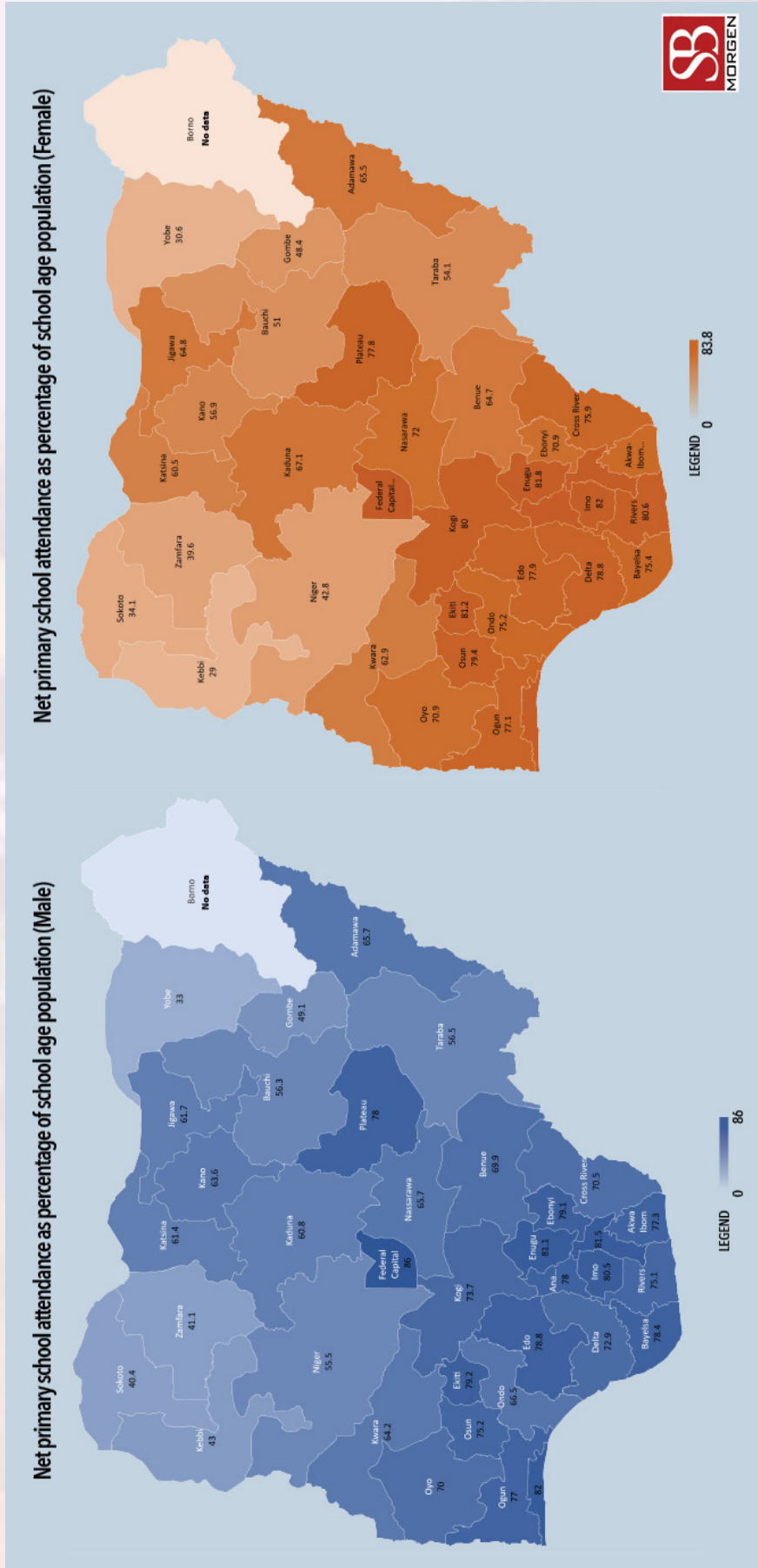
Niger State, Nigeria’s largest by land area is just one of four states (the others being Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau) in the vast North-Central region hardest hit by attacks by organised armed groups and militias with affiliation to international terror networks, most notably al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Between January 2020 and February 2021, at least 301 people were killed in 73 various violent incidents in the state. Perception of the government’s neutrality in the conflict have not helped as the government’s attempt to disarm parties to the conflict have been seen as partial to the herders, and have thus backfired, frustrating the entire disarmament campaign.

On 2 February, terrorists sacked 10 villages in Gurmana, Kurebe and Kwaki in Shiroro Local Government Area of Niger state, killing 25 people and abducting 40. The assailants attacked the said villages because they refused to attend a meeting where negotiations were opened between the terrorists and community leaders on the amount to be paid to allow farmers in the area harvest crops from their farms without attacks. Shiroro, which houses one of Nigeria’s most important electric dams has seen the worst attacks, as well as Bosso, Mariga, Mashegu and Rafi LGAs. Kagara, where the abduction took place, is very close to the volatile Birnin Gwari Local Government Area of Kaduna State in the North-West, a region that has seen no fewer than 8,000 deaths from violent incidents between 2011 and 2020, displacing nearly 300,000 people.

The insecurity was at first concentrated on Rafi and Shiroro LGAs, but the Nigerian security forces' inability to confine the violence to these two local governments owing to poor intelligence as well as having to fight the insurgents (some of whom are affiliated with Boko Haram) over a large territorial expanse (a reality which led it to carrying sporadic air raids) have given the terrorists the leeway to spread their activities to areas in close proximity to Minna, the state capital.

From an infrastructure perspective, attacks in Shiroro are of particular concern, as it is home to a crucial hydroelectric power plant with a capacity of 600MW. Boko Haram has already attacked electricity installations in the past, disrupting power supply to Maiduguri, Borno State, in the process. Other groups may well go a similar route in order to achieve their objectives. An attack that takes the Shiroro plant offline will disrupt power supply to the entire region.

Niger State is by no means an outlier. The Kagara school abduction is the latest addition to a growing list of school abductions in Northern Nigeria carried out by terror groups and organised armed militias for both economic and ideological reasons. The abduction of female students in Chibok, Borno State (April 2014) as well as Dapchi, Yobe State (February 2018) has provided inspiration for subsequent heists in a region grappling with a record number of out of school children in the world. According to Unicef, Nigeria's northern states have a net school attendance rate of 53 percent; for female school children, the numbers are worse - in the North-East and North-West, primary net attendance rates stand at 47.7 percent and 47.3 percent respectively. In north-eastern Nigeria, 2.8 million children are in need of education-in-emergencies support in three conflict-affected states (Adamawa, Borno and Yobe). In these states, at least 802 schools remain closed and 497 classrooms are listed as destroyed, with another 1,392 'damaged but repairable'. The Kankara Boys abduction of late 2020 raises important questions on the security of public schools across Northern Nigeria, as well as attempts to convince parents to send their wards to school, as insecurity across the country heightens.



In the aftermath of the Chibok Girls abduction, there was a Safe Schools Initiative launched in May 2014. The first Safe Schools Initiative was launched in Nigeria in May 2014 after 276 girls were kidnapped from their school in Chibok. It started with an investment from the Global Business Coalition for Education and matching contributions from the Government of Nigeria and the international donor community, championed by A World at School.

Some of the activities undertaken under the initiative include:

- Moving students in the highest-risk areas to schools to safer parts of the country
- A programme for rebuilding schools and adding security
- Teaching and education materials for displaced children in camps
- Provision and distribution of learning materials
- Teacher training

However, when the Buhari administration came to power in 2015, these activities took a backseat.

It may be time for a version of that initiative to be revived, in order to stem the tide of kidnapping of vulnerable children who will then be ransomed, giving violent non-state actors an upper hand.

Some nonviolent, non-state led moves have been made. In January, prominent Islamic cleric Sheikh Ahmad Gumi initiated a peace deal with some of the armed groups operating in Kaduna and Zamfara. While the initiative has yet to put a stop on the carnage in those states, especially in areas like Birnin Gwari, Chikun and Kajuru, some prominent militia leaders have surrendered arms, most notably the leader of one of the major groups responsible for the abduction of the Kankara Boys (who were released after

an undisclosed amount was paid by the Katsina state government).

The downside of this approach as this incident in Niger State shows, is that it remains unclear if the group responsible for the heist would make territorial or financial demands, or a combination of concessions from both the Niger State and federal governments. Kankara has, unfortunately, provided a useful template to non-state actors across this country, meaning that it could be open season on civilian lives and the authorities have little leverage, a pile of cash and worn-out platitudes to offer. Large scale school abductions, it regrettably appears, have come to stay, and an overwhelmed and stretched security architecture faces the prospect of a tidal wave of violence it is ill-equipped to handle.



ABOUT SBM

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