

# Silent Shame

Bringing out the voices of children caught  
in the Lake Chad crisis

**#EndViolence**

unicef  | for every child



**“Sometimes we don’t come close to women because they carry bombs.”**

Mohammed Hussein, 29, CJTF (Community Militia in Borno State), Maiduguri University. Mohammed witnessed the attack at the university where a young girl ran from the mosque and was shot at a checkpoint fleeing. Her bomb exploded.

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A defining feature of this conflict has been the increasing use of children in so-called ‘suicide’ attacks. Since 2014, 117 children have been used in attacks across all four countries in the crisis – 27 since the start of 2017.

As the world marks three years since the abduction of the Chibok girls, it is an opportunity to reflect on the wider implications for children in this crisis. While the abductions in Chibok horrified the world, a shocking part of the story is what happens to children in captivity – and after they are released.

### **A defining feature of this conflict has been the use of children in ‘suicide’ attacks**

### **Three years on**

It’s been three years since the world was outraged by the abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014. Since then, the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin has deteriorated. The Chibok girls – and thousands of other children – have endured unimaginable horrors in captivity by Boko Haram. Across the region, many children who have escaped or been liberated are now trying to rebuild their shattered lives against deep distrust of anyone associated with the insurgency.

With the conflict now in its eighth year, families have gone through years of violence, loss and hardship in camps or host communities, and they have watched their children languish out of school and suffer from illness and malnutrition.

This crisis is marked by massive violations of children’s rights – evident in the use of children on both sides of the insurgency. Boko Haram, in particular, has been leading a systematic campaign of abduction that has forced thousands of girls and boys into their ranks. Local militias, formed to protect their communities, have played a key role in stemming the tide of Boko Haram violence, but they too have used children in their operations.

The international community has mobilized to help the 2.3 million people displaced by the conflict. Schools, clinics and improved conditions in camps for internally displaced people and for refugees have stemmed the tide of a humanitarian disaster. However, equally important is to put in place programmes to support and reintegrate the children who have been abducted and held in captivity.

Beyond the direct support for the boys and girls struggling with their ordeal, a crucial part of UNICEF’s work is with communities, which need to accept the children back into their midst. This multifaceted work with local leaders will take time and is made more difficult by the ongoing use of children in the conflict. First and foremost, these children are victims of the conflict, and their accounts of what happened will help to dispel the fears and distortions – and open the doorway to reconciliation and reintegration.





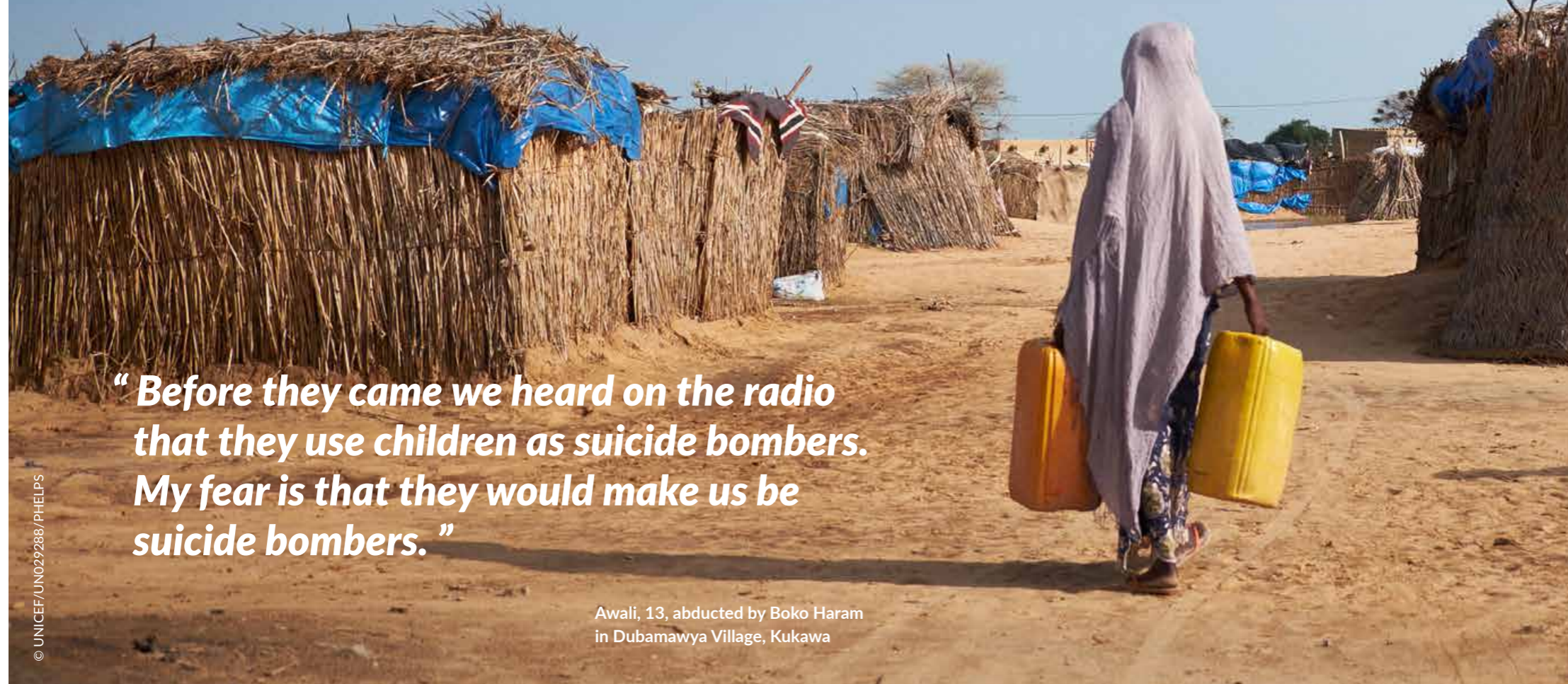
**1.3 MILLION CHILDREN**  
displaced across the Lake Chad Region



**2.3 MILLION PEOPLE**  
displaced



**123,000 CHILDREN**  
who are refugees in neighboring countries—Niger, Chad, & Cameroon



**“ Before they came we heard on the radio that they use children as suicide bombers. My fear is that they would make us be suicide bombers. ”**

Awali, 13, abducted by Boko Haram in Dubamawya Village, Kukawa

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## Escalation of violence

The third anniversary of the abduction of the Chibok girls obscures the fact that the conflict has been going on for nearly eight years and has engulfed four countries and millions of people. In recent years, the violence has intensified, with warfare tactics shifting from conventional combat to a guerrilla conflict involving ‘suicide’ attacks and scorched-earth policies.

The insurgency found fertile ground for its mix of extremism and violence. Decades of extreme poverty in the region and inadequate education may have facilitated the recruitment of the local population, in return for food security, power at the barrel of a gun and moral righteousness with spiritual rewards.

As the conflict escalated, families and children were caught in the crossfire. Human rights conventions were openly flouted as homes were burned to the ground and point blank executions, wholesale looting and targeted abductions were carried out to instill fear and extract resources to sustain the armed groups.

Families who had lost their farms, their loved ones and their belongings fled for their lives, crossing borders to safety in Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Over one million people fled to the capital of Borno State in Maiduguri, doubling the population of the city and putting immense pressure on host communities and authorities to house the families and build basic services like schools, health centers and sanitation systems.

As they fled to find security in urban centers, displaced families also found themselves facing a crisis of food security, as prices increased and families struggled to feed their children. Instead of living with fear of attack from Boko Haram, people now lived with the fear of hunger, disease and boredom. The creation of camps for displaced people and delivery of services to host communities have eased malnutrition levels and restored some basic human dignity to affected people, but the future for many remains uncertain.

# “ Dada’s story from Nigeria

Dada was 12 years old when Boko Haram entered her town. Hiding inside their home, Dada and her sister listened as gunshots rang out from the streets. When night fell, Boko Haram members descended upon the house, kicking in the door and taking both girls.

They were taken to a village in the bush made up mostly of children. The girls lived among hundreds of others the insurgents had captured during raids in the countryside. Men took wives as young as 12, and boys were forced to learn to fight.

One day, the fighters gathered the children in a clearing where they told the girls to sit on the ground and pay attention. Other men appeared dragging a girl and forcing her to lie on the ground in front of the group of terrified children.

“If anyone tries to run away,” Dada recalls them saying, “this is the same treatment we will give you.”

A knife was drawn and the insurgents approached the girl.

“Dada remembers the girl screaming, “Why are you doing this to me? I have a baby!”

The fighters severed her head from the body and

threw both the corpse and the decapitated head into the bush.

“Her eyes were wide open,” said Dada quietly.

Four months after being kidnapped, Dada was sitting outside again with the other abducted girls. Boko Haram members came to her and pointed to a young man about 18 years old. Bana was a fighter and a sheik.

“This is your husband,” she was told. That night, Dada was raped for the first of many times.

Dada managed to escape the camp, trekking through the savanna for days with no food, until she eventually came across a military camp in Cameroon. Her belly had been swelling up for some time now, and she felt as though she was having a problem with her stomach. After running some tests, the military told Dada that she was pregnant.

Today her daughter is two years old. Dada loves to play with Hussaina, picking her up and tickling her.

“At times, when I look at her I get angry,” Dada said. “But after thinking, I calm myself down. Wherever I go, I can’t be without her.”

*Dada is now 15 years old and living in Maiduguri.*



## Snatched at night

The Boko Haram insurgency was fueled in large part through systematic abduction of children. The Chibok abduction remains one of the most well-known examples, but the practice is widespread; it preceded Chibok and continues to this day.

Reports indicate that the abductions are carefully planned and targeted as part of a well-coordinated effort to strengthen the insurgency with boys and girls who would serve through fear. Young girls are spotted in the markets, and nighttime raids drag them from their beds. In some cases, parents are killed in front of the girls during the process. This is typically followed by an extended journey to a Boko Haram base in the forest where the girls are forced into early marriage and sexual slavery. For boys, the stories are equally harrowing, with fewer reports of sexual abuse.

### Some reports indicate that children were forced to become abductors themselves

Some reports also indicate that children are forced to become abductors themselves and given weapons or whips to round up children and pry them from their mother’s arms. While these reports present a troubling picture of active participation and acquiescence, it is crucial to stress that these children are victims confronted with no choice other than to follow orders to survive.



## Using children in armed groups and forces

To sustain an insurgency for nearly eight years requires a considerable mechanism of support. While the four armies fighting Boko Haram have organized supply chains and field support within their militaries, Boko Haram have compensated for their logistical deficiency by deliberately exploiting children to fill the gap and meet the basic needs of their fighting forces.

Firsthand accounts from children who were abducted reveal a pattern of passive captivity for a period of several weeks or months. The children are given food and water and watched by armed guards in remote and isolated strongholds far from the frontline of the conflict.

### Many girls as young as 13 became pregnant in captivity

After this transitional period, they are forced to choose roles. The most common tasks are cooking, cleaning, fetching water and collecting firewood. Some children are forced into more active roles in transport or even as combatants. Boys as young as 13 are taught to drive motorbikes to move fuel, ammunition and fighters in combat zones while others have to guard their fellow abductees and are threatened with death if someone escapes on their watch.

For girls in captivity, their roles are more limited and their chances for escape more narrow. They are assigned 'husbands' who rape them in a marriage without ceremony. They face periods of isolation while the husbands are away – and periods of repeated rape when they return. Many girls, some as young as 13, became pregnant in captivity and gave birth without any medical care or even kindness from their fellow inmates. Frequent beatings are commonplace and the girls describe living with constant armed guards, even when going to the toilet.



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Both the boys and the girls described the regular routine of prayer and attending the mosque and the expectations for them to adhere to strict religious routines. Many of the children who have escaped recount how they opportunistically fled when their armed guards or husbands were occupied, but many describe the experience of being abandoned in the forest, left to fend for themselves and find their way to army lines or even back into cities and towns.

#### Children associated with armed forces or armed groups

While some media outlets erroneously use the term 'child soldiers' to refer to children associated with armed groups in this conflict, the stigmatizing impact of that label calls for a more varied and nuanced understanding of children in armed groups like Boko Haram. The expression 'children associated with armed forces or armed groups' is a terminology that more accurately reflects the degree of involvement for the majority of children. In most cases, they are not active participants in the conflict but rather coerced and frightened victims who by default of their abduction have been forced to be associated with these groups.



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**Since January 2014, 117 children – more than 80 per cent of them girls – have been used in ‘suicide’ attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.**

## **A deadly mission**

The insurgency has changed its tactics over the course of the conflict, from holding towns and territory to a guerrilla-style insurgency that uses hit and run attacks and improvised explosive devices. As militaries have stepped up their attacks on Boko Haram strongholds, there has been a marked increase in ‘suicide’ attacks across the region.

Since January 2014, 117 children – more than 80 per cent of them girls – have been used in ‘suicide’ attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. As of March this year, 27 children have been used in this way in northeast Nigeria alone.

The rise in these attacks is deeply troubling for both the civilian victims and for the children being forced to carry out the bombings. Children have been intercepted at checkpoints and taken into military custody for questioning, raising concerns about this practice and the prolonged periods of custody.

It is unclear whether some of these children are even aware of what they are being asked to do. That they are carrying explosives in a belt on their chests is incontrovertible, but it has been difficult to ascertain if some of these children are being used to transport the devices to other locations and other active combatants or if they are being forced into a perverse death mission in exchange for promised redemption and martyrdom.

The upward trend of using children as a means to avoid detection is a defining feature of this conflict, already marked by grave human rights abuses. The result is that girls, boys and even infants are being viewed with increasing paranoia at checkpoints, where they are thought to be carriers of explosives.

Communities are increasingly suspicious of children who have been linked to Boko Haram, creating barriers to reintegration and reconciliation. Society’s rejection of these children, and their sense of isolation and desperation, could be making them more vulnerable to promises of martyrdom through acceptance of dangerous and deadly missions.



## Amina's story from Chad

Amina never had the chance to go to school because she grew up in a remote island of the Lake Chad where there was none. She was 16 when a man from another village proposed to her. She accepted against the will of her family and left her village. What she didn't know was that her new husband was part of Boko Haram.

After being manipulated and drugged, she was forced into an attempted suicide attack. Four people including Amina were on a canoe riding towards a weekly crowded market. The four girls carried bombs that were strapped to their bodies. When a Vigilante Committee spotted them on the canoe, two of them activated their explosives belt.

Amina didn't detonate her device but she was injured in the explosion. She lost both her legs.

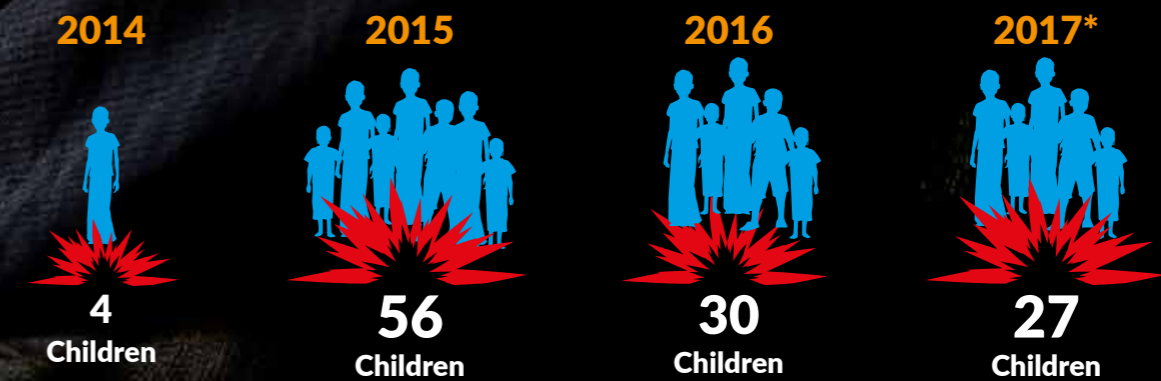
She was brought to the hospital in severe shock and with grave injuries. She didn't speak and barely ate for months. Following family tracing efforts, her family was found but they rejected her at first out of fear of stigma. After a process of mediation they took her back home.

Today, she is still on her knees and very dependent on her family to survive. She is in urgent need of support to prevent her from being excluded by the community. She wants to get an education and find a way to support herself.



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Number of children used in 'suicide' attacks in Lake Chad crisis

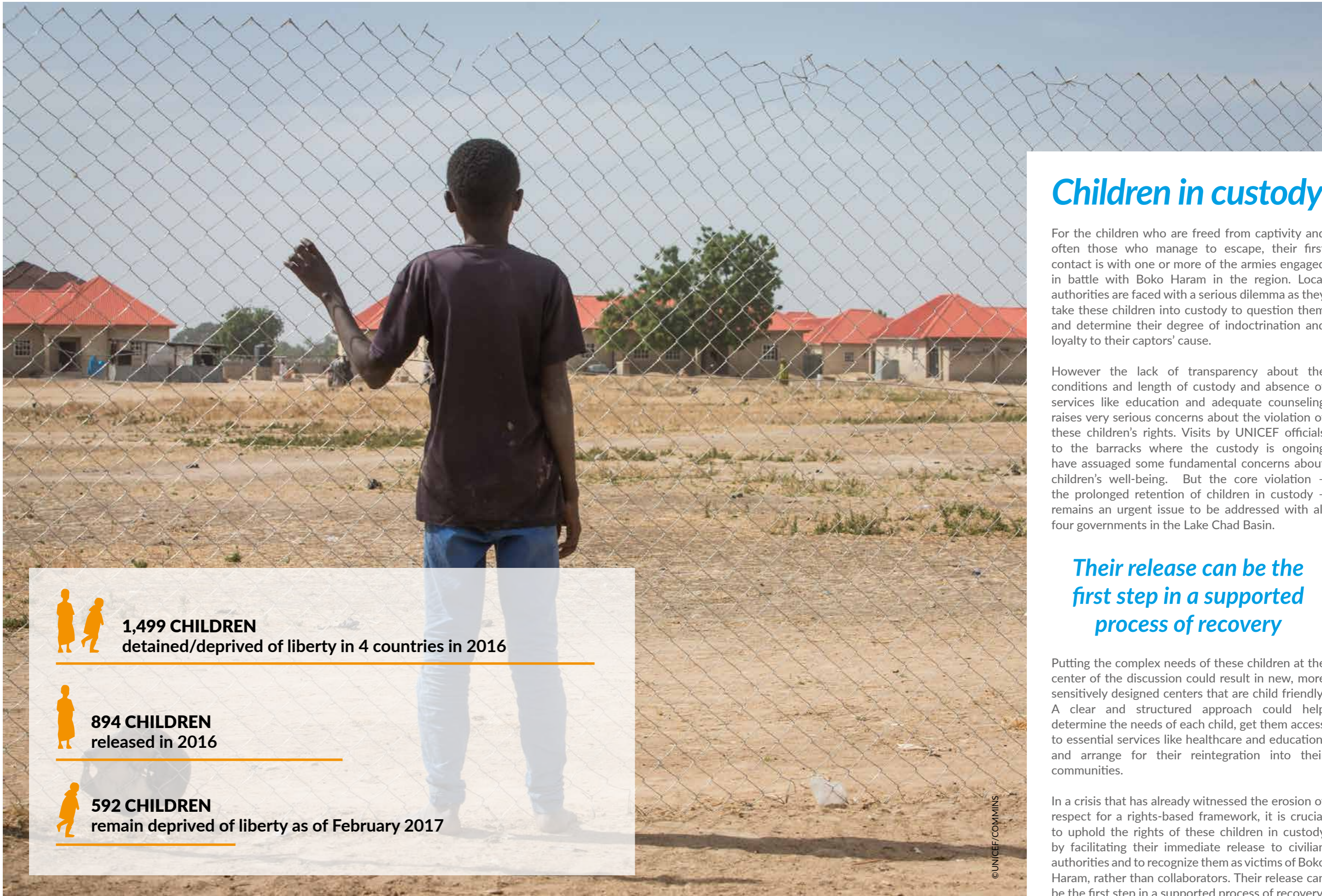


\*In the first quarter of 2017.

Since 2014, 117 children have been used in 'suicide' attacks across all four countries – the vast majority are girls.

In northeast Nigeria, there has been a sharp increase in suicide attacks in recent months with 27 since the start of 2017.

***After being manipulated and drugged, she was involved in an attempted suicide attack.***



## Children in custody

For the children who are freed from captivity and often those who manage to escape, their first contact is with one or more of the armies engaged in battle with Boko Haram in the region. Local authorities are faced with a serious dilemma as they take these children into custody to question them and determine their degree of indoctrination and loyalty to their captors' cause.

However the lack of transparency about the conditions and length of custody and absence of services like education and adequate counseling raises very serious concerns about the violation of these children's rights. Visits by UNICEF officials to the barracks where the custody is ongoing have assuaged some fundamental concerns about children's well-being. But the core violation – the prolonged retention of children in custody – remains an urgent issue to be addressed with all four governments in the Lake Chad Basin.

### *Their release can be the first step in a supported process of recovery*

Putting the complex needs of these children at the center of the discussion could result in new, more sensitively designed centers that are child friendly. A clear and structured approach could help determine the needs of each child, get them access to essential services like healthcare and education, and arrange for their reintegration into their communities.

In a crisis that has already witnessed the erosion of respect for a rights-based framework, it is crucial to uphold the rights of these children in custody by facilitating their immediate release to civilian authorities and to recognize them as victims of Boko Haram, rather than collaborators. Their release can be the first step in a supported process of recovery.



**1,499 CHILDREN**  
detained/deprived of liberty in 4 countries in 2016



**894 CHILDREN**  
released in 2016



**592 CHILDREN**  
remain deprived of liberty as of February 2017

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**312,173 CHILDREN**  
reached with psychosocial support in 2016 across all 4 countries



**806 CHILDREN**  
reunited with families in 4 countries since 2017



## Going back home

What future awaits the children who are released from military custody or those that escape from Boko Haram? As they return to their communities, many of which have been hit by the conflict, their fate is uncertain.

*For days, I hid in fields,  
in the mountains.  
Those were the worst  
moments in my life.*

Many children who have been associated with armed groups keep their experience secret because they fear the stigmatization and even violent reprisals from their community. So they bear their horrors in silent shame and endure isolation as they remove themselves from other groups for fear they might be outed and alienated even further. In these communities, professionals working with the health authorities identify children who need support and help to direct them to the services they need.

For the children living in camps, there are systems in place to help with their recovery process. In addition to the healthcare, education and basic water and sanitation services that provide a baseline of support, the response also offer centers for psychosocial support and even mental health services. These centers are the point of entry for children and youth to access a comprehensive network of professionals who discreetly offer more active case management and help each child find the services they need to process what has happened to them.

While reaching these children is a challenge in both camps and host communities, a greater challenge is the longer-term work with communities to facilitate forgiveness and reintegration. Increased fears of children as potential threats has made this difficult process even more fraught, but is possible with the participation of religious and community leaders.

# “ Tabita’s story from Cameroon

I was living a peaceful life in my village of Tchinéné, in Nigeria, with my grandmother, who took care of me after my mother died and my father left. One night I heard explosions and gunshots. I didn’t realize immediately what was happening, but my grandmother did. The armed group that many other village elders kept talking about had finally reached us.

They came to our house. We thought they would just kill us. But they had other plans: they wanted to marry me to one of them. They told my grandmother that she must pay them if she didn’t hand me over for marriage. Otherwise, they would just abduct me, and kill her.

After having made their offer they left the house,

saying they would come back. My grandmother gave me some food for the way and told me to run.

For days, I hid in fields, in the mountains. Those were the worst moments in my life. I eventually found my way to the Cameroonian border where I was put on a truck and sent to Minawao refugee camp.

It took me a very long time to find myself comfortable in the camp, to meet new friends, and to go back to school. But in Minawao, I was supported and I even became the leader of a girls club. My role is to talk about issues girls are facing in the camp, what options they have and the risks they face. Everyone talks about education. Education is the best way to defeat Boko Haram for good.



## Life skills

Helping children return to normal life after their ordeal at the hands of Boko Haram is a complex and lengthy process. It starts with addressing the immediate and acute needs of distressed children who suffer profound health and mental consequences, but it also consists in helping these children imagine their own futures in their communities. Community acceptance initiatives are essential to create a welcoming return for them.

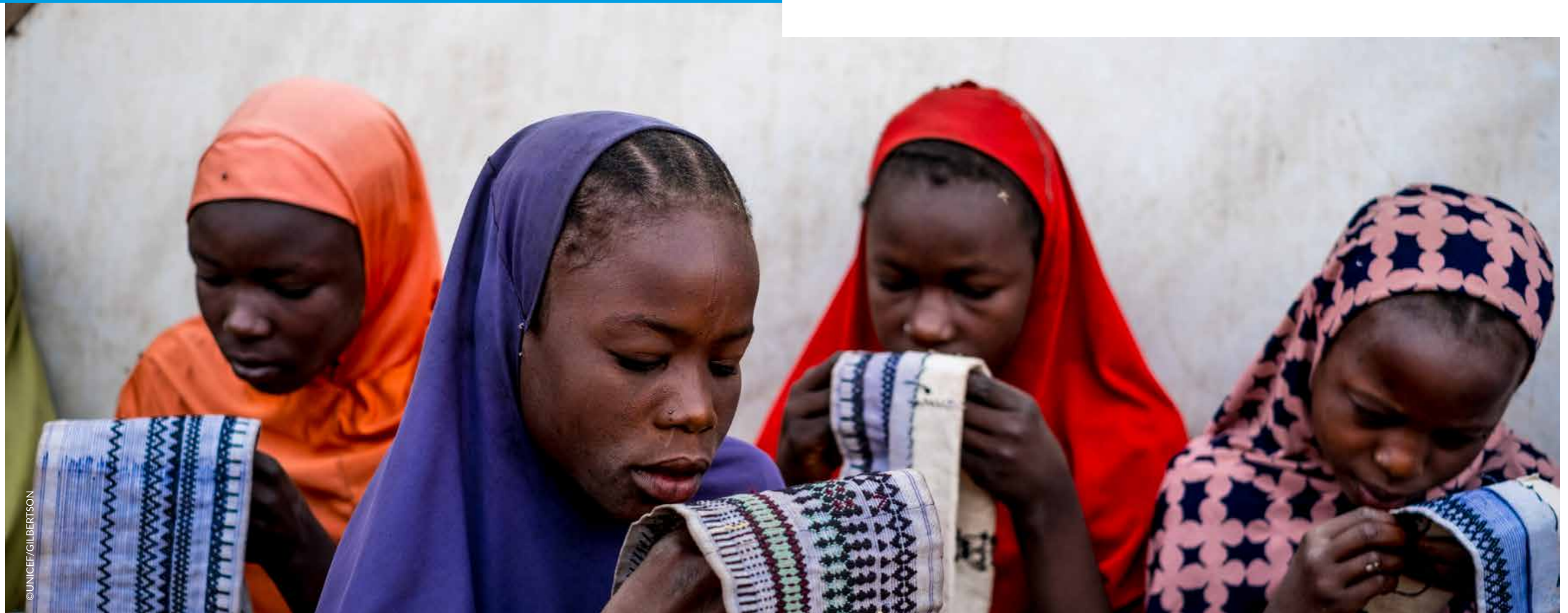
Working with religious leaders and community elders to reduce the possible stigma for these children is key to the scaling up of UNICEF’s response to help them return to a normal life, accepted by their community and confident in their own future.

When asked what she saw in her future, one 16-year-old girl who had suffered abduction and years of rape in captivity was unable to even imagine what her life might be like in a year – let alone five or ten

years. She met the question with an excruciating silence and a daunting realization that she did not have any idea what her future would be like.

In collaboration with national authorities, UNICEF and partner organizations have a comprehensive range of responses tailored to the children’s individual needs to help them recover. A mixture of activities promoting life skills, future planning and emotional literacy to help children learn more than what is found on the curriculum in the classroom are just some of the ways that UNICEF is helping these children recover their childhood. There are also a number of services that offer practical training to develop skills in sewing or cooking.

These preliminary efforts are being expanded so all children can benefit from them and the children who have survived their ordeals with Boko Haram can take part without shame or stigma.





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**“ My home is open to any lonely child who has fled Boko Haram. In times of war, children become everyone’s children. The person who is best placed to protect them must do so. ”**

Aissa from Mokolo (Far North Region of Cameroon). She currently hosts three children who have been separated from their parents.

## **More needs to be done for children**

Flying over the charred villages and barren fields of Borno State gives a perspective of the scale of the destruction and the intensity of this conflict. Stretching to the horizon, the land carries the black scars of violence that offer eerie echoes of the fear and sadness of the people who once lived there.

On the ground, meeting the children of this crisis, the stories become even more daunting as

each child has a similar story of attack, flight, loss and struggle. The courage and resilience of these children provides a glimpse of hope amid the grim reality of this crisis.

Despite the remarkable capacity of children to carry on in such trying circumstances, these children need support. However, the complexities of delivering healthcare, education, and sanitation and protection services to millions of people spread across four countries with an active and deadly conflict represent one of the world’s most complex humanitarian challenges.

**Last year UNICEF’s \$154M appeal for the Lake Chad Basin was only 40% funded**

For international organizations to coordinate this response with limited funds makes this challenge even greater. Last year UNICEF’s US\$154M appeal for the Lake Chad Basin was only 40 per cent funded, resulting in severe gaps in services and leading to delays in implementing community-based solutions. To leave these children without support will only sow the seeds of greater insecurity and poverty in the region.

Releasing children from custody and reintegrating them into their communities is an important step in a comprehensive set of services which will help them process what has happened and invite them to learn new skills that will give them a sense of their own future.

In each of the affected countries, national authorities are determined to quell a violent insurgency, but they are struggling to meet the needs of children in this conflict. Across the region, UNICEF is delivering a full spectrum of services for children and their families. These include setting up schools and temporary learning spaces, health centers and malnutrition clinics, water and sanitation projects and of course a network of centers that provide psychosocial activities and even mental health support.

The anniversary of the Chibok abductions is an opportunity to stand for and with the children caught in this crisis because their dreams – and the peace of the region – depend on our collective efforts to speak up and act on their behalf.

**“Boko Haram attacked my village and they killed my parents and my brother. They kept killing people for three days before I could run away. For months I didn’t go to school but now I’m enrolled again. The war is behind me and I want to become a teacher, to help other young girls achieve what they want.”**

Pauline, age 11

## Call for Action

- **Remove children associated with armed groups from ‘closed administrative custody’.**

A child’s association to an armed group is not sufficient grounds to keep a child in custody or for prosecution. Children who have been taken into custody for their alleged or actual association to armed groups should be immediately released and referred to civilian authorities for reintegration support. Governments must prioritize children’s recovery and reintegration. UNICEF advocates for increased commitment by governments to respect and abide by the Paris Principles, the Beijing Rules and the N’Djamena Convention, so that children are treated as victims and not perpetrators.

- **Move children from military to civilian environment as quickly as possible.**

UNICEF advocates for the development and implementation of ‘handover protocols’ in each of the four concerned countries for children encountered during military operations. The protocol facilitates a process of identification, age verification and quick transfer of a child from a military to a civilian environment.

- **Provide care and protection for separated and unaccompanied children.**

UNICEF works with partners and communities to prevent children being separated from their families and ensure that separated and unaccompanied children benefit from care, protection, family tracing and reunification services. All children affected by the crisis need psychosocial support and safe spaces to recover.

*Note: The names of the children have been changed to protect their identities. The images shown in this collection do not directly correspond to the stories of the children.*



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