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Strapped with bombs, Nigerian girls defy captors and live to tell about it

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According to UNICEF, more than 110 children have been used as suicide bombers since the start of the year — at least 76 of them girls. Most were under 15 years old. One girl blew herself up along with a baby strapped to her back.

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MAIDUGURI, Nigeria —

The girls didn't want to kill anyone. They walked in silence for a while, the weight of the explosives around their waists pulling down on them as they fingered the detonators and tried to think of a way out.

"I don't know how to get this thing off me," Hadiza, 16, recalled saying as she headed out on her mission.

"What are you going to do with yours?" she asked the 12-year-old girl next to her, who was also wearing a bomb.

"I'm going to go off by myself and blow myself up," the girl responded hopelessly.

It was all happening so fast. After being kidnapped by Boko Haram this year, Hadiza was confronted by a fighter in the camp where she was being held hostage. He wanted to "marry" her. She rejected him.

"You'll regret this," the fighter told her.

A few days later, she was brought before a Boko Haram leader. He told her she would be going to the happiest place she could imagine. Hadiza thought she was going home. He was talking about heaven.

They came for her at night, she said, grabbing a suicide belt and attaching it to her waist. The fighters then sent her and the 12-year-old girl out on foot, alone, telling them to detonate the bombs at a camp for Nigerian civilians who have fled the violence Boko Haram has inflicted on the region.

“I knew I would die and kill other people, too,” Hadiza recalled. “I didn’t want that.”

Northeastern Nigeria, now in its eighth year of war with Boko Haram, has become a place afraid of its own girls.

So far this year, extremists have carried out more than twice as many suicide bombings than they did in all of 2016, and the attacks keep coming.

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Bombers here at the center of the battle against Boko Haram have struck mosques, marketplaces, checkpoints, camps for displaced civilians and anywhere else people gather, including a single polo field attacked multiple times. Trenches have been dug around the University of Maiduguri, a frequent bombing target, in hopes of slowing down attackers.

The deployment of children has become so frighteningly common that officials in the areas where Boko Haram operates are warning citizens to be on the lookout for girl bombers. A huge billboard here in Maiduguri — the Nigerian city where Boko Haram was born — proclaims “Stop Terrorism” with the image of a scowling, wild-eyed girl with explosives on her chest, clutching a detonator.

Officials are publicly urging parents not to hand over their children to Boko Haram for use as bombers, while the military is circulating a video telling bombers they can surrender. It features an 11-year-old girl. “Do not allow them to tie explosives on you,” says the girl in the video. “It is dangerous.”

The public-service ad paints bombers and their families as Boko Haram collaborators who either support the rebels’ campaign of terror, or were brainwashed or drugged into doing so.

But The New York Times tracked down and interviewed 18 girls in Nigeria who were sent on suicide missions by Boko Haram. Their accounts shatter the narrative often perpetuated by officials.

Far from having been willing participants, the girls described being kidnapped and held hostage, with family members killed during their capture.

All of the girls recounted how armed extremists forcibly tied suicide belts to their waists, or thrust bombs into their hands, before pushing them toward crowds of people. Most were told that their religion compelled them to carry out the orders. And all of them resisted, preventing the attacks by begging ordinary citizens or the authorities to help them.

For these girls and others, even approaching the authorities to ask for help was exceedingly dangerous. Soldiers and civilians at checkpoints are on high alert for anyone suspicious — and usually that means any woman or girl, most of whom wear long headscarves and garments that could cover an explosive belt. In just the past three months of 2016, the United Nations says, 13 children from 11 to 17 years old were killed after they were wrongly thought to be suicide bombers.

Most of the girls interviewed said, like Hadiza, that they had been deployed as bombers after refusing to be married off to a fighter. For years Boko Haram fighters have forced girls into “marriage,” a euphemism for rape, sometimes impregnating them.

Many of the girls echoed Hadiza’s account, saying the extremists had promised them paradise in exchange for pushing a red detonator button. The girls, nearly all involved in planned attacks within the past year, were dropped off along empty roads as gun-toting fighters stayed back at a distance to watch them walk toward their targets.

Maimuma, 14, whom extremists told to bomb a group of soldiers, said she didn’t want to become like the dozens of other girls who have blown themselves up, taking bystanders with them. She knows that many people suspect she is a Boko Haram collaborator. But she argues that she and other girls like her should be praised for defying the extremists. “Some people see me as part of Boko Haram,” she said. “Some people see me as a hero.”

The girls who were sent on suicide missions now try to blend into teenage life in Maiduguri. The war interrupted schooling for nearly all of them. They are eager to return. They dream of becoming teachers, doctors or lawyers.

They value their religion and say they were unconvinced by Boko Haram's insistence that Islam supports suicide bombings. Some worry that God would have punished them had they accidentally set off the bombs attached to them.

When Hadiza and the 12-year-old girl approached a checkpoint, she was scared of what the soldiers might do. Hadiza told the younger girl to wait by a tree in the distance while she explained their predicament to the soldiers. She knew the girl would raise suspicion because she was too young to be walking in the bush without a parent.

"She was such a small girl," Hadiza said.

The soldiers believed her and helped the girls take off their explosives belts before splitting them up for questioning. Hadiza was eventually taken to a camp for displaced people. She still doesn't know where her mother is, or if she is even alive. But her father showed up at the camp a few weeks after she did. When she told him what happened, he cried, both horrified and relieved.

"He would never reject me," she said. "He was so happy I survived."

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