



Militancy/Terrorism

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Nigeria Analysis: Boko Haram claims to abduct hundreds of students in Katsina State, underscoring threat posed by group as it expands to northwestern states

Executive Summary

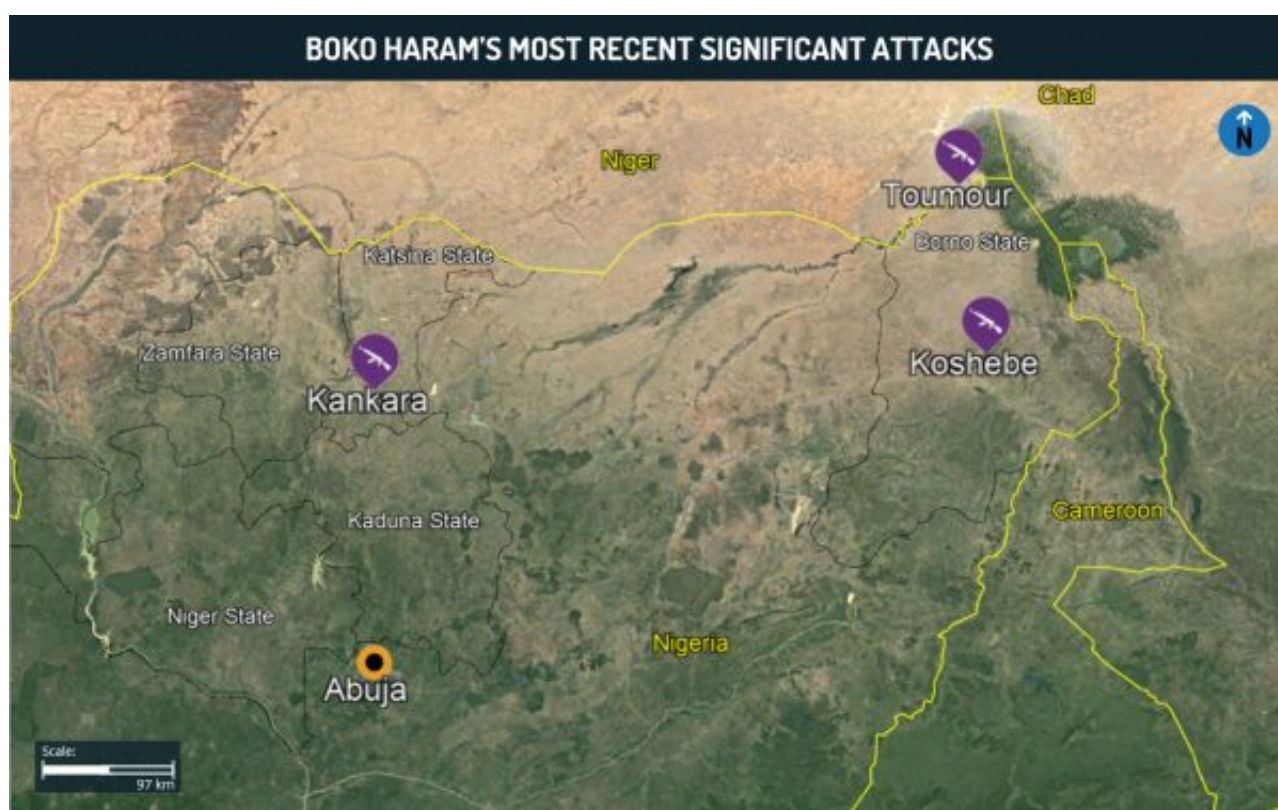
- Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released a video claiming responsibility for the abduction of several hundred students from a school in Kankara, Katsina State. This marked the group's first attack in northwestern Nigeria after Shekau claimed to have links with armed groups in Niger State in July.
- The Kankara attack suggests operational ties with bandit groups that are active in the area and the significant domestic and international response is likely to encourage further recruitment and allies, as well as bolstering Boko Haram's image in the Lake Chad basin region.
- This followed two large-scale attacks in Nigeria's Borno State and Niger's Diffa Region in the preceding two weeks, reflecting a deliberate effort to draw media attention after coming under pressure this year by both security forces and their Islamic State rivals.
- The group also stated its intentions to intensify activity during the Christmas season, which aligns with previous Boko Haram activity, and further attacks are likely in both the Lake Chad region as well as the northwest.
- **Avoid all travel to the Lake Chad basin region as well as Nigeria's Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, and Zamfara states due to extreme levels of militancy, banditry, and crime, with a particular risk of kidnapping while traveling along highways.**

Please be advised

- Reports from December 15 cite a 4.28 minute recording released by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in which he claimed responsibility for the abduction of several hundred students from a school in Kankara, Katsina State on December 11. Shekau claimed that the attack was perpetrated to promote Islam instead of "un-Islamic practices as Western education".
- On December 17, Boko Haram released a video showcasing the abducted children. One of the children says in English, "Please, you have to dissolve any gang of vigilantes, close any kind of schools, excluding Islamiyyah. All the troops who have come here to help us, please send them back."
- Sources cite Boko Haram members indicating that the group has yet to make ransom demands for 523 abducted children. The group has indicated that the delay in claiming the attack was because it wanted to ensure that the children were properly secured with the group.
- On December 14, the Katsina Governor Aminu Masari reportedly stated that the Kankara abductors had issued ransom demands and negotiations had begun to facilitate the children's release. He also said that security forces had identified the children's locations spread across forests in Katsina, Zamfara, and Kaduna states. This follows the December 12 announcement by the Nigerian Presidency that security forces located the bandits' hideout in a nearby forest and

exchanged fire with the assailants to rescue the children.

- Unconfirmed reports indicate that the abduction of the children was perpetrated by three different bandit groups working together and that Shekau had allegedly made a deal with the perpetrators to take the abducted children into his custody.
- Reports from December 14 cite a 2.53 minute video released by Boko Haram showcasing a masked fighter claiming responsibility for the death of at least 50 people during a raid targeting Toumour in Niger's Diffa Region on December 12-13. This town reportedly hosted large-scale internally displaced people (IDP) Nigerien as well as refugees from Nigeria's Borno State. In the video, the group reportedly stated that as Christmas approaches Boko Haram will intensify attacks.
- On December 1, Boko Haram circulated a video to media sources in which the group claimed responsibility for the attack in Koshobe, Borno State on November 28, in which over 70 farmers were killed allegedly in retaliation for the farmers handing over one of its militants to the security forces. The group also claimed responsibility for the death of 22 farmers during two separate attacks near Maiduguri in November.



Assessments & Forecast

Kankara attack demonstrates Boko Haram's growing presence, ties with bandit groups in northwestern states

1. Boko Haram's claim of responsibility for the Kankara attack marks the first operation officially conducted by the group in northwestern Nigeria. This follows the group's [release of a video in July](#) in which they claimed to have ties with armed groups in Niger State due to Shekau's negotiations with bandit groups to join Boko Haram. In this context, the Kankara abductions are a prime example of cooperation between bandits and jihadists, with the latter potentially providing the bandits with guidance, training, and funding. While bandit groups do typically organize kidnappings for ransom, such a large-scale attack on a soft target like a school is extremely rare. However, Boko Haram achieved international fame with its April 2014 attack on a school in Chibok,

Borno State during which they kidnapped 276 girls. The militant group has also engaged the federal government in negotiations for both prisoner exchanges and ransoms.

2. These indications are indicative of Boko Haram's involvement in the attack, with the possibility that it was orchestrated under Shekau's guidance. The attack is alleged to have been carried out by three bandit groups in cooperation with one another, while security forces have said the abducted children were scattered in several groups across forests in Katsina, Zamfara, and Kaduna states. This suggests that Shekau may have built alliances with several bandit groups across state borders who worked together to organize this attack. **FORECAST:** Given the apparent success of the Kankara abductions, additional similar attacks linked to Boko Haram could take place in other northwestern states. The concern regarding this threat is further illustrated by authorities closing schools in Kano, Zamfara, and Jigawa states.
3. At the same time, it is noteworthy that some of the information is contradictory. Both the Nigerian government and Boko Haram have a known tendency to inflate their stories to portray a more successful image. For example, Boko Haram claims to have 523 children in custody, but between children returning from hiding and others who escaped, it appears probable that this number is exaggerated in order to gain more attention. Similarly, the authorities' claim to have launched negotiations despite Boko Haram claiming to not have issued any demands yet suggests that it is possible the government is amplifying their efforts to rescue the children to appease the national outcry. There have been protests and widespread criticism of President Muhammadu Buhari for continued insecurity in the northwestern states. **FORECAST:** In these circumstances, authorities will likely attempt to reject the reports of the jihadist group's involvement given that it would only worsen public perceptions of the government in the northwest.
4. There remains the possibility that one of the bandit groups involved in the attack could have sought to negotiate independently with the government to exchange children for ransom. This could be done to avoid splitting ransom with Boko Haram or other bandits. **FORECAST:** With the northwestern states representing relatively new ground for Boko Haram and Shekau himself believed to be based in Borno State, the ability to maintain continued cooperation or links with the bandit groups may be compromised and the bandits may seek to break away. However, the Kankara incident would likely help Shekau bolster his influence among bandit groups in Katsina or other northwestern states and encourage them to join him. This is likely to be further reinforced by the government likely eventually paying the ransoms, as it has done in the past, and Shekau's intermediaries could use this success to persuade more bandits to join the jihadist movement.
5. **FORECAST:** Security forces can nonetheless be expected to continue efforts on the ground to locate the children and attempt rescue operations. The military may avoid certain efforts due to concerns about collateral damage in an operation. Ultimately, the Kankara attack continues to underscore the limitations of the Nigerian government in addressing insecurity in the northwest, which will additionally motivate the public backlash against the Buhari administration's security policies. Boko Haram's release of a video demonstrating that at least some of the children are in their custody is indicative of the militant group's understanding of this dynamic and are likely to release materials that will bring about media coverage of the attack in order to increase their leverage in negotiations going forward.



Screenshot from Boko Haram video released on December 17 showcasing children abducted in Kankara, Katsina State on December 11

Boko Haram organizes series of large-scale attacks to reinvigorate media attention after setbacks in Lake Chad region

1. The notoriety that Boko Haram is receiving for the attack in Kankara is likely something that the group is deliberately pursuing after some of the setbacks faced earlier in the year. The jihadist group came under significant pressure in the Lake Chad basin region due to targeted counter-militancy corporations in both Nigeria and Chad, as well as amid the rivalry with the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). Over the past year, ISWAP has expanded and entrenched itself in Borno State, which has traditionally been Shekau's stronghold. Recognition that Boko Haram is operational in the northwest would likely be extremely valuable to the group in gathering local and international attention as well as positioning itself as a viable security threat not only in the Lake Chad region but other parts of Nigeria as well.
2. The Kankara attack is the third significant event for which Boko Haram has claimed responsibility in two weeks. Previously, the group claimed responsibility for killing over 70 farmers in Koshobe, Borno State on November 28 and at least 51 civilians in Toumour, Niger on December 14. This represents a departure from Boko Haram's media activity in the past several months, as they have released propaganda intermittently that has been focused on religious or recruitment messages. Boko Haram has long avoided routinely claiming all or even most of its attacks but it is possible that this sudden uptick in propaganda efforts is a reflection of their only being able to mount large-scale attacks now after months of difficulties with regional security forces as well as ISWAP. Publicizing these attacks would then allow Shekau to reestablish the group's image as one that is powerful and resilient despite ISWAP's more sophisticated media activity.
3. This has been fairly successful in that Boko Haram has received significant media attention as a result of these attacks and claims. The events in Borno State have underscored that they remain a considerable threat in the Lake Chad region. The group's threat to intensify attacks during the

Christmas holidays aligns with their activity during the festive season in previous years as well as an effort to further capitalize on the attention due to the significance of this time for Western observers. **FORECAST:** In this context, Boko Haram is likely to conduct additional attacks in the Lake Chad region in the coming weeks, both large-scale and smaller village raids. The group is also likely to specifically target Christian communities in the region.

4. **FORECAST:** More broadly, the attacks and subsequent claims of responsibility in both Lake Chad and Katsina will help Boko Haram build its capabilities and recruit more fighters. It is likely that while some of the Kankara children will be ransomed, others will be forcibly recruited into the group. Shekau's intermediaries in the northwestern states are likely to take advantage of the attention to further recruit among bandit groups as well. Security forces are expected to elevate their deployments particularly around Christian communities in the Lake Chad region in the coming weeks, but given their limited capabilities, attacks are nonetheless likely to occur. Likewise, bandit groups linked to Boko Haram are likely to be able to withstand security operations in the northwestern states and thus further attacks are expected in the coming months.

Recommendations

1. Avoid all travel to Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, and Zamfara states due to extreme levels of banditry and crime, with a particular risk of kidnapping while traveling along highways.
2. We advise avoiding all travel to areas of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad within the Lake Chad Region given the extreme risk of militancy.
3. Travel to Abuja, Lagos, and Port Harcourt can continue while exercising increased vigilance and adhering to stringent security precautions regarding criminal and security threats.