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Smuggled diary tells how abducted women survived Boko Haram camp

There was a rescue campaign on Twitter, but the women taken from a Nigerian school were saved by their strength and diplomacy

Naomi Adamu, the Chibok student who led resistance among the women to their Boko Haram captors. Photograph: Mohammed Bukar

The resistance began three months after the young women were taken from their school dormitory by Islamist militants and hidden in the depths of a forest. It would end in direct confrontation and disobedience, and an unlikely victory which saved their lives.

But as the extremists of Boko Haram drove them through the bush to camps beyond the reach of any rescue, freedom was years away.

The story of the extraordinary courage of the women held for up to three years by the Islamist extremists in north-eastern Nigeria has never been told, despite the massive global attention focused on their abduction in April 2014.

The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls was tweeted by Michelle Obama, Kim Kardashian, the pope and others, in one of the most prominent examples of online activism ever. It brought the engagement of some of the most powerful states in the world, the dispatch of hundreds of troops and billions of dollars of military hardware to west Africa.

But now a book, due to be published early next month, will reveal the reality of life for the more than 200 women from the school in Chibok, who were kept as hostages in one of the most infamous mass abductions of recent decades.

“We wanted to tell the story of how these women survived, but also the story of why it took so long to free them in spite of, or perhaps because of, the social media campaign,” said Joe

Parkinson, a co-author of *Bring Back Our Girls*, which is based on hundreds of interviews with the students, family members, former militants, officials, spies and others involved in their ordeal.

Among the students was Naomi Adamu. Her defiance began when the extremists told the students to swap their school uniforms for a black, flowing, all-covering garment. The 24-year-old kept her chequered blue dress, and then, risking a beating or worse, she began a diary.

The notebooks she eventually brought with her out of the forest provided much of the raw material for the book.

The wife of the vice-president of Nigeria, Dolapo Osinbajo, consoles one of the 21 released Chibok girls in October 2016. Photograph: STR/EPA

Adamu wrote on the days when it was safe, after compulsory lessons on the Qur'an and foraging for meagre rations from the forest.

The small act of rebellion gave her strength. When her Boko Haram minders told her she would be killed if she did not convert, marry a fighter and bear his children, she refused and was beaten with the butt of a rifle. Her captors did not follow through on their lethal threat, nor were she or the others who refused "marriage" subjected to sexual abuse. But they were condemned to backbreaking labour as "slaves".

By mid-2015, with Boko Haram now on the retreat, Adamu and her closest friends were starting to lose their fear of the extremists. Inspired by her example, the other hostages began to fight back too, risking lashings with sticks and wire.

"I became the leader of our girls because I was the eldest among them and I was the most stubborn. Boko Haram wanted me to convert as an example because they knew the other girls listened to me – they beat me and bullied me and threatened to kill me, but I told them even if the heaven and earth come together I will not marry," Adamu told the authors.

Soon, some of the hostages were openly insubordinate, refusing orders and being beaten repeatedly. They began quietly singing hymns when their guards were distracted. Then the singing got louder.

A small group of the most defiant students was separated. Adamu, their leader, was dubbed "the chief infidel" by furious Boko Haram leaders.

"When they realised we don't wear hijab like the other girls they beat us and said they would cut off our heads. They made us wear hijab and pray but we decided together to fake the ceremony. We mouthed Christian prayers and told each other the story of Job," said Adamu.

Once again the students were told they would be killed if they did not submit and convert. Again the small group of rebels refused.

"At a certain point we had seen so many bodies, we were no longer afraid to die," she told the authors.

When Boko Haram tried to starve others into obedience, Adamu helped organise a clandestine supply of rice to fuel resistance. The tactic worked, and more and more students began to renounce the faith they said they had adopted only out of fear.
But beyond the forest, attempts to rescue the students were flagging.
“Twitter generated outrage … but not the actual means to free anybody,” said Parkinson. Nigeria’s feuding spy agencies called off a series of early deals, which probably would have freed all of the girls. The president himself suspected that the abduction was a hoax, set up by political rivals. Key informants close to Boko Haram were arrested by Nigeria’s military. A British spy plane sent to search for the women broke down en route to the country. Mutual distrust and poor relations with the Nigerians hindered the work of the 38 strong “interdisciplinary assistance team” deployed by the US. A botched air strike on Boko Haram’s headquarters left 10 of the girls dead and 30 or more injured, some maimed for life.

Some of the women being led to safety aboard a Nigerian army helicopter in 2017. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images
But Adamu remained determined to resist. “Partly I was strong because I was angry. I was angry we had been kidnapped before graduation,” she said. “And I was angry when 30 girls converted to Islam and got married … I felt some didn’t fight hard enough. It divided the group and weakened our resolve. People accepted they wouldn’t go home,” Adamu said.
Time was running out. The students were close to starvation, their rations were cut again and again. There was hope, however. Boko Haram was weaker than it had been since its resurgence in 2009, and increasingly fractured, with factions divided over what to do with their globally famous hostages.
A small team of Nigerian volunteers led by a diplomat from a little-known department of Switzerland’s foreign ministry, the human security division, had been working on a deal to free the students. In October 2016, a first batch of 21 students was released in return for a handful of senior Boko Haram militants. Then, seven months later, another 82. But at least 40 have died in the forest. Dozens are still there.
Adamu, defiant to the end, strapped her secret diaries to her body to carry them to freedom as she walked out through the bush. Driving away, she and the others chanted a Chibok song: “Today is a happy day.”
Parkinson, a reporter in Africa with the *Wall Street Journal*, said the story of the students raised an important question about dealing with extremists.
“The small team that ultimately answered the global demand to rescue the Chibok girls worked in secret for one of the world’s most discrete governments and smallest states. Its success relied not on loudly expressing moral judgment but on suspending it. They tried to reason with Boko Haram instead of denouncing it,” he said.
Adamu remains in northern Nigeria with ambitions to have her own family and set up some kind of business. But she is still not safe. Since the abduction of the Chibok students, Boko

Haram has kidnapped more than 10,000 boys as child fighters as well as a similar number of girls and women, who have been used to make ransom demands to their families or forced into marriage.

“Our chief problem is that Chibok is now in danger again … If nothing changes it will only be a short time until one of us is kidnapped again,” she said.

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