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Nigeria: Chibok Girls - Hold Lawmakers Accountable, U.S. Congresswoman Tells Nigerians

By Martins Oloja
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Minneapolis, United States — A MEMBER of the United States House of Representatives, Hon. Frederica Wilson (D, Florida) has said that Nigerians and indeed the mass media, should henceforth, put more pressure on their overpaid elected representatives at the national and state assemblies to find the missing 219 Chibok girls and end the Boko Haram insurgency.

Apparently angry about what she saw as a gross dereliction of representation by members of the National Assembly in Nigeria, the Congresswoman told The Guardian that Nigerian citizens should look in the direction of the people "they stood in the sun for several hours to elect" to evolve strategies to find the missing girls and end the scourge called Boko Haram.

Wilson, who returned from Nigeria last Wednesday on the insurgency challenge mission, gave the charge at the weekend at a symposium organised on the Chibok girls by the National Association of Black Journalists in the United States, which will end its annual convention today in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States.

According to Representative Wilson who was resplendent in a red blazer and tomato-red hat outfit popularised by the BringBackOurGirls campaigners in Nigeria: "Yes, you need to put pressure on the elected representatives. They make a quarter of a million dollars in a year. We don't make that at the Congress!

"The people of Nigeria need to tell them: 'We didn't elect you to stand by and allow Boko Haram to take over. We elected you to come together to fight Boko Haram, to do what you can to fund and train the military to fight Boko Haram and to find the girls...'"

In a passionate tone, she told The Guardian after the panel discussion moderated by CNN's Michaela Pereira: "You can't hold America to fight the fire for you. You should hold the elected representatives to fight the fire. Tell them, we elected you to find homes and places for the thousands of displaced people. There are thousands and thousands of internally displaced people that have to be resettled."

Wilson told The Guardian further what parliamentarians should do in a representative democracy, apart from law making in the chambers:

"The citizens have to tell the elected representatives, this is a democracy. If you want to be a democracy, you have to act as a democracy. Tell them there are thousands and thousands of people that have been displaced by Boko Haram. They don't have places to go. What are your representatives doing about that?"

The Congresswoman, who said she would return to Nigeria soon to train some people on the art of holding the people to act as a democracy, said she would join others in the United States on August 27 when the abducted Chibok girls would clock about 500 days in captivity.

The lawmaker who assisted in getting U.S. study visa for 10 Chibok girls who escaped from the insurgents after the April 2014 abduction disclosed to The Guardian that she was pleasantly concerned that the girls who jumped the Boko Haram trucks and escaped and many other girls from the area are hungry for education.

Her words: "They want an education. They want to go to school. We have Americans who don't want to go to school. But these girls want to go to school. They have a worth. They have a future. They cannot be held captive... "

She said it was gratifying to note that a Nigerian community in Miami, Florida is trying to help in the education of the children. The 10 Chibok girls are in the United States high school courtesy of a non-governmental organisation, "Education Must Continue Initiative," formed by a Nigerian lawyer at the Georgetown University in Virginia, Mr. Emmanuel Ogebe.

Ogebe brought one of the 10 girls, simply addressed as 'Joy', to the black journalists' programme. The girl who narrated how she and three others escaped from their captors said she would like to be a physician.

"I would like to read to be a Doctor," she told the audience.

Representative Wilson in response to another question said she has been involved because: "First I am a mother. I was a school principal. So I am convinced that education is the key to everything. Education is the key to fighting poverty, education is critical to healthcare, criminal justice system... "

She said it was painful that some of the Chibok girls' fathers have died of heart attack while waiting for the return of their daughters.

"They want to hear that their daughters are alive when we meet them. But we can't say that even as we tell them, 'don't give up'. We too won't give up. We will continue with education of those that escaped. I feel that if you get education, you can make it in life."

The Congresswoman said she had some impressions from recent developments and attitude of Nigeria's current President Muhammadu Buhari that something more concrete would be done about the girls and the fight against Boko Haram.

Her words: "He (the president) came to the United States and I met with him. And I went to Nigeria on the issue and returned only this Wednesday. I met him and he said he would do something. Former President Jonathan didn't meet people to give assurance like that. We have heard some intelligence from local sources in Nigeria and even in the United States that something concrete would happen. But we can't give any assurance to anybody..."

The panel discussion, which involved Joy (surname and location withheld), featured Emmanuel Ogebe, Vladimir Duthiers, former CNN West Africa Bureau Chief in Lagos now with CBS News, U.S.), John Yearwood, Miami Herald and International Press Foundation and U.S. Representative, Frederica Wilson.

Chibok girl admitted to U.S. university

Meanwhile, after an 11-month sojourn in the U.S., one of the escaped Chibok girls currently schooling there has secured admission to a university.

Speaking exclusively to The Guardian during the convention, guardian of the 10 Chibok girls who relocated to the U.S., Ogebe, said this was a "major and unexpected breakthrough."

Ogebe, a human rights lawyer and director of 'Education Must Continue Initiative,' said during a special session of the NABJ on the abducted Chibok girls, that after meeting some of the escaped girls in Abuja, he was moved by their plight and concerned about their safety.

He said upon returning to the U.S., he worked hard to obtain continuing academic opportunities for them as the girls were fearful of further attacks by Boko Haram if they returned to school.

At the colloquium, Duthiers recalled that part of the challenges of covering Nigeria's dreaded Boko Haram and indeed trailing the missing girls included the fact that

"government and the military authorities had not been" transparent about helping journalists to access the area."

He said Nigeria is the giant of Africa "with massive connection to the U.S" but agreed with Yearwood that "it is not the most transparent in the world"

On his part, Yearwood, a chieftain of International Press Foundation, noted that part of the fundamental challenge was that even the wife of former President Goodluck Jonathan had denied initially that there was a kidnap in Chibok, saying "it was a wicked rumour".

Yearwood said it was paradoxical that Nigeria which is richer than some Gulf states cannot find evidence of oil wealth and so, lack of transparency in the system and indeed the military, might have affected management of the missing girls saga.

But Ogebe wondered why the U.S would deny Nigeria the chance to buy arms "since government is not asking for grant or gift of arms.

"That way, the U.S is making the job of tackling insurgency difficult for President Buhari that just visited them",

The Guardian observed that many African Americans in the hall could not control themselves as they shed tears while Joy was narrating her gory tale, especially when she aptly thanked everybody that came and have been supporting and prayed that God would remember their labour of love.

'How we escaped from our captors in April 2014'

During the panel discussion, Joy narrated her story of abduction and escape on April 14, 2014.

"They kept us under a tree and asked us to say our last prayers. Some of us were crying and some were praying."

Then, their Boko Haram abductors said those who wanted to live should get into the trucks and those who wanted to die should remain under the tree.

As they rode in the open truck, Joy recalls that a tree branch injured one of her classmates on the leg. She had to straddle her in her arms as the girl wept and the terrorists ordered her to shut up.

At this point one girl came up with the suggestion to jump out of the moving truck and some of them began to do so. But Joy, unfortunately, could not due to the injured girl she was attending to.

She finally got her chance when their vehicle broke down and they were forced to camp in the Sambisa forest.

"I asked them if I could go to the toilet, but they refused twice.

Finally, I disguised myself a little and took three girls with me to ask again. This time they agreed," a confident Joy recalled of her experience that night when she was just 17 years old.

"As we squatted pretending as though we were easing ourselves, I told the other girls I was not going back, that we must run.

One girl asked what if they killed us. I told them God will help us and we started running."

'I have 10 girls now who call me Dad'

Congresswoman Wilson said that as a former school principal the abduction, which Ogebe called "the longest running mass abduction in contemporary history," touched her deeply and she vowed never to forget the girls.

Ogebe urged the spell-bound audience to "be the change they want to see in the world," saying when he and the congresswoman first met Joy in Abuja 14 months ago, little did he know that one day, all the three of them would be sitting together in a panel in the U.S. He added: "I don't have a hash-tag but I have 10 girls now who call me 'Dad'."

Quoting a Nigerian proverb, Ogebe said: "Until the lion learns to tell its story, the tale that will be told is that of the glorious hunter. We need to value our lives and give our own narrative. These girls valued their lives and made a decision to jump. Joy is a true heroine who saved three others."

Ogebe who called on corporate and religious organisations and people of goodwill in Nigeria to help support the 10 Chibok girls as they prepare to resume for the next academic year, told The Guardian exclusively that there is still no fund to guarantee their continued education in the United States.

"We have received no support from institutional donors - government or otherwise. It's been a purely private effort. Although we reached out to Borno State, Federal Government, Victim Support Fund and Safe School Initiative, no help has come.

"It is not too much for MTN, Zenith Bank, Oando, Glo, Living Faith, Dangote, TY and others to adopt and sponsor one Chibok girl for one of the five years required to complete their education.

I can confidently tell you that Americans rallied together to assist the orphans of the 911 attacks in New York so I don't see why Nigerians cannot rally and support our Chibok Girls who are now world famous."

Ogebe stated that ability to secure funding for the Chibok girl who gained university admission will determine whether she moves ahead or remains in high school with the others.

His words: "The girl that gained admission has really done remarkably well since she came less than a year ago. She is so articulate when speaking English that it would be unfair for her to lose another year after the terrorists disrupted their lives last year.

"I believe it should be an inspiration to the world and to the others if she can make it into an American higher institution of learning. We don't know what has become of the 219 girls in the hands of the terrorists but we do know what could become of these escaped Chibok girls if the resources are available. An example is Joy who wants to become a doctor and return to help rebuild the devastated Northeast."

Ogebe said interested people can contribute to Education Must Continue Initiative, which was formed a year ago in response to Boko Haram's assault on education in Nigeria, by giving to EMCI's which has an account for this in a Nigerian bank.

"EMCI was created by concerned Nigerians, many of whom are themselves victims of Boko Haram helping other victims. It has volunteers in Yola, Jos, Abuja and the United States," he said.