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Jubilee Campaign Marks Leah Sharibu’s Sixth Birthday Spent in Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP/IS-WA) Captivity

Yesterday, on 14 May 2023, Jubilee Campaign marked the 20th birthday - and sixth birthday spent in militant captivity - of Leah Sharibu, a young Nigerian Christian woman. Having originally been abducted from Government Girls Science and Technical School in Dapchi, Yobe State at the age of 14, Leah has been forced to spend the fundamental and transitional period from adolescence to adulthood without the right to practice her faith, complete her education, and live according to her own aspirations.

For the past decade, northern Nigeria has been wracked by Islamic jihadist violence, with terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and bands of radical Fulani militants attacking Christian communities, places of worship including churches and mosques, and other civilian and military infrastructure. One gravely concerning pattern of terrorist aggression is the routine targeting of educational institutions for mass abductions. Perhaps the most notable example is Boko Haram’s kidnapping of 276 predominantly Christian female students between the ages of 16 and 18 years from Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria. Nearly one decade later, 98 girls are still unaccounted for but are presumed to have remained in captivity and, similar to Leah, have had all vestiges of autonomy wrested from their grasp.¹

Just over five years ago, in February 2018, Leah was kidnapped along with 109 schoolgirls - all of whom were between the ages of 11 and 19 years - from their school by ISWAP militants. The attack garnered immediate condemnation, especially following the disclosure that, despite a multitude of preemptive requests for assistance from the local population, authorities disreputably failed to intervene and protect its most vulnerable citizens. About one month prior to the fateful incident, army troops were withdrawn from the area and redeployed to another location under “the premise that Dapchi has been relatively calm and peaceful”. However, army spokesperson Onyema Nwachukwu’s assertions that the local police were informed of the army’s withdrawal have been rejected by Yobe state police commissioner Sumonu Abdulmaliki, who has castigated the army troops’ from discontinuing their protective efforts in the area without informing local authorities of the potential security vacuum to be left in their wake.²

While Yobe authorities have blamed the army’s unanticipated withdrawal for the disgracefully inadequate response to the abduction, numerous civilians have reported that their warnings to local security officials of the presence of a nine-vehicle convoy of Islamic militants driving through an adjacent municipality had been ignored despite

¹ Amnesty International, [“Nigeria: Nine years after Chibok girls’ abducted, authorities failing to protect children”](#), 14 April 2023.

² Reuters, [“Nigerian army and police disagree over security in mass abduction town”](#), 26 February 2018.

promises of their “monitoring” the situation and responding.³ The vexation regarding the “inexcusable security lapses”⁴ which left over 100 young schoolgirls imperiled by an entirely preventable atrocity was further exacerbated by authorities’ shamefully uncoordinated reporting. Three days after the abduction, Yobe state officials stated that some of the girl victims had been rescued by army forces, only to retract such claim the following day, effectively rubbing salt in the wounds of the hundreds of relatives anxiously waiting for news about the girls’ status.⁵

At last, one month after the attack, in mid-March 2018, militants had released 101 victims to return to their families and communities. The anomalies included five young girls who tragically perished during and/or after the kidnapping, as well as a lone Christian girl, Leah Sharibu. Though Leah is the face of the hundreds of victims of mass abductions in Nigeria, she is more importantly a testament to these girls’ bravery and resilience in the face of danger. Subjected to repeated orders to renounce Christianity and conversion to Islam and threats of indefinite internment, Leah has remained resolutely steadfast in her faith, galvanizing admiration worldwide.

In response to ISWAP’s scheme to render Leah a “slave for life”⁶, the Nigerian presidency has asserted its determination to rescue Leah and return her safely to her family. However, five years have passed with negligible action to fulfill this promise. Whereas the Nigerian government is failing to provide updates regarding their strategy to extricate Leah from militant captivity, advocacy and relief organizations on the ground have proved themselves to be the only reliable actors in collecting information on Leah’s status and relaying it to the millions of Nigerians and global citizens who keep her in our hearts and minds. While we are relieved of recent updates that Leah is alive and physically healthy in captivity, we have been disheartened to have learned over the past few years of her forced marriage to a militant commander and birth of two young children.⁷

We are also further concerned about Leah’s situation in light of the testimonies of Nigerian girls and women who have been periodically set free by Boko Haram and ISWAP and who have shared the circumstances of their daily lives in captivity. In addition to being coercively transformed into domestic servants for the militants - cooking, cleaning, maintaining the barracks, treating injuries, child rearing, fetching water, repairing and maintaining weapons, and more - they have also been subjected to sexual servitude and Islamist indoctrination.⁸

Leah’s parents, Nathan and Rebecca Sharibu, have suffered for half a decade being separated from their daughter but remain hopeful in spite of adversity and government dereliction of duty. In December 2021, the couple relayed their wishes to a representative, Dr. Gloria Puldu of LEAH Foundation, who has informed us that “They said they were tired of speaking, crying and pleading with the government of Buhari, which is deaf to every call. They said they were tired of routine calls, which hurt so much that they had to just call on anyone who wished to stand with them to do so only in prayers.”⁹

Jubilee Campaign continues to keep Leah Sharibu and her two young children in our prayers, as well as her parents Nathan and Rebecca Sharibu and her siblings, and the many Nigerian girls and women who remain in forced servitude to Boko Haram and ISWAP. We pray for Leah’s and her children’s safety, health, and liberation. We pray for Nathan and Rebecca’s health, comfort, and unwavering hope. We pray that the Nigerian government will immediately undertake efforts and exhaust all possible avenues to secure the release of young Leah and her children and the reunion with their family.

³ Africa News, [“Nigeria was warned before Boko Haram abduction of Dapchi girls: Amnesty”](#), 21 March 2018

⁴ John Campbell, [“Controversy Surrounds Release of Most Dapchi Girls in Nigeria”](#), *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 March 2018.

⁵ BBC News, [“Nigeria Dapchi abductions: Timeline of events”](#), 23 March 2018.

⁶ Open Doors Canada, [“Leah Sharibu turns 20 while in captivity”](#), 12 May 2023.

⁷ International Christian Concern, [“Leah Sharibu Gives Birth to Her Second Child While in Captivity”](#), 24 March 2021.

⁸ Jubilee Campaign, [Kidnapping & Slavery in Nigeria](#), October 2021.

⁹ Friday Olorok, [“We’re tired of crying, pleading with Buhari over Leah Sharibu - Parents”](#), *Punch Nigeria*, 28 December 2021.

Jubilee Campaign also notes with concern the following school abductions which have transpired in recent years: Prince Academy School (August 2020; Kaduna); Government Science College (February 2021; Niger); Government Girls Secondary School (February 2021; Zamfara); Federal College of Forestry Mechanization (March 2021; Kaduna); Greenfield University (April 2021; Kaduna); The King's School (May 2021, Plateau); Bethel Baptist High School (July 2021; Kaduna); Government Day Secondary School (September 2021; Zamfara); and many more.



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