News



In this photo released by the Christian Association of Nigeria, a man walks past belongings at the St. Mary's Catholic Primary and Secondary School after gunmen abducted children and staff in Papiri community, Nigeria, Nov. 21. (AP/Christian Association of Nigeria)

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Gunmen attacked a Catholic boarding school in a western region of Nigeria and abducted more than 200 schoolchildren Nov. 21, the Christian Association of Nigeria said, in the latest in a spate of abductions in Africa's most populous country.

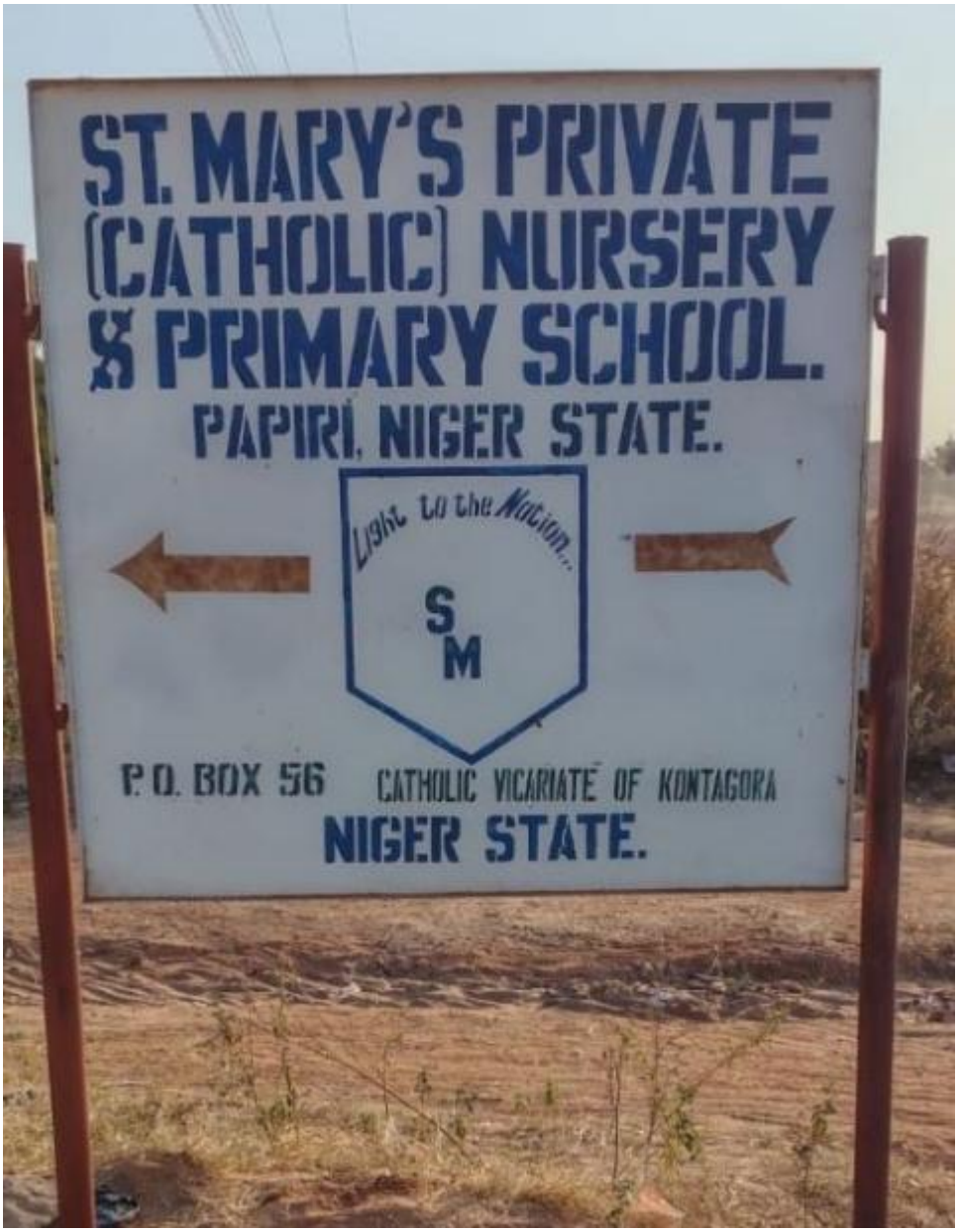
The attack and abductions took place at St. Mary's School, a Catholic institution in the Agwara local government's Papiri community. Attackers seized 215 pupils and students as well as 12 teachers, said Daniel Atori, a spokesperson for the Niger state chapter of CAN.

News reports Nov. 22 said officials had updated the number of children abducted to more than 300.

"I just got back to the village tonight after I visited the school where I also met with parents," Atori said in a statement, quoting Bishop Bulus Yohana Dauwa of Nigeria's Diocese of Kontagora, the CAN chairman in Niger. The statement added that the association is working "to ensure our children’s safe return."

The Niger State Police Command said the abductions took place in the early hours, and that military and security forces have since been deployed to the community. It described St. Mary's as a secondary school, which in Nigeria would serve children between the ages of 12 and 17.

A satellite image shows that the school compound is attached to an adjoining primary school, with more than 50 classroom and dormitory buildings. It's located near a major road linking the towns of Yelwa and Mokwa.



This photo released by the Christian Association of Nigeria shows the sign post of St. Mary's Catholic Primary and Secondary School where gunmen abducted children and staff in Papiri community, Nigeria, Friday, Nov. 21. (AP/Christian Association of Nigeria)

Dauda Chekula, 62, said that four of his grandchildren, ages 7 to 10, were among the schoolchildren abducted.

"We don't know what is happening now, because we have not heard anything since this morning," Chekula said. "The children who were able to escape have scattered, some of them ran back to their houses and the only information we are getting is

that the attackers are still moving with the remaining children into the bush."

The statement by the secretary to the Niger state government said that the abduction occurred, despite prior intelligence warning of heightened threats.

"Regrettably, St. Mary's School proceeded to reopen and resume academic activities without notifying or seeking clearance from the State Government, thereby exposing pupils and the staff to avoidable risk," it read.

Umar Yunus, a Papiri resident, said there were only local security arrangements and no official police or government forces securing the school at the time of the attack on Friday.

The Catholic Diocese of Kontagora said in a statement that a security staffer was "badly shot" during the attack.

Authorities, meanwhile, closed 47 of the country's federal unity colleges that are mostly in conflict-battered northern states. The unity colleges — a group of elite government schools with attendance drawn from across the country — are to be closed immediately, according to a circular issued by Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education.

Spate of abductions

The abductions took place days after gunmen on Nov. 17 attacked a high school and abducted 25 schoolgirls in the neighboring Kebbi state, in Maga, around 170 kilometers (105 miles) from Papiri. One of the girls later escaped and is safe, the school's principal said.



(Associated Press)

In a separate attack on Nov. 17 in Kwara state, which borders Niger state, gunmen attacked a church, killing two people. During the attack, 38 worshippers were also abducted, Femi Agbabiaka, secretary of the Christ Apostolic Church, told The Associated Press on Nov. 21. He said that the kidnappers are demanding a ransom of 100 million naira ($69,000) for each person taken.

Nigerian President Bola Tinubu canceled his trip to this weekend's Group of 20 summit in South Africa over the recent events. Vice President Kashim Shettima will represent the president at the summit, the presidency said on X on Nov. 21.

"We will use every instrument of the state to bring these girls home and to ensure that the perpetrators of this wickedness face the full weight of justice," Shettima said during a visit to Kebbi state on Nov. 19.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks in Niger and Kebbi state, but analysts and locals say gangs often target schools, travelers and remote villagers in kidnappings for ransom. Authorities say the gunmen are mostly former herders who have taken up arms against farming communities after clashes between them over

strained resources.

Abductions have come to define the insecurity prevailing in Africa's most populous nation.

At least 1,500 students have been abducted in the region since Boko Haram jihadi extremists seized 276 Chibok schoolgirls more than a decade ago. But bandits are also active in the region, and analysts say gangs often target schools to gain attention.

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While Christians are among those targeted, analysts say that the majority of victims of armed groups are Muslims in Nigeria's Muslim-majority north, where most attacks occur.

Community upset

Analysts and residents blame the insecurity on a failure to prosecute known attackers, and the rampant corruption that limits weapons supplies to security forces while ensuring a steady supply to the gangs.

Eze Gloria Chidinma, 27, a Lagos-based influencer, also known as "Riaz Kitchen," told The Associated Press her sister was able to escape the school during the attacks by jumping a fence.

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Chidinma said it's not the first time her family has been affected by the rampant kidnappings in the country.

"My mother and my older brother were kidnapped last year. We called security, we called the police, and they just said there is nothing they can do," she said, noting the family had to pay "a huge amount of money" to rescue them.

"My message to the authorities right now is to think about the people. Your job is to protect lives and properties. People's lives should matter to you," Chidinma added.

Yohanna Buru, a pastor and head of the Peace Revival And Reconciliation Foundation, an organization focused on interfaith dialogue, called on authorities to increase security around schools in areas affected by the security crisis.

"If the government was doing enough, then rampant kidnappings all over the country would not have happened," he said. "It's as if they don't care about the future of our children."