News



A rural road in Imo State, Nigeria (Unsplash/Nnaemeka Ugochukwu)



by Doreen Ajiambo

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Thousands of religious sisters serving in the West African nation of Nigeria and beyond have rejoiced after gunmen on Oct. 14 released three of their colleagues who had been abducted early last week in Imo State, southern Nigeria.

The abductees included Srs. Rosemary Ejiowokeoghere Osiowhemu and Josephine Mary Chinyekwuo of the Missionary Daughters of Mater Ecclesiae and Maria Ngozi Okoye of the Risen Lord. The other two were seminarian Peter Eyakeno Sunday and driver Awoke Emmanuel.

"With gratitude to our great God, the superior general and the entire members of the Missionary Daughters of Mater Ecclesiae, joyfully announce the safe release of our three kidnapped nuns, a seminarian and the driver," the vicar general of the Missionary Daughters of Mater Ecclesiae in Nigeria, Sr. Gloria Nnabuchi, announced in a note shared with Global Sisters Report.

Nnabuchi continued to "sincerely appreciate the Church and all the people of goodwill for your kind support throughout this trial moment."

Sr. Constancia Mosakeng of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Lesotho reacted to the announcement, thanking God for the safe release of the sisters and the other two abductees. "We thank you God, for fighting for your humble and innocent people. Those who trust in the Lord shall never be harmed," she said.

The five were kidnapped Oct. 5 along the road to Mbano town on their way to the funeral of the mother of one of the nuns. Following their abduction, the Catholic Church in Nigeria urged the faithful to pray for their safe release.

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Africa's most populous country, especially in the northeast, has been experiencing insecurity since 2009, when the Boko Haram insurgency began with the objective of creating an Islamic state in the region.

Since then, the terrorist group has targeted and killed Christians, forcing most churches and schools to shut down. The security situation has further been complicated by other militia groups targeting Christians.

A new report by the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety) has established that more than 50 armed groups, most of them jihadist movements, have sprung up in Nigeria since 2015, targeting Christians and church institutions.

In Nigeria, a country of more than 213 million people, more than 5,000 believers have been killed for their faith in the last year, according to the recent Open Doors research. Further, the research also indicates that in the last year, more than 4,700 Christians were kidnapped for their faith, and at least 1,000 believers were raped, sexually assaulted or sexually harassed for their faith.

In 2022, for example, various reports showed that more than 100 priests and religious sisters were either kidnapped, arrested or killed by armed gunmen. The criminal gangs have always demanded ransom payment as a condition to release most hostages, but some have been killed or sexually abused.

The situation in the country has forced religious sisters to live in fear and worry about carrying out their ministries or even running their errands.



Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Florence Nwaonuma (CNS/Valentine Iwenwanne)

"I feel very bad and scared. These gangs are targeting sisters, and we don't know what to do now," said Sr. Florence Nwaonuma, a member of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, an indigenous congregation in Nigeria. "How do we work like this? We don't even want to go out anymore, and once you are out there, you have to be very careful because you are at risk."

Nwaonuma speculated that apart from the gangs targeting them because of their faith, they also believe sisters have money, and once they are abducted, the church can pay ransom for their release.

"I think that just like many African countries, people believe sisters have money, and this puts us at risk," she said, noting that the kidnappers always aim at exploiting

the financial resources of the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, Nwaonuma urged religious sisters living in risk regions to take safety precautions and not to abandon their ministries amid the increased attacks on religious leaders, especially the sisters.

"The sisters should not leave their communities too early and not stay away beyond 6 p.m.," she said, warning sisters to avoid lonely roads. "But despite the kidnappings, the work of God has to be done. Therefore, I encourage sisters to continue carrying out their ministries and have faith in God to protect them."