



3.23.18

NIGERIA | Lawyers Call for Release of Girl

The Christian Lawyers Fellowship of Nigeria (CLASFON) called on President Buhari to ensure the release of Leah Sharibu, the Christian girl from Dapchi currently being held by the Boko Haram terrorist group for refusing to renounce her faith in exchange for freedom.

In a statement issued March 22 and signed by its president, CLASFON described the continued captivity of Leah Sharibu as “disheartening” and called on the federal government “to live up to its responsibility and uphold the tenets and principles of the Nigerian constitution. Every citizen has a right to be protected irrespective of his/her gender, culture and religious belief.” The group also asked the president to “ensure the immediate release of Leah Sharibu and the other remaining Chibok girls.”

On March 21, Boko Haram returned 104 of the 110 girls they abducted Feb. 19 from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, along with a male and female minors. The move reportedly followed the conclusion of an agreement that saw armed forces withdraw from the town, allowing the terrorists unhindered access.

The returning students confirmed that Leah Sharibu was “held back on religious grounds” due to her refusal to renounce her faith and wear a hijab. In an interview with Nigerian media, one of the girls speculated that she and the others may have been released “because we are Muslims and they felt it was right for them to free us so that we will not suffer.” The returnees also confirmed that five of the younger students died during their arduous journey “because they were trampled inside the vehicles,” and were buried in the bush.

Video footage of Leah’s family soon after they learned of her plight showed her mother, Rebecca Sharibu, in a state of extreme shock, while her sister fainted. In a comment to Nigerian media her father Nathan Sharibu said, “They gave her the option of converting in order to be released but she said she will never become a Muslim. I am very sad... but I’m also jubilating too because my daughter did not denounce Christ.”

Her mother later added that Leah had been prevented from leaving with the others at the last minute, and was in the custody of three Boko Haram women. She had sent a message asking her family "to pray for the will of God to be done in her life." Mrs. Sharibu urged the government to "revisit the terms of the agreement to ensure the release of my daughter."

Facing mounting criticism for brokering a deal that left one child behind, the presidency issued a statement March 22 pledging it would "not relent in efforts to bring Leah Sharibu safely back home to her parents." It also denied reports it had paid a ransom to the terrorist group, stating that military maneuvers prevented the terrorists from reaching the Lake Chad area, putting pressure on them to return the girls.

The militants who kidnapped the girls are from the Al Barnawi faction of Boko Haram, which broke away from the faction led by Abubakar al Shekau following disagreements about attacks on worship centers in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Its leader, Abu Mussab al-Barnawi, is thought to be related to Boko Haram's late founder and is recognized by Islamic State (IS, Daesh).

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes the return of the 104 girls, and extends our deepest condolences to the families of the five who died during this terrible ordeal. We are perplexed and saddened that Leah was excluded from the agreement that was brokered for the return of the children and add our voice to calls for the government of Nigeria to prioritize her safe return to her family. We also urge the administration to put in place a holistic strategy to protect educational establishments in vulnerable communities and to ensure that every girl is free to pursue an education without fear."