

News

Free from Boko Haram, Nigeria's Chibok Girls are Kept Silent

Most of the 1,000 kidnapped school girls remain captive, but many of those 'freed' are now held by the government

By **MICHELLE FAUL**
Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria — She was found wandering in a forest, the first of the nearly 300 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram to escape on her own and reach freedom. That was in May. Since then, Amina Ali Nkeki has been sequestered by Nigeria's intelligence agency, embraced just once by her family months ago.

Some say Nigeria's government is keeping the young woman silent because it doesn't want her telling the world about military blunders in the fight against the Islamic extremist group, or about her desire to be reunited with the father of her child — a detained former Boko Haram commander.

"I worry, sometimes,

that I don't know if she is alive or dead," her mother, Binta Ali Nkeki, sobbed during an exclusive telephone interview with The Associated Press from her remote northeastern village of Mbalala. She said she hasn't seen her daughter since July.

Sunday marks 1,000 days since the Chibok schoolgirls were abducted together from a government boarding school in April 2014. Most of them remain in captivity. The few who have been freed, like Amina, have found themselves not completely free.

The mass kidnapping horrified the world and brought Boko Haram international attention. The failure of Nigeria's former government to act quickly to free the girls sparked a global Bring Back Our Girls

movement; even U.S. first lady Michelle Obama posted a photo with its logo on social media.

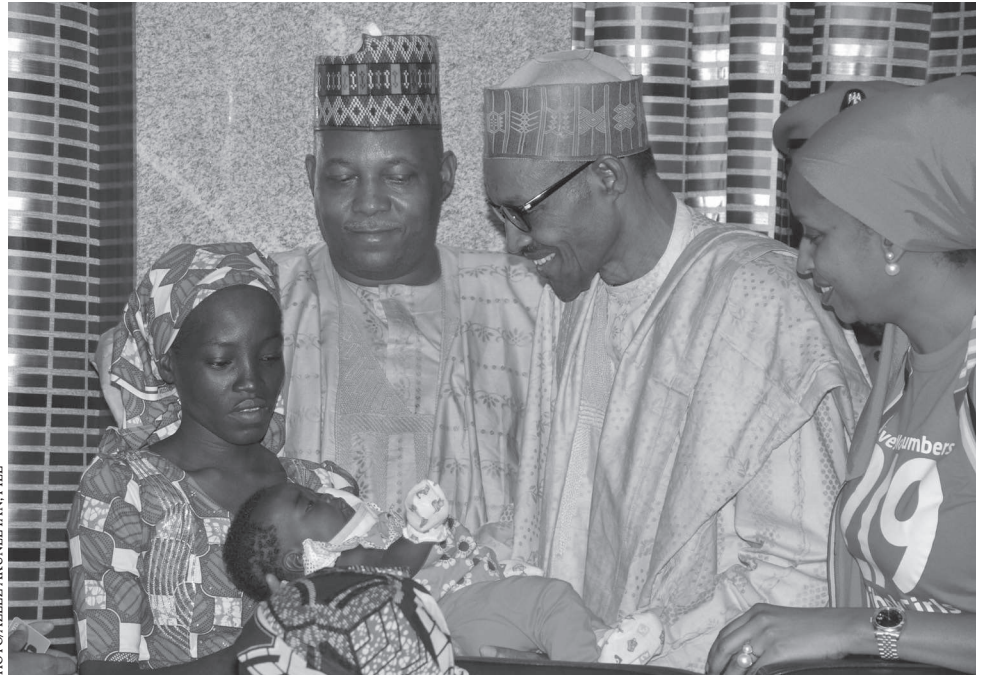
Amina was the first of the kidnapped girls to escape on her own. Months later, in October, the government negotiated the release of 21 Chibok girls. Another girl was freed in November in an army raid on an extremist camp in the Sambisa Forest.

On Thursday, one more was found during military interrogations of Boko Haram suspects, along with the baby she had given birth to in captivity.

When Amina's mother heard last month that "freed" girls would be allowed to come home for Christmas, she borrowed money to reach Chibok, the town where their former boarding school is located.

She was welcomed by the 21 girls, who tried to reassure her that her daughter was "fine, in good health," even though she had not been allowed to accompany them.

Human rights groups and lawyers have criticized Nigeria's treatment of the freed girls, who are held in Abuja, the capital,



In this Thursday, May 19, 2016 file photo, Nigeria President Muhammadu Buhari, second right, greets Amina Ali, left, the first rescued Chibok schoolgirl, at the Presidential palace in Abuja, Nigeria. She was found wandering in a forest, the first of the nearly 300 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram to escape on her own and reach freedom. Since then, Amina Ali Nkeki has been sequestered by Nigeria's secret intelligence agency. Sunday Jan. 8, 2017 marks 1,000 days since the mass kidnapping, and most of the Chibok schoolgirls remain in captivity.

nearly 900 kilometers (560 miles) from Chibok. The government says the girls are getting medical attention, trauma counseling and rehabilitation.

Officials in the government and the presidency did not respond to requests for comment, following a familiar pattern.

People who have spoken to the freed girls say they have stories the government does not want told, including that three Chibok girls were killed during Nigerian Air Force bombings of Boko Haram camps.

Amina, who is believed to be at least 20 though her uneducated mother says she has no idea, has insisted that her child's father is a victim, like herself, who was kidnapped by Boko Haram and forced to fight for the insurgents.

Binta says that when her daughter was rescued — hunters found

Amina, her 4-month-old baby girl and the father in a forest — she said she didn't want to go back to school. But her mother and brother, Noah, persuaded her to take up Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's promise to give her the best education possible.

"They told her that soon she will be starting school," Noah Ali Nkeki told the AP in an interview. He got the news in a rare phone call from his sister on Thursday, the first time he had heard from her in three months.

He cannot call her. Officials call him using a blocked number and then put Amina on the line. The girl's mother doesn't get to speak to her because she doesn't own a cellphone and reception in her village is poor.

"I don't know what the government is trying to do. They have had her

now for seven months," Noah said.

Binta, a gaunt woman whose eyes mirror the pain of a hard life and whose hands are rough from farming, was widowed five years ago. Eleven of her children have died, in childbirth or soon afterward. Abina and Noah are all she has.

"I wonder how my only grandchild is doing," she said of Amina's daughter, Safia. "Do you think she's walking by now?"

Binta was suicidal after her daughter's kidnapping, community leaders have told the AP. There were reports Boko Haram threatened to sell the kidnapped girls into slavery, marry them off to fighters and force them to convert to Islam. Chibok is a Christian enclave in mainly Muslim northern Nigeria.

Read the rest of this story at TheSkanner.com

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