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## **21 Chibok Schoolgirls, Reuniting With Parents, Tell of Boko Haram Slavery**

*Chris Stein and Dionne Searcey*

*The New York Times*

ABUJA, Nigeria — They were taken deep into the Sambisa Forest to Boko Haram's stronghold, where the more than [200 schoolgirls from Chibok](#) were offered a choice: Join the militants or become their slaves.

About half of them chose to join and marry the fighters and were taken away, never to be heard from.

Those who refused endured more than two years of servitude, washing, fetching water and cooking for Boko Haram.

The girls, nearly all of them Christians, lived in grass huts and were forced to convert to Islam. At first they ate rice and maize.

But then food became scarce. During their captivity in the forest, a few of them died.

These were the stories that parents of the schoolgirls from Chibok heard Sunday from [21 girls released](#) last week after the Nigerian government negotiated their freedom.

The parents of the freed girls, as well as parents of [girls still held captive](#), were bused to the nation's capital for a joyful reunion ceremony at a hospital run by the country's secret police service.

Videos of the ceremony showed reunited families hopping up and down together in celebration, singing Christian songs of praise.

"I felt like it was the day that I born her into this world," said Ruth Markus, the mother of Saratu Markus, one of the freed girls. "I danced and danced and danced."

The girls are in the custody of the secret police, and they are receiving medical and psychological care, government officials said.

They were scheduled to meet with President Muhammadu Buhari on Monday.

Mr. Buhari, who took office a year ago, had [pledged](#) during his campaign to find the girls. Officials have said they expect more girls to be released soon.

As many as 276 girls [were taken in April 2014](#) when members of Boko Haram stormed their boarding school during exam week.

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About 50 escaped in the initial days after the abduction, but before last week only one had been found since: Amina Ali, who was discovered this year [roaming in the forest with a baby](#).

Boko Haram fighters have captured and killed large groups of other schoolchildren, but the kidnapping of the students from Chibok caught the world's attention, fueled by a #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign.

On Sunday, people from Chibok who met with the girls said they looked gaunt.

"They've just become like skeletons," said Yana Galang, a mother of a still-missing girl and a community leader of the Chibok parents.

Some parents who met with the girls said they had reported that one of the schoolgirls in their group of about 100 died of a snakebite, one died in childbirth (their encampment included male hostages, too) and four died in a bombing.

The Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross helped broker negotiations to release the girls, and the Chibok residents who met with the girls Sunday offered more details about their release.

Militants had gathered the girls recently and told them that they were going home. A few days later, a Red Cross vehicle rumbled into the forest where the girls were held.

Representatives shook hands and talked with a militant and then left. A militant then read from a piece of paper the names of those who were to be freed.

Militants later drove the girls for a couple hours until their vehicle broke down. They pointed them in a direction and told them to start walking.

The girls walked for two days and arrived in a border town where they were able to contact Nigerian officials.