

Nigeria's Rural Protection Crisis: Killings and Mass Abductions in Northern Nigeria's Communities

Case Studies of the Kwall Massacre, Papiri School Kidnapping, and Kurmin Wali Church Abductions (2025–2026)

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Executive Summary

Between April 2025 and January 2026, rural communities in North Central Nigeria experienced a series of violent attacks that exposed deep structural weaknesses in the country's rural security architecture. This report documents three major incidents: the Kwall massacre in Plateau State, the Papiri school kidnapping in Niger State, and the Kurmin Wali repeated church abductions in Kaduna State. These incidents represent different manifestations of violence: mass killing, school kidnapping, and church abduction, but together they reveal a consistent pattern of insecurity affecting rural communities.

On April 13, 2025, armed attackers stormed the community of Kwall in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau State, killing at least 52 residents, burning homes, and destroying food stores. Survivors reported that the attackers surrounded the village at night and launched a coordinated assault, leaving the community devastated and raising questions about the absence of security personnel during the attack or the impossibility of rescue from security agencies, even with distress calls.

Seven months later, on November 21, 2025, gunmen attacked St. Mary's Catholic Private School in Papiri, Niger State. More than 60 motorcycles carrying armed men stormed the school compound and abducted hundreds of students and staff. The attack lasted more than two hours without intervention from security forces. Many of the victims, including young children, spent weeks in captivity before their eventual release.

A third major incident occurred on January 18, 2026, in Kurmin Wali village, Kajuru Local Government Area, Kaduna State. Armed men on motorcycles surrounded churches during Sunday worship services and abducted dozens of villagers. Community testimonies indicate that

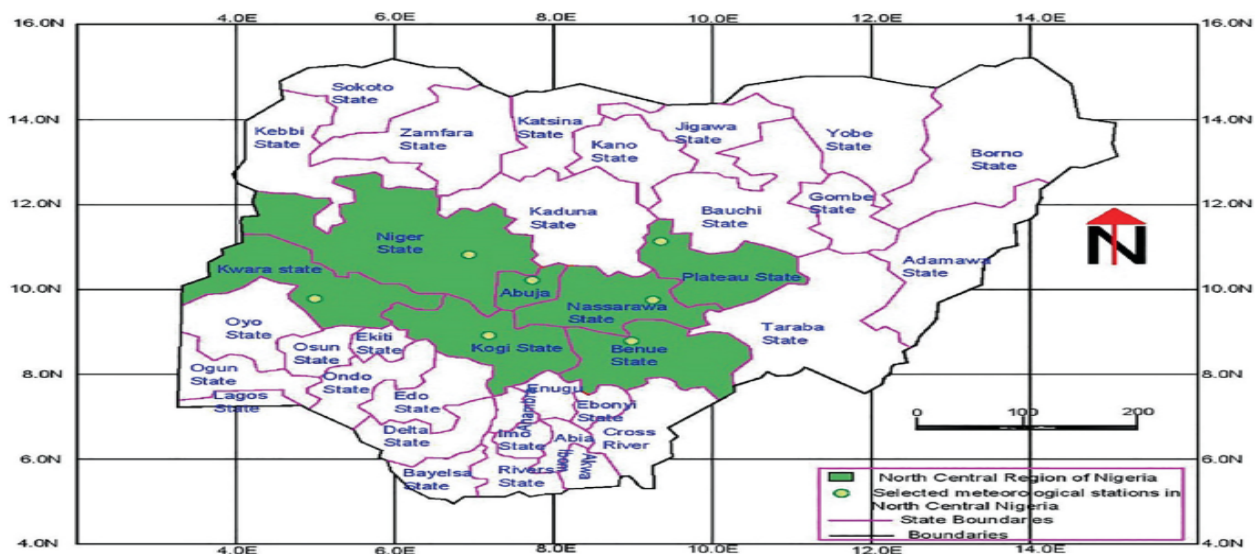
the village has experienced more than twenty attacks over several years, highlighting a pattern of repeated violence.

Although the three incidents occurred in different states, they reveal common structural vulnerabilities affecting rural communities: isolation, limited infrastructure, absence of security posts, and the presence of armed groups operating in nearby forests. These factors allow attackers to carry out coordinated assaults with minimal risk of interception.

The attacks have had profound humanitarian consequences. Survivors report psychological trauma, economic disruption, displacement, and the breakdown of educational and agricultural activities. Families have abandoned farms, children have withdrawn from school, resulting in a higher number of out-of-school children in Northern Nigeria, and many residents now live in constant fear of further attacks.

This report argues that these incidents are not isolated security failures but symptoms of a broader rural protection crisis. Without comprehensive reforms, including improved rural security deployment, infrastructure development, and community protection policies, similar attacks are likely to continue.

Background



As seen on the map above, Nigeria's northern region forms part of a broader geographic corridor connecting the Sahel to West Africa's coastal states. Several northern Nigerian states, including Borno, Yobe, Jigawa, Katsina, Sokoto, and Kebbi, share direct borders with Sahel countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, where armed insurgencies, extremist groups, and transnational criminal networks operate across porous frontiers. Although North-Central states such as Niger and Kwara do not directly border Sahelian countries, they lie along important internal transit routes linking Nigeria's northern frontier to the country's central and southern regions. This positioning creates what analysts often describe as a Sahel–North Central security corridor, through which armed groups, weapons, and illicit networks can move from the Sahel through northern Nigeria and into interior rural areas. The presence of dense forests, weak security infrastructure, and poorly monitored rural roads in parts of North Central Nigeria further increases communities' vulnerability to such spillover effects. As a result, security crises that originate in the Sahel can indirectly affect rural communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where attacks on villages, schools, and places of worship have become increasingly frequent.

For example, Kwara State lies along Nigeria's western frontier with the Republic of Benin. Although Benin itself is relatively stable, its northern regions border Burkina Faso and Niger, countries within the Sahel where extremist violence and armed insurgencies have intensified in recent years. This geographic proximity creates potential security spillover risks, particularly for rural communities located near forest corridors and porous border routes. This geographic reality increases the vulnerability of rural communities in the North Central region, where weak security presence, forested terrain, and limited infrastructure create conditions that armed groups can exploit.

The region contains a diverse mix of ethnic and religious communities and has become a flashpoint for conflicts involving armed militias, criminal bandit groups, and insurgent factions.

Many rural communities in the region rely heavily on subsistence farming and have limited access to infrastructure or government services. Roads are often poorly maintained, communication networks are unreliable, and security presence is minimal. These structural challenges make rural villages particularly vulnerable to armed attacks.

The three incidents examined in this report occurred in Plateau, Niger, and Kaduna States. Although geographically separate, the communities share similar characteristics: remote rural environments, agricultural livelihoods, and proximity to forested areas that provide cover for armed groups. In Kwall, Plateau State, residents reported that the attackers approached from surrounding bush areas before setting homes and barns on fire. In Papiri, Niger State, the attackers used motorcycles to quickly surround a school compound and abduct students. In Kurmin Wali, Kaduna State, armed groups targeted churches during Sunday services, exploiting the predictable gathering of worshippers.

The repeated nature of these attacks suggests that rural communities in North Central Nigeria face systemic security vulnerabilities rather than isolated incidents of violence.

Methodology

This report is based on qualitative field investigations conducted between April 2025 and early 2026 by researchers associated with Theo-Sight, Nigeria; the Christian Awareness Initiative of Nigeria (CHAIN), Nigeria; and 21 Wilberforce, USA. The research methodology combined field visits, interviews, and documentary analysis to reconstruct the events surrounding the three incidents and assess their broader implications. Researchers conducted site visits to affected communities where security conditions permitted.

As part of this investigation, the Theo-Sight field team conducted an on-site visit to Kwall approximately two weeks after the April 13, 2025, massacre. During the visit, researchers conducted in-person interviews with survivors, bereaved families, and community leaders to document eyewitness accounts and assess the humanitarian impact of the attack. A total of eleven people were interviewed independently in Kwall. The team also conducted a physical assessment of the affected areas, observing extensive destruction, including burnt homes, razed food barns, and bullet impacts on residential walls that provided material evidence of the violence. Investigators met with women who had been widowed as a result of the attack and children who had lost parents, many of whom were left without stable shelter or support. In addition to documenting testimonies and physical evidence, the research team analysed the geographical

location of Kwall and its surrounding terrain, including nearby forests and the town's proximity to the Plateau–Kaduna boundary, to assess how environmental, geographical and security factors contributed to the community's vulnerability.

In the case of Kurmin Wali, multiple field visits were conducted (including both CHAIN and Theo-Sight) to observe the local environment, assess patterns of insecurity, and gather residents' testimonies. A total of 12 people were interviewed in Kurmi Wali during two separate investigation visits. These visits allowed investigators to identify structural factors such as proximity to forests, infrastructure gaps, fractured relationships between villagers and Fulani, and community displacement. Specifically, the earlier findings that the Kurmi Wali community had been subjected to several attacks, including ransom payments made over 20 times, warranted a structural assessment to understand the underlying patterns and causes. The first field visit to Kurmi Wali was three days after the latest attack incident. The last field visit took place two months after the attack. This confirms that the report captures both the immediate experience and later-developed responses.

Due to heightened insecurity in the Papiri area during the investigation period, the research team could not safely conduct on-site visits. Instead, investigators relied on digitally mediated interviews with eyewitnesses, parents of abducted students, school staff members, and community leaders who were directly affected by the incident. These interviews were conducted using secure communication platforms. Six people, including survivors, parents of kidnapped victims and school officials, are part of those interviewed.

In total, the research team interviewed survivors, community members, religious leaders, parents of victims, and local officials. As of now, a total of 29 village residents have been interviewed in the three investigations. Interviewees included individuals who experienced captivity, family members of victims, and community leaders familiar with the security situation in their areas. Additional information was obtained by reviewing community records, victim lists, local media reports, and statements from government authorities. Researchers cross-checked testimonies and documentary sources to verify casualty figures and reconstruct the sequence of events.

The evolving nature of crisis reporting posed challenges in establishing precise numbers of victims in some cases. Initial reports often differed from later confirmed figures as communities

verified which individuals had been abducted, killed, or displaced. Despite these limitations, the combination of field observation, interviews, and documentary evidence provides a credible basis for the findings presented in this report.

The selection of Niger, Plateau, Kwara, Kaduna, and Kogi States for Phase One was strategically guided by a convergence of empirical urgency, operational feasibility, and policy relevance. These states have witnessed some of the most recent and severe incidents of abduction, communal violence, and faith-based attacks between 2024 and 2026, thereby offering access to fresh data, active community memory, and survivors whose testimonies enhance the reliability of field evidence. Additionally, several incidents within these locations have attracted national and international attention, positioning the research to contribute meaningfully to global advocacy and policy engagement. The states also present relatively accessible environments compared to high-intensity insurgency zones, enabling ethical and safe fieldwork within existing funding constraints. Furthermore, they represent contexts where significant gaps persist in survivor-centred documentation, accountability tracking, and the construction of coherent narratives. By concentrating resources on these “worst-hit” yet accessible areas, the project prioritises depth, methodological rigour, and the production of actionable, evidence-based recommendations. Fieldwork has therefore commenced in Plateau, Kaduna, and Niger States, with Kwara and expanded engagement in Plateau scheduled for subsequent stages of Phase One.

Timeline of Documented Incidents

The three incidents documented in this report occurred within a period of less than one year and illustrate the escalating pattern of violence affecting rural communities in North Central Nigeria.

April 13, 2025 — Kwall Massacre (Plateau State)

In the early hours of April 13, 2025, armed attackers stormed the community of Kwall in Bassa Local Government Area of Plateau State. Witnesses reported that the attackers approached the village under the cover of darkness and surrounded the settlement before launching a coordinated assault. Homes were set on fire, trapping families inside. Food barns, shops, and grain reserves were also deliberately burned, leaving the community without basic resources for survival. At least 52 residents were killed during the attack, many of them Christians belonging to the Irigwe

community. Survivors reported that security forces did not intervene during the attack despite the presence of security installations in the broader region. The massacre resulted in widespread destruction, displacement of families, and long-term humanitarian hardship.

November 21, 2025 — Papiri School Kidnapping (Niger State)

On the night of November 21, 2025, armed gunmen attacked St. Mary's Catholic Private School in Papiri, located in Agwara Local Government Area of Niger State. The attackers reportedly arrived on more than 60 motorcycles and surrounded the school compound shortly after midnight. After killing the school gatekeeper, the attackers forced their way into dormitories and abducted hundreds of students and staff members. The assault lasted for more than two hours without intervention from security forces. The kidnapped victims were taken into nearby forest areas where they remained in captivity for several weeks. Eventually, the abductees were released in two separate groups in December 2025. However, the circumstances surrounding their release remain contested, with differing accounts suggesting a combination of negotiations and security operations. The attack generated national and international concern due to the scale of the abduction and the vulnerability of educational institutions in rural areas.

January 18, 2026 — Kurmin Wali Church Abductions (Kaduna State)

On Sunday morning, January 18, 2026, armed men attacked Kurmin Wali village in Kajuru Local Government Area of Kaduna State. The attackers reportedly arrived on motorcycles and surrounded several churches during worship services. Congregants attempting to flee were captured and forced into nearby forests. Survivors later described being beaten and marched through bush areas toward abandoned villages. Community testimonies indicate that Kurmin Wali has experienced more than twenty attacks over several years, making the January incident part of a long-standing pattern of violence in the region. The attack further deepened the sense of insecurity among residents, many of whom have since limited their farming activities, relocated family members, or begun sleeping outside the village at night due to fear of further attacks.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of this investigation, based on fieldwork, survivor testimonies, and cross-case analysis of the Kwall massacre, Kurmin Wali abductions, and Papiri school kidnapping, reveal a deeply entrenched rural protection crisis in Northern Nigeria. The findings are presented below in concrete, evidence-based points:

1. Divergent Official and Civil Society Narratives on the Rural abduction and violence

Public and official narratives and news of violence in Nigeria's rural settlements are usually conflicting. For example, an examination of official police communications and civil society reporting following the Kurmin Wali incident reveals notable differences in the timing, content, and framing of information about the attack. The first official communication originated from the Kaduna State Police Command on 18 January 2026, based on a message reportedly received by the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) in Kajuru Local Government Area. The statement indicated that at approximately 17:45 hours, police received information that earlier that day at about 11:25 hours, "unspecified numbers of bandits armed with sophisticated weapons" had attacked ECWA Church and Cherubim and Seraphim Church 2 in Kurmin Wali. The statement emphasized that the number of abducted worshippers had not yet been confirmed and highlighted operational constraints, noting that the community is located in a remote forest area and that security forces faced difficulties accessing the location immediately due to poor road infrastructure. It further stated that the DPO had mobilised other security agencies and the military and that investigations had commenced.

A second press statement, issued on 20 January 2026 by CSP Benjamin Hundeyin, the Force Public Relations Officer of the Nigeria Police Force, from Force Headquarters in Abuja, offered additional clarification regarding earlier public remarks by police authorities. According to the statement, the Kaduna State Security Council, convened by the Governor of Kaduna State at Government House in Kaduna, reviewed the incident reports after some individuals from the affected local government area alleged that the initial reports were false. The police explained that earlier comments by the Commissioner of Police for Kaduna State during a media interaction had been intended to prevent public panic while facts were being verified. The statement confirmed that subsequent verification by operational and intelligence units established that the incident had indeed occurred and that the Inspector-General of Police, Kayode

Egbetokun, had ordered the deployment of tactical units and intelligence assets to Kajuru and surrounding communities to support search-and-rescue operations and restore security.

In contrast, a press statement issued on 20 January 2026 by Christian Solidarity Worldwide Nigeria (CSW-N) presented a more detailed account based on testimonies gathered from local sources. The statement, signed by Reuben Buhari, Research and Press Officer of CSW-N, and referencing comments by Reverend Yunusa Sabo Nmadu, Chief Executive Officer of CSW-N, reported that armed bandits attacked three churches: ECWA, Albarka Cherubim and Seraphim 1, and Haske Cherubim and Seraphim 2, during Sunday worship services on 18 January 2026. According to community sources cited by CSW-N, the attackers arrived on dozens of motorcycles and on foot, divided into three groups, and forced congregants into the surrounding bush. CSW-N further reported that its investigative team attempted to visit Kurmin Wali but was prevented from entering the community by military personnel who cited standing orders restricting access. Based on information obtained from community members, CSW-N estimated that approximately 167 individuals remained in captivity, although the names of victims were still being compiled at the time. This report shall provide data-verifiable details of the victims.

The contrasting narratives between the police and civil society actors illustrate the complexities of information gathering in the aftermath of violent incidents in remote rural areas. While police statements emphasized verification procedures and operational constraints before confirming casualty figures, civil society sources relied more directly on community testimonies that provided earlier but evolving estimates of the number of victims. These differences highlight the challenges of crisis communication, particularly when incidents occur in isolated communities where access is limited, and information must be verified through multiple channels.

2. Systematic Absence and Failure of State Security Response

Across all three case studies, there is a consistent pattern of delayed, absent, or ineffective security intervention during attacks. In Kwall, despite the scale and duration of the assault, “the military base nearby remained unresponsive,” with one eyewitness stating, “*They told us there was no order to intervene.*” This reflects a structural paralysis in security response protocols. Similarly, in Papiri, attackers operated for over two hours without interruption, even though the nearest security formation was approximately 60 kilometres away, making rapid response

impossible. In Kurmin Wali, residents reported that security forces often arrive too late, sometimes citing a lack of authorisation as the reason for inaction.

3. Targeted Vulnerability and Gendered Impact of Abductions

Findings from Kurmin Wali further reveal the deeply personal and gendered consequences of repeated abduction patterns. Among those kidnapped during the January 2026 attack were two pregnant women. Disturbingly, shortly after their release, one of them lost her pregnancy due to the physical and psychological stress endured in captivity. This underscores the severe, often undocumented health consequences of abduction beyond immediate violence. More broadly, Kurmin Wali has experienced at least 23 attacks between 2008 and 2026, indicating a long-standing, cyclical pattern of insecurity. In each of these incidents, both men and women have been abducted, with communities repeatedly forced to pay ransom for their release. This sustained pattern highlights not only the normalisation of kidnapping as a livelihood strategy for armed groups but also the prolonged exposure of rural populations to trauma, economic depletion, and generational vulnerability. More than half of the residents of Kurmi Wali have left the village for safety concerns. One key disrobing issue is the fact that the kidnappers are still living very close to Kurmi Wali. They are still there. Their place of abode is known to the residents. Another attack is imminent without immediate action.

4. Increasing Tactical Sophistication and Coordination of Attacks

The attacks demonstrate a high level of planning, coordination, and tactical execution. In Kwall, assailants approached “from multiple directions, strategically encircling the community to block all possible escape routes,” before systematically burning homes and food sources. In Papiri, over 60 motorcycles were used to surround and storm the school in a coordinated operation lasting nearly two hours. In Kurmin Wali, attackers simultaneously targeted three churches during Sunday worship, dividing into groups to maximize capture. These patterns suggest organised armed groups operating with a deeper understanding of terrain and strategic intent rather than spontaneous violence.

5. Deliberate Targeting of Vulnerable Civilian Spaces

A key finding is the systematic targeting of “soft” civilian spaces: schools, churches, and rural settlements, where populations are least protected. In Papiri, a school described as “the only realistic educational opportunity for children across dozens of surrounding villages” became the focal point of mass abduction. In Kurmin Wali, worshippers were abducted during church services, while in Kwall, entire families were attacked in their homes at night. These cases demonstrate that attackers deliberately exploit locations with minimal security presence and high symbolic or communal value.

6. Recurrent and Normalized Cycles of Violence

The violence is not isolated but forms part of repeated and normalized attack patterns. Kurmin Wali alone has experienced “more than twenty attacks over the years,” with residents stating, *“Each time they come, they kidnap people and we contribute money to pay ransom.”* Similarly, Kwall reflects a history of recurring, coordinated assaults on Irigwe Christian communities. This normalization of violence has created a cycle in which communities anticipate attacks but lack the means to prevent them.

7. Severe Humanitarian and Psychosocial Impact on Communities

The attacks have resulted in devastating humanitarian consequences. In Kwall, survivors were left without food as barns were burned, forcing families to “boil wild leaves to feed their infants.” In Papiri, children as young as five were abducted and held for weeks, leading to long-term psychological trauma and disruption of education. In Kurmin Wali, survivors described beatings, hunger, and forced marches through forests, with captives stating, *“They never kept us in one place... Food and water were scarce.”* These impacts extend beyond immediate violence to long-term social and psychological damage.

8. Economic Collapse and Disruption of Rural Livelihoods

The findings show that violence is not only lethal but also economically destructive. In Kurmin Wali, agricultural activities have significantly declined, with reports that “the youth... no longer want to go to the farm,” and some villages now have fewer than 20 residents. In Kwall, destruction of food storage and farmland created immediate food insecurity. In Papiri, farming

and local commerce have been disrupted, with shops closing early and families relocating children. This indicates a broader strategy of destabilising rural economies.

9. Strategic Use of Forests and Borderland Spaces by Armed Groups

All three cases reveal that attackers exploit forests and poorly governed border regions as operational bases. Kurmin Wali is “encircled by thick forests,” which attackers use for movement, captivity, and evasion. Papiri attackers retreated into the surrounding forest zones after the operation. In Kwall, proximity to the Kaduna border enabled attackers to cross jurisdictional lines without accountability. These spaces function as safe havens due to weak surveillance and coordination.

10. Data Gaps, Conflicting Narratives, and Documentation Challenges

The research identified significant inconsistencies in reporting and documentation. In Kurmin Wali, initial reports of 177 abductees were later corrected to 89 verified victims after careful cross-checking. In Papiri, victim numbers fluctuated between over 300, 265, and later 230 confirmed abductees. There were also conflicting narratives regarding perpetrators and government warnings prior to the attack. These discrepancies highlight the need for rigorous, field-based, survivor-centered documentation.

11. Erosion of Trust in Government and Deepening Community Despair

A recurring theme across all cases is the loss of trust in state institutions. In Kurmin Wali, a youth leader lamented, *“We do not know who to cry to anymore.”* In Kwall, the absence of arrests or investigations reinforced perceptions of impunity. In Papiri, unresolved questions about security warnings and government response have deepened skepticism about state capacity. This erosion of trust weakens state legitimacy and fuels vulnerability.

12. Evidence of Broader Structural and Policy Failure

Collectively, the findings point to a systemic failure in Nigeria’s rural protection architecture. Rural communities lack basic infrastructure, including roads, communication networks, and nearby security posts, as seen in Kurmin Wali. Schools operate without armed protection or early-warning systems, as demonstrated in Papiri. The absence of coordinated security

frameworks, rapid-response mechanisms, and accountability structures allows attacks to recur with minimal consequence.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the crisis is not merely a series of isolated incidents but a patterned, systemic breakdown in rural protection. The convergence of security failure, organized armed violence, economic destabilization, and governance gaps has created an environment in which rural communities are repeatedly exposed to killings and mass abductions with little protection or recourse.

Initial Analysis

The three incidents documented in this report the Kwall massacre in Plateau State, the Papiri school kidnapping in Niger State, and the Kurmin Wali church abductions in Kaduna State occurred in different locations and involved different forms of violence. However, a comparative analysis of these cases reveals striking similarities in the methods used by attackers, the vulnerabilities of rural communities, and the systemic weaknesses in security response.

Similar Operational Tactics

One of the most consistent patterns across the three cases is the use of coordinated attacks designed to maximize fear and limit the ability of victims to escape. In Kwall, the attackers surrounded the community at night before launching a coordinated assault that involved burning homes and food barns. In Papiri, gunmen arrived on dozens of motorcycles and encircled a school compound before abducting students and staff. In Kurmin Wali, attackers divided into groups and surrounded churches during Sunday worship services.

In each case, the attackers used tactics that demonstrated knowledge of the local environment and an understanding of how to exploit predictable social gatherings such as church services or school dormitories. These coordinated methods suggest a level of organization and planning rather than spontaneous violence.

Exploitation of Rural Isolation

Another recurring pattern is the strategic exploitation of the geographic isolation of rural communities. All three locations share similar structural characteristics: they are remote settlements surrounded by forests or difficult terrain, connected to nearby towns by poorly maintained roads, and lacking permanent security installations. In such environments, attackers are able to move quickly, launch assaults, and retreat before security forces arrive. Forested areas also serve as natural hideouts for armed groups, making it difficult for authorities to track or intercept them. In both the Papiri and Kurmin Wali incidents, victims reported being moved through forest locations during captivity, indicating that attackers maintain operational bases in these remote areas.

Delayed or Absent Security Response

Across all three cases, survivors repeatedly described the absence or delayed arrival of security forces during the attacks. In Kwall, villagers reported that no security personnel arrived while homes were being burned and residents were killed. In Papiri, the kidnapping operation lasted more than two hours without intervention from security agencies. In Kurmin Wali, community members indicated that security forces often arrive only after attackers have already fled.

This pattern highlights the structural limitations of Nigeria's current rural security framework. The long distances between villages and security bases, combined with bureaucratic delays in authorization for intervention, often allow attackers to complete their operations without confrontation.

Targeting of Civilian Gathering Spaces

Another important pattern is the targeting of locations where civilians gather in large numbers. Schools, churches, and residential villages represent central spaces of community life in rural Nigeria. These locations are often predictable in terms of when people will gather, making them attractive targets for attackers seeking to maximize casualties or kidnappings. In Papiri, the attackers targeted a boarding school where children were sleeping in dormitories. In Kurmin Wali, churches were attacked during Sunday services. In Kwall, homes were burned during the night when families were asleep. The deliberate targeting of such locations increases the psychological impact of attacks and disrupts the social fabric of rural communities.

Humanitarian and Economic Consequences

The attacks documented in this report have produced significant humanitarian consequences for the affected communities. Survivors report widespread psychological trauma, economic hardship, and displacement. In farming communities such as Kwall and Kurmin Wali, fear of further attacks has forced many farmers to abandon their fields. This not only affects household livelihoods but also threatens food security in the broader region. In Papiri, the kidnapping of students disrupted education for hundreds of children, with some families now reluctant to send their children back to school. These long-term impacts demonstrate that attacks on rural communities extend beyond immediate casualties. They weaken economic stability, disrupt social structures, and contribute to cycles of poverty and insecurity.