When the Palace Is No Longer Safe: Kidnapped Kings and the Crisis of Rural Security in Kwara State

November 4, 2026 By Theosight Media

A Theo-Sight investigation finds traditional rulers in Kwara State abducted from their palaces, royal households held for months, and ransoms raised by monarchs, families and neighbours rather than the state. It asks what their exposure means for the rural communities that look to them for leadership and protection.

The palace that could no longer guarantee safety

Shortly before 8 p.m. on 31 December 2025, the Aniwo of Afin, a retired school teacher who reigns over a farming community in Ile-Ire ward of Ifelodun Local Government Area, was in his parlour while his household prepared chickens for the New Year meal. One of his children suddenly ran to lock the front door. Through the window, the monarch saw armed men coming towards the house. They opened fire and forced their way in.

Eight men came, he later told Theo-Sight, six of them carrying AK-47 rifles. His wife was hit by a bullet in the hand; she lay still, and the attackers left her for dead. They ate the festive food, searched the house for money, and marched the king and one of his sons into the bush, walking until daybreak. As they left, he recalled, their leader said: “the worst has happened. The remaining is money.”

He was released about five weeks later. By his own account, his family and supporters paid above ₦30 million with two charged power banks; a family source quoted in the press put the second payment at ₦12 million. Asked how he’s able to survive the financial predicament, he replied: Months later, “I have about 7 million to pay back from sources where the ransom was borrowed.”

The Afin raid was not an isolated crime. In the last six days of 2025, armed men raided at least three palaces in Ifelodun alone, and other Kwara rulers have since been killed, abducted or driven from their towns. Traditional rulers are the people villagers report threats to and the people security agencies call when they need community cooperation. If the kings who are culturally expected to be the protectors of their communities are being targeted, what becomes the fate of ordinary members of the communities?

Key findings

- **Palaces are being targeted directly.** Field records and published reports identify at least ten attacks on Kwara rulers, palaces or royal households between February 2024 and August 2026. Two rulers were reportedly killed in their palaces; another died in captivity after his community said the ransom had been paid.

- **Communities, not the state, are paying.** Documented payments range from about ₦2.6 million for one small community's captives to more than ₦50 million in cash and three motorcycles for nine people taken from one palace.
- **Protection at the palaces examined was minimal:** no guards, an unstaffed Civil Defence office, police up to an hour away, and local guards whose single-shot guns was openly underrated by bandits during the attack on a palace.
- **Communities are deserted.** One community studied is almost deserted, and findings show that at least 30 rulers in southern Kwara have left their palaces.
- **Government has acted, but gaps remain.** The state has trained new forest guards and police have made arrests and carried out some successful rescues; nevertheless, rulers say the guards are based too far from vulnerable towns.

These findings come from a purposive sample in Kwara State. They show a pattern in the places studied, not the overall prevalence of such attacks across the state or Nigeria.

1. Why we investigated and how we gathered the evidence

Theo-Sight's Research on Human Rights and Advocacy (ReHuRA) project documents violence against traditional institutions, places of worship and rural communities. Its Kwara fieldwork took place mainly between April and June 2026, with follow-up interviews until August. According to project records, researchers interviewed between 130 and 140 people in more than 20 communities, including three traditional rulers, survivors, relatives, clergy, vigilantes, eyewitnesses, hunters and ransom negotiators.

Interviews were semi-structured and transcribed, and respondents were told how their information would be used. Several asked not to be identified; private individuals are not named here. Theo-Sight adopts ethical guidelines of the Nigeria Data Protection Commission.

2. Traditional rulers on the front line of insecurity

Most palace attacks took place in Kwara South, farming communities bordering forest reserves that stretch towards Kogi and Niger States.

Date	Place (LGA)	What was reported
1 Feb 2024	Koro-Ekiti (Ekiti)	The Olukoro, a retired army officer, shot dead in his palace; his wife and another person abducted and later freed
Sep 2025	Ogbayo, Oke-Ode (Ifelodun)	Village head reportedly killed in his palace
Nov 2025	Bayagan-Ile (Ifelodun)	The Ojibara abducted from his farm; reportedly freed after about 25 days
26 Dec 2025	Adanla (Ifelodun)	Palace raided while the monarch was away; nine people abducted and held until March 2026
Late Dec 2025	Owa-Onire (Ifelodun)	Palace forced open; the king and members of his household seized; a teenage girl held about two months
31 Dec 2025	Afin, Ile-Ire (Ifelodun)	The Aniwo and his son abducted; his wife shot; held about five weeks
3 Feb 2026	Woro (Kaiama)	Village head's palace burned during a massacre; family members killed or abducted
18 Apr 2026	Olayinka (Ifelodun)	Monarch abducted from his palace; reported in June to have died in captivity
25 May 2026	Yashikira (Baruten)	Emir's palace set on fire; wives and children among about ten abducted
22 Aug 2026	Igbesi (Isin)	Monarch abducted; rescued by police, soldiers and vigilantes; died about two weeks later after an illness

Adanla. According to research, people were watching a football match there on 26 December when gunmen arrived and asked for the king, who had left town that evening. They took nine people instead, and held them until March. Ransom demanded was more than ₦50 million in cash and three motorcycles of a particular brand the kidnappers specified, which the family found only in Lagos.

Owa-Onire. Attackers forced their way into the palace and seized the king and members of his household. The king was later freed, but a teenage girl from the household was held for about two months. After a second attack, the king left with his family. “Nobody is in the community again as we speak,” an eyewitness, who fled to the bush with his family, said.

Olayinka. An eyewitness said about ten armed men broke down the door of the palace of Oba Salman Olatunji Aweda on 18 April 2026. In June, a captive released by the same group said the king had died. The king was killed even though his community had paid “a huge sum of money including motorcycles and fuel”.

3. Voices from the palaces and affected communities

The attack on Aniwo palace could have been avoided if the community security had sufficient weapons. Because he had farmed the area as a boy, he recognised much of the route to the kidnappers’ camp, where he was chained with a motorcycle chain and padlock alongside nine other captives.

Based on this experience, the King concluded that “It is pure business for them.”

“You know in all these insecurity and kidnapping issues the target of these perpetrators is monarchs.” **— A traditional ruler in Kwara state.**

A resident in Ile-Ire district said the palace had no guards: “There’s a Civil Defence office around the palace but no one is there, its not functional.” The nearest police station, he estimated, was “about 55 minutes to 1 hour from the palace”. Local hunters held back on the night of the attack: “They said the guns these people brought were beyond their power.” When a palace is attacked or its ruler leaves, it weakens traditional governance and indigenous community life

4. Recommendations: making the palace and rural communities safer

Keeping traditional rulers safe cannot rest on government alone. The cases in this investigation show gaps that palaces, communities, local government, civil society and the formal security system can close better together than apart. The five measures below are practical, mostly low-cost, and built on shared responsibility.

1. Review the safety of each palace and fix the simple weaknesses first.

In each high-risk area, the palace council and community leaders should walk through the palace and its surroundings with a trained security adviser, and note how an attacker could get in, where the household would shelter and how they would leave safely. Most fixes are simple: strong doors and locks, lighting around the compound, a secure inner room, cleared bush near the walls, a single controlled gate with a visitors' register, and a household safety plan that everyone has practised. At Afin, Adanla and Owa-Onire, attackers entered palaces that had no guard at all.

Working together: Rulers and palace households; chiefs-in-council; community development associations; local government; trained security advisers.

2. Build an early-warning and response chain around every palace.

Help often arrives too late because no one is alerted in time; at Ile-Ire the nearest station was about an hour away. Each community can set up a simple chain that links the palace to ward heads, hunters, farmers, herders, youth and women's groups and religious leaders, using phone groups, two-way radios and agreed alarm signals such as bells or drums. A short contact sheet should show who calls whom, and which neighbouring communities and responders will come to help. The chain should be tested regularly and response times recorded, so that weak links can be fixed.

Working together: Residents; community security groups; neighbouring communities; local government; DSS, mobile network providers, to improve coverage in dead zones.

3. Protect information about rulers' movements and routines.

Attackers asked for kings by their titles and struck where they expected to find them: in the palace, on the farm or at home when the ruler had travelled. Where possible, palaces should limit who knows a ruler's travel plans, vary routines and routes to farms and markets, avoid travelling alone, check the background of new palace staff, and agree a confidential way for residents to report strangers asking questions about the ruler. Rulers, chiefs and household members should also receive basic training in personal safety and what to do if confronted.

Working together: Rulers and their households; chiefs; palace staff; residents; civil society and faith-based trainers.

4. Set up joint local safety committees that meet regularly and report back.

In each high-risk LGA, a standing committee should bring together the traditional council, local government officials, community security groups such as hunters, vigilantes and forest guards, faith leaders, women and youth representatives, and the security agencies responsible for the area. It should meet monthly, share warnings, plan joint patrols, and agree how community guards are selected, trained, supervised and equipped within the law, so that they are neither outgunned nor unaccountable. Hunters at Ile-Ire held back because “the guns these people brought were beyond their power”. Every concern raised should receive a written answer at the next meeting.

Working together: Traditional councils; local government; community security groups; police force, faith, women and youth leaders; the security agencies serving the area.

5. Record every attack and support recovery together.

There is no single trusted record of attacks on traditional institutions, and freed rulers are often left to carry the cost alone; one is still repaying the debt from his own ransom. Traditional councils, universities and civil society groups can keep a shared register of incidents with government, so that patterns and hotspots are visible and resources go where the risk is highest. At the same time, faith communities, health workers, philanthropists and community associations can provide trauma care, help with ransom debts, and support the safe return of displaced rulers and residents, so that traditional leadership continues.

Working together: Traditional councils; universities and research bodies; civil society; faith communities; health workers; government.

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Theo-Sight Institute for Research and Advocacy is a Nigerian-led research and advocacy organisation that works with government, communities and partners to strengthen the protection of vulnerable people.