

US security mission arrives in Nigeria

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Only days after pressing a reluctant President Goodluck Jonathan into accepting US “help” in rescuing 223 school girls held captive by the Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram, the Obama administration is conducting surveillance flights over Nigeria.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said that all but one of the 27-member team of advisers and security personnel have set up office in the capital Abuja to oversee their operations in Nigeria. Those in place include five State Department officials, ten Pentagon planners and advisers, seven African Command troops, and four FBI kidnap recovery specialists.

“The scope of that assistance has been outlined, and it includes military and law enforcement assistance, advisory assistance, as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support,” Carney said.

Finding the schoolgirls would not be easy, as US forces would be searching an area the size of New England, he said. He was thereby serving notice that US forces were there to stay and would likely be increased.

The meaning of “US advisors” quickly became clear. Referring to the suggestion from the Boko Haram leader that the group would negotiate for a ransom, prisoner exchange or some other deal, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the Obama administration would oppose paying any ransom for some or all of the girls, although the decision rested with the Nigerian government. “The United States policy... is to deny kidnappers the benefits of their criminal acts, including ransoms or concessions,” she said.

Jonathan dutifully toed the line and rejected any deal with the kidnappers.

His government and its clique of wealthy backers are so widely despised that Abuja has little effective control over vast swathes of the country. The Muslim northeast has been under a state of emergency for a

year and the army has failed to defeat the Boko Haram insurgency. In the Niger Delta region in the southeast, at least 10 percent of oil production is lost as a result of theft and illegal bunkering on an industrial scale.

The president ignored the girls’ abduction for three weeks and then blamed their parents for failing to provide enough information about their identities. When protests broke out over the failure to do anything to secure the girls’ release, the president’s wife, Patience Jonathan, ordered the arrest of two leaders of the protests, accusing them of belonging to Boko Haram and fabricating the report of the kidnappings to discredit the government.

Under conditions where the government is tottering, the US has--to all intents and purposes--taken over the running of Nigeria, with the search for the schoolgirls providing a convenient cover. Jonathan’s presidency will last only so long as he carries out Washington’s dictates.

Britain, France, Canada, China and Israel have also sent specialist teams and equipment to help the search.

French President Francois Hollande has seized the opportunity to call for a summit meeting on security in West Africa, focusing on Boko Haram, to be held in Paris at the weekend. The meeting is likely to include the leaders of at least five of Nigeria’s neighbours: Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin.

The deployment of the Western forces marks a significant escalation in the ongoing military intervention by Washington and its allies in Africa--from North and East Africa, to the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, to oil-rich West Africa.

The aim of this “pivot to Africa” is to secure the continent’s huge mineral and energy resources against competition from China, which has overtaken the US as Africa’s principal trading partner.

The mobilisation of a neo-colonial venture in a country that has overtaken South Africa to become the

world's 27th largest economy has been legitimised by an international social media campaign around the hashtag #BringOurGirlsBack. It received a big boost from the World Economic Forum on Africa, meeting in Abuja last week, where African billionaire business leaders and the CEOs of giant transnational corporations and financial institutions rubbed shoulders.

So hostile is their agenda to the broad mass of the population that businesses and schools were closed in the capital and their hotels and meeting places had to be protected by 6,000 security personnel, including some from the US.

Of some significance was the backing the forum received from the Women in Enterprise conference meeting at the same time in Lagos. In attendance were well-known feminists and some of the world's most powerful women in the media, fashion, business and politics. Their role was to use gender issues to advance the predatory interests of US imperialism, by demanding international intervention, i.e., military action, to secure the girls' release.

In Washington, female members of the Congressional Black Caucus held a press conference to denounce the actions of Boko Haram and demand the return of the schoolgirls to their families.

The campaign reached a crescendo when US President Barack Obama turned over his weekly radio slot to First Lady Michelle, who mouthed inanities about how "In these girls, Barack and I see our daughters. We see their hopes, their dreams and we can only imagine the anguish their parents are feeling right now."

The Obamas are very selective in their anguish. According to UNICEF, an estimated 4.7 million children in Nigeria of primary school age are not in school, and it is not uncommon to see cases of 100 pupils per teacher or students sitting under trees outside the school building because there are not enough classrooms. In some of the northern states of Nigeria, the ratio of girls to boys ranges from 1 to 2 to 1 to 3.

Alongside Nigeria's 16,000 millionaires, the official rate of unemployment was 23 percent in 2011, while an estimated 70 percent of the population lived below the poverty line in 2010.

The "humanitarian" chorus was taken up and amplified by the corporate media on behalf of

Washington and big business' right to plunder the resources of some of the most impoverished people on the planet. Such campaigns have become a favoured means of legitimising wars for regime change and overcoming mass opposition on the part of the public to colonialism.

The moral outrage bears a striking similarity to the #Kony2012 campaign to capture Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, which was responsible for abducting hundreds of children across Central Africa. That ended up with the deployment of hundreds of US special operations troops in Uganda and neighbouring countries, which have since been augmented with advanced CV-22 Osprey warplanes, capable of vertical takeoffs and landings. Two-and-a-half years later, Kony still has not been captured.

A Pentagon official said that the military were also considering whether to send drones to Nigeria. He revealed more than perhaps he realised when he said that drones could be diverted to the country from the search for Kony in East Africa.

Behind the moral outrage lies the concern over China's increasing presence in Nigeria. Such is the volume of business that there are now daily flights between the two countries. More than 17,000 Chinese are legally resident in Lagos and neighbouring Ogun State, but the real number is believed to be much higher. Nigeria's main attraction is its oil, with a Chinese corporation announcing in January a \$10 billion investment in oil and gas exploration in the Bida basin in Niger State.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has offered to help Nigeria's fight against terrorism, including providing military training for anti-insurgency operations.



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