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**Kidnapping for Ransom in Nigeria: Implications and
Quest for a Permanent Solution**

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Abstract

Kidnapping has recently become a profitable venture among youths in Nigeria. This criminal practice that started in the form of hostage taking in the Niger-Delta, region of the country in calling the attention of the government to the marginalization of the region, has seemingly become a variant of armed robbery with high level of expertise in abducting people for ransom illegally. The ascendancy of this insecurity threat is now becoming perplexing to several citizens, business people, foreign investors, law enforcement agencies and the government. Hence, this study takes a critical look at this new wave of crime as well as its implication on the nation. The study indicates that kidnapping for ransom is a criminal offence against the fundamental human right of

citizens that would require proactive and prompt response of security operatives to curb. However, it was concluded that good governance still remains the key to resolving insecurity threat like kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria.

Key words: Insecurity, Kidnapping, Hostage taking, Crime, Ransom,

Introduction

The survival and security of life holds a very important place in the life of every living being. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (1999) specifically states that “the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of the government.” Consequently, the government spends a considerable amount of the nations’ funds on securing lives and property against all forms of internal and external treat. Unfortunately, the achievement of this primary purpose of the government has become more and more challenging with the ascendancy of several insecurity threats such as: militancy, armed robbery, ritual killing, insurgency, hostage taking and kidnapping among others.

Kidnapping, is not new among Nigerians. In the last decade, a wide spread incidence of this criminal act -kidnapping and hostage taking was reported among prominent personalities in government and multinational corporations in the South-eastern and Niger Delta region. Unfortunately, what started in the Niger Delta as a means of calling government attention to the neglect and underdevelopment of the areas by oil companies, now seem like a variant of armed robbery as several miscreants, local misfits and aggrieved unemployed youths, have now taken kidnapping for ransom to be a lucrative venture for ‘quick money.’

Ngwama (2014) citing Davidson (2010), described how this activity is being carried out when he accentuated, “a group of criminals armed with guns and cell phones apprehend unsuspecting victims and drag their victim into a secluded spot and begin to make phone calls to whomever and demand for a ransom.” Gboyega Alaka -a reporter for *The Nation* newspaper, described the level of expertise that was involved in one of the recent kidnap operations that took place in FESTAC town Lagos State), saying:

It was a commando-like operation. About five gun-toting men in military uniform crossed a jeep on a certain evening somewhere as it negotiated its way into the Raji Rasaki Estate in Amuwo-Odofin Area of Lagos, ordered the occupant, an obviously well-to-do man out of the car, threatening to shoot if he as much as played any pranks, ordered him into their vehicle and drove off, shooting fiercely as they disappeared into the night. Eye-witnesses said everything happened in less than five minutes. Some said they actually thought it was some military team on an arrest mission (The Nation, 2016 March 13 p.19).

A young man, an eye witness (Ifeanyi) who narrated the incident to *The Nation* reporter- Gboyega Alaka, said “*it was such that not many dared look for longer than seconds, as the precision and terror with which the kidnappers operated, spoke of high level expertise*” (The Nation, 2016 March 13 p.19). First, this scenario explains that this criminal act (just like armed robbery), usually involves a group of persons of common interest with well-planned strategies on who, where, when and how to apprehend an individual or set of targeted persons. Secondly, the scenario shows that this unlawful practice is usually done with the motive of extorting money from the family of a victim or victims in form of ransom. Lastly, this also shows that this dreadful practice could be carried out at just any place-open or secluded.

This criminal practice only becomes more worrisome and mind boggling when one considers that this atrocity can happen just anywhere- the market, school, at home, the office, at the driveway to/from work, in a shopping mall or even in a tourist site, at any time. For instance, kidnappers could act as a friend and walk into one’s office neatly dressed, quietly excuse anyone they find in ‘their target’s office,’ escort the victim past the unsuspecting staff/colleagues into their waiting vehicle (with a smile), having sufficiently threatened to hurt the victim with lethal weapons before coming out of his/her office. Okengwu (2011) asserted that “sometimes, the kidnappers dress like security operatives, the police or the army or government vigilante, identify themselves with fake identity cards and persuade or threaten the victim to go with them”.

Other methods of kidnapping could be more dramatic, such as when the perpetrators mask their faces, open fire sporadically into the air to cause panic or chaos, and then, they whisk the target away in ‘the commando style attack’ (Abugu, 2009; Olagoke, 2010). Based on the unprecedented nature of kidnapping practices, methods and various motives of abductors on unsuspecting victims; kidnapping is often used synonymously or along with terms such as: capturing, hostage-taking, abduction, hijacking, and so on.

Kidnapping: Conceptual Definitions and Rationales

Kidnapping means several things to several persons and more often than not, individual definitions differ from the perspective or view, with respect to constituted laws, personalities involved in the operation and their motives. However, some definitions germane to this study have been highlighted. According to Uzorma & Nwanegbo-Ben (2014), kidnapping is the act of seizing and detaining or carrying away a person by unlawful force or by fraud, and often with a demand for ransom. According to them, it occurs when a person is abducted and taken from one place to another against their will, or a situation in which a person is confined to a controlled space without the confinement being from a legal authority. They further noted that it involves taking a person from their family forcefully without their consent with the motive of holding the person as a hostage and earning a profit from their family.

Buttressing this, Ngwama (2014) defined kidnapping as false imprisonment in the sense that it involves the illegal confinement of individuals against his or her own will by another individual in such a way as to violate the confined individual's right to be free from the restraint of movement. He added that it is an act that involves taking away a person against the person's will, usually to hold the person in false imprisonment or confinement without legal authority.

In criminal law, Ottuh & Aituf (2014) noted that kidnapping is the wholesale taking away or transportation of a person against the person's will usually to confine the person in false imprisonment without legal authority. They expounded that this act may be done principally to extract ransom or in connection with a child custody as a fall out of marital dispute. Such kidnapping or abduction of a child is often labelled "child stealing" and "parental kidnapping", particularly when the act is carried with the intention of keeping the child permanently as against collecting a ransom or other things the 'child stealer' is agitating for.

Turner (1998) earlier defined kidnapping as a situation where persons are forcibly seized and transported to a destination where they are held against their will in unlawful confinement. It also describes incidents when persons are lured away and then held illegally. The definitions clearly distinguish kidnapping from any form of legal house arrest or police detention that may be ordered by the state and carried out by law enforcement agents. It also shows that kidnapping is a criminal act that takes place when a person or group of persons employ some form of coercion and treat to abduct and confined a victim or set of victims to a place or location (against his/her or their own will), with the motive of getting something from the abductee(s), someone or a group of persons related to the abductee(s) by blood or by association.

Turner (1998) listed four key rationales for kidnapping as follows: a) kidnapping for money but no politics; b.) kidnapping without any political or monetary motive; c.) kidnapping for money and politics and d.) kidnapping for politics but no money. However, the reasons for the first and notable kidnapping practices in Nigeria is traceable to the cry of the Niger Delta people over the marginalization of the region, the despoliation of their environments, and the hazardous oil explorative activities of the oil multinationals in the area (Akpan and Akpabio 2003). The federal government was far too lax concerning promoting sustainable development for the people in the region. This is reflected in the general absence of human and capital development projects and dearth of social amenities such as electricity, pipe borne water, hospitals, housing and schools despite the enormous contribution of oil wealth from the region, to the national treasury.

Implications of Kidnapping on Nigerians

No doubt, the incessant reports of kidnapping incidences, reaching Nigerians on local and satellite television stations, radio, newspapers and other broadcast media, constitutes threat to socio-economic activities in an economically viable state with large productive labour force like in Nigeria. Many multinational companies in oil producing state neither consider the region hospitable for business activities nor the government's security measures efficient in providing adequate safety for them, their children and family. Consequently, many business persons (victims and non-previous victims of this epidemic), travel to other fast developing nations around the West African sub-region for a safe haven; leaving the shores of the country with a ripple effect of unemployment. Okolo (2010) narrated his ordeal in this regard by stressing that "if industries are closing shops and investors are not forthcoming because of insecurity and other attendant problems faced by businesses, then the future particularly that of the children should agitate the minds of everybody."

The political importance of thugs and hooligans to party aspirants during campaign periods, seem to have had a trickle down and spill-over influence on several innocent citizens. Previously jobless youths that were recruited by political god fathers to cause chaos, steal ballot boxes, and even kidnap viable political members from opposing parties; have now taken up their 'seasonal job' as a full time business. The "man must survive" mentality and "quick money syndrome", has brought many of these misfits, into group of kidnapers; targeting not only prominent political leaders but also well-meaning Nigerians who they perceive to be persons of high financial prospect in the society. Persons that fall victims of this scrupulous business usually turn out to be teenagers, young ladies, actors/actresses, relatives of footballers, academics, children of clergymen and TV personalities alike. For instance, Ngwama (2014) recalled the case of four journalists and a driver travelling in a convoy of buses from a conference in Uyo, Akwa-Ibom State, that were kidnapped in Abia State on their way back to Lagos on Sunday, July 11, 2010. The abductors from their hideout, demanded a ransom of N250 million and later reconsidered to accept N30 million. A torrent of public protests, condemnations and threats necessitate and frightened the kidnapers to let go of their victims.

Due to cases on unsuccessful apprehension of culprits, and successful collection of ransom by captors, many Nigerians have seemingly lost interest in security operatives whom they sometimes see as collaborators with the perpetrators. It is a known fact that in event of a kidnap, concerned families usually never reported to law enforcement agents for the fear of murder of the victims. The case of Late Obi Akaeze Edward Ofolue III of Ubulu-Uku in Delta State, who was abducted and murdered in the den of kidnapers, is still fresh. Same for a certain Lagos businessman, who was abducted in FESTAC in 2011, and whose decomposing body was later

discovered close to a remote village in his town in Anambra State (The Nation, 2016 March 13 p.19). These killings usually occur when families fail to respond promptly to their demands or when the abductors discover traces of security agents' involvement, in the remission of the ransom. Hence, most families prefer to pay the ransom to losing their beloved. This also accounts for why it is somewhat difficult for authorities to collate actual statistics on the incidence of kidnapping in the country (as many cases of kidnapping, are never reported by concerned families).

Another consequence of this criminal act is the emotional upset, palpable fear and trauma, the incidence leaves on residents that witnessed the crime during the time of the operation. This insecurity treat can be worrisome when one considers the network of innocent looking individuals that take security surveillance for these culprits (before, during and after laying hold of the victim). After the successful abduction of two business men: Chief Francis Umeh, (a well-known spare part dealer at the popular Aspanda Market, Trade Fair, Badagry Expressway Lagos) and another notable businessman, Cosmas Ojukwu, Elias Ukachukwu (who was kidnapped two weeks after in similar manner on the same estate in FESTAC town Lagos); looking to locate houses of some of the victims and possibly speak with some of them, one *The Nation* reporter, narrated his plight saying: “*not a soul was willing to help the moment they learnt of my intention or mission,.....some, immediately retreated to their shells.*” The response of one volunteer (Femi), to the reporter, shows how large the insecurity line was drawn between residents and reporters. He said:

It is a dangerous topic to discuss. I am not even sure if you (the gentleman) posing as a reporter is not actually one of the kidnapers on the mission to feel the pulse of the people (The Nation, 2016 March 13 p.20).

This becomes more challenging when the interrogation is coming from a person or group of persons suspected to be a police or member of any law enforcement agent respectively. The legal implication of this shows the gap in police-community relations in the country, making investigations that could lead to the apprehension of the culprits more difficult for ‘uniform men’. As expounded by Ottuh & Aituf (2014), many of this kidnapers are, “suspected to work with unsuspected individuals like call girls, relations, bankers, business partners, close associates, disabled and/or disguised beggars.” They recruit these persons to stand on-the-look-out for possible disturbances that could hinder the successful completion of their operation. Evidently, this is why everyone present and not present in the crime scene (at the time of the kidnap), is usually taken for a suspect. Hence, every one lives in fear of the next man or woman living next door, including: the young boys in the barber’s shop, that innocent looking boy selling ‘recharge card’ (network airtime) at a corner of the street, and even that “*aboki*”-fulani man with his battery-powered radio, selling wares in his kiosk.

The Way Forward

There is every reason for everyone to condemn kidnapping and take proactive steps on channeling the energies of abductors into productive ventures that will contribute to life and development of the society. This is very important because it is easy for a young man of productive age, to attribute personal life failures to unfair parenting, lack of gainful job opportunity, bad governance and leadership and several flimsy excuses among others. However, the fact still remains that everyone can attain the good prize on anything honestly, if he/she wishes to pay the good price modestly. This implies that choosing the part of crime to earn a living after a few honest attempt that failed, can be likened to a sprinter that is racing on a treadmill. He (the sprinter) exerts so much energy but 'goes everywhere' on the same spot. Unfortunately, a lot of youths know this, but eventually fall for wrong counsels from wrong peers. For instance, a young man that is seriously facing difficulties with securing a job to put food on his table, could become so desperate about making some quick cash and take the suggestion of a friend, to join his 'network of secret informants' in a one-shot kidnapping adventure that would make him an overnight millionaire, as a welcome idea.

Ugwulebo (2011) in Uzorma, & Nwanegbo-Ben, (2014) on the phenomenology of hostage-taking and kidnapping, noted that "kidnapping as an organized crime, is better noticed when a victim's relations are bringing the ransom." He recounted an incident in which the wife of a victim was asked to bring the ransom to a particular sport in the World Bank Housing Estate area in Owerri, Imo State. When she reached the spot, the captors, called her and asked her some questions which she answered. She was then directed to go to a place between Egbu and Owerri capital city which she did. After another round of interrogation, they referred her to a place in Mbaise (another Local Government Area in Imo State). By this time, it was getting dark. From the point agreed, they ordered her to board a motorcycle to another point further into the hinterlands and drop the money. After she dropped the money, they told her to go so that they could count the money and be sure it was complete before releasing her husband. She was also assured of her husband's release that night. True to their promise, they released her husband but at Elele (Rivers State). Evidently, this shows that kidnapping for ransom, is well organized and involves a network of trained intellectual field syndicates who are perhaps, unemployed graduates roaming the street as 'roaring intellectual devils,' seeking for whom they may 'devour'.

Due to the increasing cases of kidnapping across the country, there is need for the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) to rise to the aid of Nigerians with proactive and prompt response to any distress call in this regard. Although, the recent Lagos State government's attention on case of three abducted school girls who were kidnapped on Monday February 29, this year, is still being celebrated in the country, after the police

unleashed a massive 500-man rescue team to recover the abducted girls. Needless to say, the reaction of the Lagos State government and heavy heat of the police rescue team, smoked out the kidnappers from their hiding. However, while Nigerians on the media were celebrating the heroic rescue of the girls from the Babington Macaulay Junior Seminary School, Ikorodu Lagos, one viewer as published in an article in *The Nation* newspaper (2016, March 13 p.19) captioned: “*Unsung kidnap cases: A case of slow police reaction?*” sent a message to the television media which reads: “*what’s the police doing about the spate of kidnapping in Festac/Amuwo Odofin axis. My uncle has been held for six weeks.*” This seemingly shows that there are several ‘unsung kidnap cases’ where victims’ family just tries to fix their ordeal underground, without calling the attention of the media. This whole situation, begs the question: “when shall the spate of kidnapping and other insecurity threats become a thing of the past in Nigeria?”

The Nigeria government needs to take pragmatic step in its policy decisions to address economic hardship and unemployment problems through good governance at all levels including in non-public enterprises. This position was supported by former President, Goodluck Jonathan, quoted in Wakili (2013) thus: “I agree totally that until we create jobs; until Nigerians can wake up and find food to eat; until Nigerians sick can walk to the hospital and get treatment; the economic indices may not mean much to us.”

However, kidnapping for ransom must be seen by security operatives as a criminal offence against the fundamental human rights of citizens. Therefore, their proactive and prompt response to curb the menace is highly expedient. Furthermore, security operatives such as the Police Public Relations (PPR) division of the police force need to publish useful security tips that would be helpful for previous victims, victims and non –victims of this criminal act, to prevent future reoccurrence, stay alive while in kidnappers den and avoid being a victim respectively. This could help to sensitize Nigerians on the need to be security conscious within their immediate work environment.

Conclusion

Any effort directed towards the pursuit of zero-tolerance for corruption, still remains the ultimate solution to this menace in Nigeria. This remains a fact because good governance is key to everything including engaging ‘restless youths’ on productive concerns as against going about some dishonest and criminal deals. This support the maxim “an idle mind is the devil’s work shop” However, Nigerian youths also have to take their destiny in their hands (and not laws into their hands) by engaging their ‘idle minds’ with creative, lawful, and productive thoughts that can bring about an enviable means of livelihood for them and their loved ones.

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