

THE HILL

OPINION, P. 26
REP. WILSON:
BOKO HARAM IS
'SO ENAMORED'
WITH ISIS

MISFIRES ON
RECENT RACES
TRIGGER BIG
QUESTIONS ON
POLLSTERS, P. 4



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comment

For the Chibok schoolgirls

By Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-Fla.)

Nearly 600 days ago, Boko Haram captured the world's attention when it kidnapped a group of more than 250 children in Nigeria. The Chibok schoolgirls now symbolize the thousands of lives and communities the group has destroyed in its ongoing reign of terror.

I have visited Nigeria twice since that fateful night. And in conversations with families whose girls are still missing, other victims, Nigerian lawmakers and the girls who thankfully escaped the terrorist group's grip, I have heard countless tales of unfathomable horror.

Boko Haram's only allegiance is to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), so its viciousness knows no bounds, especially with regard to women and girls.

There's a knock at the door. A young girl answers, and on the other side is a pair of Boko Haram insurgents. They kill her parents and then decapitate her brother because he would likely end up a pastor like his father. The girl spends the next few days tied up, sandwiched between her dead father and brother.

In another village, a suicide bomb has gone off. Although unproven, some believe that Boko Haram is using captive Chibok girls to spread its terror.

Whenever a bombing occurs, I've been told, the missing girls' families race to the site, desperate to see the girl's face to determine whether it was their daughter who'd been forced to carry out the attack.

Suicide bombs are a technique straight out of the ISIS playbook and one that Boko Haram has employed for years. But according to U.S. military officials, there is growing evidence that it is receiving counseling from ISIS and mirroring its tactics, such as grisly video beheadings.

Efforts by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) of troops from Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Benin to root out and defeat the insurgents is showing signs of progress. And a "100 Most Wanted" poster of Boko Haram's top leaders is even yielding results. Unfortunately, the group is turning its attention beyond Nigeria in hope of spreading its harm.

The White House plans to deploy 300 troops to Cameroon to provide "intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance" support to the MNJTF. It's a great first step in the right direction, many say, but I believe much more must be done.

That is why I have introduced H.R. 3833, legislation that directs the departments of State and Defense to jointly develop a five-year plan to assist the MNJTF in defeating Boko Ha-

ram, help rebuild the region's social and economic infrastructure and eradicate the conditions that have allowed the terrorist group's rise.

The plan must address humanitarian support for civilians and security for schools. In September, the Senate passed companion legislation introduced by Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) to combat Boko Haram.

There are many issues on which congressional Democrats and Republicans disagree. It has been so gratifying to discover that the need to extinguish Boko Haram is something on which we agree.

I see that each week on Wear Something Red Wednesday, when Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), Assistant Democratic Leader James Clyburn (D-S.C.), Republican Conference Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rogers (Wash.) and a bipartisan group of men and women gather on the Capitol steps to meet with reporters and take photos that can be used in our daily #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign.

It's not unusual for a member new to these efforts to ask why I have been so relentless in pursuing their support, especially during periods when global interest has appeared to wane. My answer is twofold.

Boko Haram is so enamored with ISIS that it wants to emulate the group in

every possible way. I am fearful that it will try to replicate ISIS's efforts to recruit disillusioned and disaffected American boys and men of color.

Many young men living in our urban districts have no education, no jobs and no hope. They do, however, have Internet access and are ripe for the picking. This is a potential problem that is not discussed nearly enough, and it would be a travesty to wait for Boko Haram to strike on American soil before we take its threat to our homeland more seriously.

My guiding light, however, is the safe return of the Chibok girls still being held captive. Until they're returned, I will keep pressing the U.S. and Nigerian governments to work together. I will continue to tweet and post Facebook messages calling for their return and urge my colleagues to wear something red every Wednesday.

During both visits to Nigeria, I met with several Chibok girls who escaped from Boko Haram. It is both heart-breaking and heartwarming to witness these girls, who are still so young and somehow still innocent, courageously defying their former captors in the best way possible — by getting an education and preparing to make their marks on the world.

For nearly 600 days, I have waited for 219 other prayers to be answered. I won't give up until that happens.

Wilson represents Florida's 24th Congressional District and has served in the House since 2011. She sits on the Education and the Workforce Committee.