

# Sixteen abducted Nigerian Baptists released

June 8, 2023

Sixteen members of Bege Baptist Church of Masala in central Nigeria were released June 4 after being kidnapped nearly a month earlier.

Gunmen abducted 43 individuals during a May 7 morning worship service at Bege Baptist Church in Nigeria's Kaduna State, John Joseph Hayab, national field director for [Global Peace Foundation-Nigeria](#), reported.



John Joseph Hayab

"Some escaped on their way, and the bandits released others who could not walk the long distance," Hayab wrote in a June 7 email to the *Baptist Standard*. "Four weeks later, the remaining 16 were released after ransom had been paid, with also some support from their Muslim neighbors."

Hayab, Kaduna State Chair of the Christian Association of Nigeria, told [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#) local Muslims contributed funds toward the ransom and also purchased a motorcycle requested by the kidnapers as part of the payment.

"We are grateful to the local Muslims who contributed towards the ransom,

and pray that from now onwards, the two religious communities will work together to bring this painful era of kidnapping, violence and killings to an end,” he told CSW.

## **Relief mingled with continued concern**

While religious freedom advocates applauded the interfaith cooperation that helped secure the release of the kidnapped Baptists, some registered concern about continued attacks on Christians and the government’s failure to provide security.

“We are grateful for the freedom of the 16 church members and for the efforts of the local Christian and Muslim communities to secure their release. However, local authorities in Kaduna and national leaders need to adopt much stronger security and legal protections to stop the ongoing cycle of violence against religious minorities” said Trent Martin, advocacy and training coordinator for the 21Wilberforce human rights organization.

“The United States must also not turn a blind eye to the deteriorating situation in Nigeria and should redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern to encourage swift action to end these widespread attacks on religious freedom.”

When the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issued its annual report](#) in May, it [recommended Nigeria be designated as a Country of Particular Concern](#)—a nation whose government engages in or tolerates “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations.”

“Rampant violence and atrocities across Nigeria continued to impact freedom of religion or belief for many Nigerians,” the report stated, pointing specifically to attacks on churches and individual Christians by the Islamic State West Africa Province.



Frank Wolf

In a May 1 virtual event marking the release of the report, Commissioner Frank Wolf—author of the International Religious Freedom Act when he served in the U.S. House of Representatives—described the situation in Nigeria succinctly.

“Nigeria is the most dangerous country in the world for Christians,” Wolf said.

[Terrorist attacks](#) claimed the lives of more than 200 Christians in the states of Benue and Kaduna in late March and early April in the aftermath of an election season.

“Despite government rhetoric calling for interfaith unity, the Nigerian government has generally failed to enact meaningful policy reforms and changes to address the drivers of violence impacting religious liberty,” the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom said in an [April 19 statement](#).

In a widely viewed video, Nasir el-Rufai, former governor of Kaduna State, expressed satisfaction at having secured Muslim dominance politically. During El-Rufai’s eight years as governor, predominantly Christian southern Kaduna experienced a significant rise in armed attacks.

CSW described the situation during his years in office as characterized by “thousands killed, thousands more displaced, and hundreds of villages

destroyed, occupied by militia or too dangerous to approach.”

Anyone who spoke out against abuses—as well as members of targeted communities who tried to defend their homes—were “regularly detained arbitrarily and indefinitely, disarmed, or harassed judicially,” CSW noted.

## **Baptist church among buildings demolished**

As the end of his time in office approached, El-Rufai ordered the demolition of more than 900 buildings—some belonging to a minority Shi’a community and others belonging to Christians, including Alheri Baptist Church on May 22.

Mervyn Thomas, founding president of CSW, welcomed the release of the 16 kidnapped Baptist worshippers and applauded members of the local Muslim community who contributed to secure their release.

“However, the comments of former governor El-Rufai illustrate that the situation remains highly charged as violations in southern Kaduna continue to manifest along religious fault lines while those with the power to end them have prioritized other agendas,” Thomas said.

“We also lament the unnecessary loss of lives in the latest irregular demolitions in Kaduna State, which largely target religious minorities or political opponents of the former governor, and were once again conducted in defiance of court orders.

“We urge the Nigerian authorities to challenge anyone who fosters religious division, to do far more to combat religion-related violence, and to prioritize the protection of vulnerable communities.”

Thomas also called on the international community to draw attention to the

human rights crisis in Nigeria and to urge “redress and compensation for the extrajudicial killings and demolitions in Kaduna State.”

John Gongwer, executive director of 21 Wilberforce, urged Nigerian religious and political leaders to work with the international community to seek reform.

“The reality is that this sequenced cycle of incident-lament-action-call has become a broken record and will continue to be until Nigerians work together with their international partners for change,” he said.

Gongwer noted 21Wilberforce is in discussions with Nigerian pastors, national and regional faith leaders, and Nigerian political and judicial officials to develop and support initiatives “that monitor and report on threats to religious freedom and, perhaps more importantly, to work to equip local partners on how to respond to and help mitigate these threats and human rights violations.”