News
Religious Life



Women religious are pictured in a file photo entering a church in Abuja, Nigeria. Two Nigerian sisters who were kidnapped Jan. 7 as they returned home from a meeting in Anambra, a state in Nigeria, were freed Jan. 13 with no conditions. (OSV News/Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters)

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Two Nigerian women religious who were kidnapped Jan. 7 as they returned home from a meeting in Ogboji, a town in Anambra state in Nigeria, were freed Jan. 13 with no conditions, their congregation said.

Sister Vincentia Maria Nwankwo and Sister Grace Mariette Okoli, who were returning from a vocational associations' meeting and were taken along Ufuma Road, are members of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Mother of Christ of Onitsha, in southern Nigeria.

"We are happy to announce that our dear Sisters ... have been released without any conditions and are in good health," the congregation said in a statement, expressing gratitude "to God and all of you for your prayers and support during these difficult and uncertain days."

The two nuns both head Catholic schools: Vincentia Maria is the principal of Archbishop Charles Heerey Memorial Model Secondary School in Ufuma, and Grace Mariette is the principal of Immaculate Girls Model Secondary School in Nnewi.

In a Jan. 7 statement shared with OSV News Sister Maria Sobenna Ikeotuonye, the congregation's secretary general, had said she was saddened at the news of the kidnapping, and called for "fervent prayers and supplications to God that they may be released as soon as possible and come back to us safe and sound."

The earlier prayer of the congregation that they "be released unconditionally" was heard.

The secretary general commended the two nuns to "the powerful intercession of our Blessed Mother Mary for their speedy release from the hands of their kidnappers."

Intersociety, a well-known Catholic-inspired organization for civil liberties and a fervent advocate of human and religious rights in Nigeria, joined its voice in calls for the immediate release of the nuns after the Jan. 7 abduction.

In talking with OSV News, Emeka Umeagbalasi, the society's executive director, lamented that attacks on the clergy as well as kidnapping for ransom has become current currency in several parts of Nigeria.

"Just about three weeks ago, a reverend father was killed. Now we are talking about the abduction of two reverend sisters in the same Anambra state. Barely one month

ago, a retired Anglican archbishop was abducted and it took more than three weeks for an undisclosed amount of money running into millions of nairas (Nigeria's currency) to be paid for him to be released," Umeagbalasi told OSVNews.

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He regretted that in the midst of all these abductions and killings, the security agencies seemed helpless. Umeagbalasi's frustration with the lack of action is also personal.

"On the 5th of December, my family members: my wife, my son, the house (maid), and my driver were nearly abducted by the same persons of the underworld," he told OSV News.

He said his family might have survived, but their vehicle was taken by the attackers, getting away with many valuable items.

In Nigeria, armed gangs locally known as "bandits" — which target Christians — were making 2024 the worst year for security in the region's recent history. In November, the "bandits" had kidnapped — and released — three Catholic priests.

While comprehensive data has not been given for 2024 yet, between September 2022 and August 2023 alone, 21 Catholic priests were kidnapped in Nigeria, the bishops' conference said.

The Fulani herders — militia dubbed the fourth deadliest terror group in the world — also kidnapped civilians, abducted schoolchildren for ransom, while seizing farms and displacing thousands of Christian farmers.

Over the last nine years, the Nigerian paramilitary organizations but also official police and military, massacred an estimated 32,300 civilians in the southeast of the country, according to a Dec. 22 report by Intersociety.

The report also highlighted that criminal groups killed over 14,500 citizens between August 2015 and December 2024. During this period, around 65,000 civilians were forced to pay over $320 million in ransoms, according to Intersociety.

Tragically, about 6,500 kidnapped individuals who couldn't pay the ransom were killed, while those who did pay were still tortured before being released.

Although no group has claimed responsibility for the latest kidnapping, Nigeria continues to suffer from violence perpetrated by various terrorist organizations, including Fulani herders or Boko Haram, terror group responsible for the 2014 Chibok girls kidnapping, seeing 276 schoolgirls disappeared, 90 of whom are still missing.