

1 Village, 20 Attacks: Mass Abduction in Kurmin Wali Exemplifies Nigeria's Rural Protection Crisis

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Introduction:

“We do not know who to cry to anymore,” said Peter Barnabas, a youth leader in Kurmin Wali, to researchers visiting the rural community in Kaduna State where three congregations were abducted during Sunday worship services on January 18.

Researchers from CHAIN and Theo-Sight Institute for Research and Advocacy, which are 2 organizations that are part of a new Nigerian advocacy partnership, visited the community three days after the attacks and conducted a follow-up research visit this month on March 3. This report offers insight into what happened and what can be done to help prevent attacks like this from happening again in vulnerable Nigerian communities.



The significance of the Kurmin Wali attack rests not solely in the high tally of 89 verified abductees on January 18, but also in the fact that the community has suffered such attacks over 20 times before—including the prior Sunday—with more victims abducted, and more ransom demanded, each time. And this displaced community of fellow Nigerians begs for interventions that government authorities should be able to provide, such as faster security response protocols and greater community reporting capacity.



Based on the research in Kurmin Wali, this report calls for collaboration between relevant stakeholders to develop effective community protection measures including faster emergency response, improved community/security

cooperation, strengthened local protection capacity, and broader rural-protection policies. As the Bible verse written on the blue sign of an attacked Kurmin Wali church, John 8:32, states: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Background:

Kurmin Wali is a rural settlement located in Afogo Ward of Kajuru Local Government Area in Kaduna State, approximately 80 kilometres from Kaduna city. The community of approximately 500 members is inhabited primarily by the Adara (Kadara) ethnic group, and nearly all residents are Christian subsistence farmers. While modest in size, Kurmin Wali represents a typical rural community in Nigeria's Middle Belt, deeply rooted in agriculture, communal living, and religious life.

Yet its geographic location has made it dangerously vulnerable. The village is encircled by thick forests and isolated bushland, with limited infrastructure and poor access roads connecting it to nearby towns. The neighboring villages of Gindin Gada to the west and Ungwan Wahala to the

east are entirely deserted, after the original residents fled repeated attacks from armed nomadic groups that regularly occupy the area and have cost these communities millions of naira in ransoms.

Methodology:

Following reports of the mass abduction that occurred on January 18, researchers from two of the advocacy partner organizations, CHAIN (Christian Awareness Initiative of Nigeria) and Theo-Sight, conducted field visits to the community on January 21 and March 3. The investigation combined on-site field documentation, eyewitness interviews, survivor testimonies, and cross-verification of community records. Researchers interviewed 12 community members, including survivors, their family members, and community, church, and youth leaders. The team also reviewed community registers, compiled victim lists, and analysed testimonies collected by civil society partners and media organisations.

Early reports claimed that 177 villagers had been abducted, but the researchers worked with the village head to cross-check households and confirm who had fled during the attack and determined the final confirmed number of abductees is 89 individuals. This evolving data illustrates a challenge in documenting mass attacks in rural communities: the first numbers reported often reflect incomplete information, and delay officials from speaking out until information is verified. This demonstrates the need for closer partnership between government authorities and village residents to have faster, corroborated data to inform effective responses.

Narrative of the Attack:

On Sunday, 18 January 2026, Kurmin Wali was preparing for a day of worship. By 9 a.m., congregations had gathered in three churches: Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), Albarka Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), and Haske Cherubim and Seraphim Church. Then dozens of armed bandits riding motorcycles stormed the community.

“We were in the church when the warden rushed in shouting that bandits had surrounded the village,” said Andrew Ezekiel, one of the Haske C&S worshipers. “People started running. But before we could escape, they were already there.”

The attackers deceived the villagers. “They raised their guns in the air and told us not to run,” said Ezekiel. “They said nothing would happen.” However, the church members were rounded up, forced into the surrounding forest, and made to sit on the ground in an open field.

“Without any reason, they began beating people with sticks,” said Maigirma Shakarau a 41-year-old victim who suffered a serious head injury. Afterwards, the captives were forced to continue marching toward Gindin Gada, an abandoned village deserted due to earlier attacks. “Since nobody lives there anymore, the houses were empty,” said Shakarau, who escaped there. “I managed to sneak into one of the rooms with my child. I locked the door and stayed there for about two hours until everywhere became quiet.”

The captives were held for about nine days. “They never kept us in one place,” said one of the abductees, Ojo. “They kept moving us through the forest so nobody could find them.” Food and water were scarce. Many victims suffered hunger and exhaustion. Eventually, vehicles arrived in the forest and transported the captives to Kaduna, where they were received by officials of the

Department of State Services (DSS). The victims remained under government medical supervision for approximately two weeks.

Even after the victims returned to Kurmin Wali, the sense of danger remained. Residents report that armed groups are still seen moving with cattle through the forests surrounding the village. “When villagers see them, they run away,” said the village head. “If you don’t run, they may capture you.” As a result: some families no longer sleep in the village at night; farmers avoid fields near the forest, the three churches have not met again because their pastors fled; and half of the young people have migrated to safer towns.

A Pattern of Repeated Attacks:

Residents of Kurmin Wali testified that the January 18 2026 attack is only the latest of more than twenty attacks since 2022—including the abduction of 22 worshipers the prior Sunday January 11, costing the community 2.6 million naira in ransom, said pastor Micah Akan, chairman of the local Afogo Ward of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).

“Each time they come, they kidnap people,” said Ezekiel. “And we contribute money to pay ransom.” The village head summarized the cost of past attacks to researchers: Abductions in 2022 required ransom payments of 300,000 naira; in 2023, the demanded ransom was 500,000 naira; in 2024, the ransom was 700,000 naira; and in 2025, the ransom was 2.6 million naira. The cost of the release of the 89 abductees from January 18 was unknown, he told researchers, because it appeared the government had paid for their release.

Apart from the monetary gain that has prompted the bandits to intensify their attacks on Kurmin Wali, the proximity of the community to the bandit hideout is a contributing factor. The researchers discovered that the Kurmin village is close to a mountain where bandits live. Another abduction is imminent without urgent intervention.

Structural Neglect and Rural Vulnerability:

The investigation also revealed severe structural neglect in Kurmin Wali. The village lacks electricity, primary or secondary schools, healthcare facilities, reliable telecommunications, and good access roads. These conditions severely limit emergency response. Residents say that when attacks occur, security forces arrive too late. According to testimonies gathered by researchers, soldiers sometimes explain that they cannot respond without authorization from higher command authorities. This bureaucratic delay allows attackers to escape.

Recommendations to Prevent Attacks:

The investigation revealed that the armed perpetrators still operate within the forests surrounding Kurmin Wali, which remains vulnerable to further attacks. Thus, the researchers have identified short-term and medium-term interventions necessary to improve emergency response and strengthen community resilience, arranged in order of easiest and quickest for authorities to approve, fund, and implement:

1. Improve relationship between village head and security forces

Findings indicate a history of fractured relations between the village head of Kurmin Wali and the local security agency. Relevant stakeholders, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) or other peace advocates, should convene the village head and local security and offer collaboration training to rebuild the relationship and create joint plans for the prevention of future attacks.

2. Make security response protocols more agile

Testimonies from community members reveal that security personnel claim they cannot act without orders from higher command authorities. Operational protocols must therefore be revised to allow immediate response to emergency attacks.

3. Relocate security post closer to village

It is commendable that the government has established a security post 2 kilometres from the Kurmin Wali community. However, due to the poor road network and the bushy space between the security post and the community it serves, communication and effective community policing are difficult. The post should be moved closer, and the number of security personnel stationed there should be increased.

4. Strengthen the security capacity of the community

Kurmin Wali does not have a community protection group because they lack adequate resources as they have been impoverished by ransoms and inability to farm with economic effect. If the community is supported, it can organize a small group of local protection to support the government security. Government authorities should provide communication devices, train community volunteers, and establish formal coordination channels with security agencies.

5. Establish a national rural protection policy

Nigeria urgently requires a comprehensive rural protection strategy that prioritizes vulnerable farming communities and prevents armed groups from establishing operational bases close to the communities they have victimized. Such a policy should include permanent security posts near high-risk villages, rapid response patrol units moving around, and surveillance of forest corridors used by armed groups.

Conclusion:

The events in Kurmin Wali illustrate the growing vulnerability of rural communities across Nigeria's Middle Belt. Though the return of the abducted villagers brought relief, the structural conditions that enabled the attack remain unresolved. Armed groups still operate in nearby forests. Security responses remain slow. Infrastructure remains weak. Without urgent reforms, communities like Kurmin Wali will remain trapped in a cycle of violence and insecurity.

“We have tried to avert this, and we are tired of trying. We don't know what next to do,” said Peter Barnabas. “Each time it happens, we pack our belongings to other villages. But we have to always return back, because we do not have any other place to run to.”

“We don't usually report such things, because we believe that everything is from God,” said Andrew Ezekiel. “But this one is too much. [And] that is why we cried out.”