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Vatican City — August 22, 2022
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Four Catholic nuns kidnapped Aug. 21 in southeast Nigeria were released two days later, their order said.

"With hearts full of joy, the Sisters of Jesus the Savior wish to announce the unconditional and safe release of four of our sisters," said an Aug. 23 statement from Sr. Zita Ihedoro, secretary-general. She thanked people for their "prayers and moral support during this difficult moment."

Fides, information service of the Pontifical Mission Societies, identified the four as Srs. Johannes Nwodo, Christabel Echemazu, Liberata Mbamalu and Benita Agu, members of the Sisters of Jesus the Savior.

The Nigerian order has more than 160 members, with formation houses in River and Abia states.

The four nuns were abducted while traveling from Rivers state to Imo state for a thanksgiving Mass when they were kidnapped.

Kidnappings for ransom have been common in northwestern Nigeria, but are starting to spread to other areas of the country.

U.S.-based National Public Radio reported that in June 2021 alone, about 45 people per day were kidnapped for ransom in Nigeria.

In May, Archbishop Matthew Ndagoso of Kaduna, vice president of the bishops' conference, told an online forum: "Banditry has taken a new dimension in the last three to four years as bandits now use sophisticated weapons to massively destroy villages and their properties, kidnapping for ransom during the day time and at night."

He blamed the country's porous borders for the importation of increasingly sophisticated weapons that fuel growing insecurity. He also called on the government to control how arms and ammunition were being imported and to prosecute those found to illegally possess arms and ammunition.

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Editor's note: *This article was updated at 10:45 a.m. Central time Aug. 24.*