



## Investigation into ‘Nigeria’s Hidden Gulag’ wins the HART Prize for Human Rights 2026

By Frontline Journalist, Mike Odeh James

Trigger warning: This article contains distressing content. The names and ages of survivors have been changed by HART to protect their anonymity.

When the bus arrived on April 30, 2026, the survivors stepped down slowly.

They looked exhausted, filthy, and painfully thin. Most were children younger than 15. Some could barely walk. Others stared blankly into the distance, as if part of them was still trapped inside the forest they had just escaped.

Among them was 19-year-old student Esther Yaro. Yaro told this reporter she was kidnapped on January 3, 2026, from Angwan Gamo in northwestern Nigeria and taken deep into a forest camp run by terrorists.

*"The terrorists came to our village and seized 15 people, including my mother and younger brothers," Yaro said. "They tied motorcycle chains around our hands and legs so we could not escape."*

She said captives were starved, beaten, and forced to witness killings inside the camp.

*"Beatings and killings happened almost every day," she said quietly. "Our captors enjoyed it."*

She recalled how her aunt was murdered.

*"They killed my aunt and cut her body into pieces,"* she said.

Another survivor, Peter Musa from Bandi village in Kauru County, described the camps as hidden prisons where torture, hunger, fear, and death have become part of daily life.

### **'One of the largest hostage camps'**

The Fulani are one of West Africa's largest ethnic groups, with an estimated population of about ten million people in Nigeria alone.

Most Fulani families live peacefully across northern Nigeria as herders, farmers, traders, teachers, and civil servants. Security analysts and survivors say a small but dangerous faction within the wider Fulani population has embraced kidnapping for ransom and rural terrorism.

These armed groups, often referred to by local residents as Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM), operate mainly in Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, Benue, and Taraba states.

In Southern Kaduna, survivors and local leaders say many militants have established camps deep inside Rijana Forest. The forest stretches across Kachia, Kajuru, and Kagarko counties and lies close to several military formations and checkpoints.

Survivors describe Rijana as one of the largest hostage camps in northwestern Nigeria. Residents say militants move through forests on motorcycles, attacking isolated farming communities and highways before dragging captives into hidden camps.

From these camps, militants allegedly target vulnerable ethnic minority communities, especially the Adara, Gbagyi, and Atyap people.

Families say victims are held for months under brutal conditions while relatives sell farmland, livestock, homes, and motorcycles to raise ransom money. Stephen Danladi, whose mother, stepmother, and siblings were kidnapped, told this reporter he paid 50 million Naira before his relatives were released. He said Rijana is not one camp, but a network of smaller camps controlled by different Fulani militia warlords.

*"Each mini camp can house between 50 and 100 kidnapped persons guarded by heavily armed men," Danladi said.*

Yaro confirmed his account: *"There were about sixty of us in my camp alone,"* she said. *"In one night, the hunting groups can bring more than 30 people. And there are many hunting groups around Rijana."*

### **Life at the camp**

Many survivors described severe torture and starvation inside the camps.

*"My younger ones and mother were fed once a week,"* Danladi said. *"The rest of the time they survived on grasses and tree bark. One of my younger brothers died of hunger."*

He said those eventually released returned with sores, whip marks, and signs of prolonged abuse.

For many survivors, escape from Rijana does not mean freedom from trauma. The memories of chains, executions, starvation, and endless fear remain long after release.

### **Federal government, military aware of Rijana camp**

All the survivors and relatives interviewed said the Nigerian military is aware of the camps but has failed to dismantle them or rescue the hostages.

*"A soldier asked me to pay him three million naira to help secure the release of my relatives,"* Danladi alleged.

He also said he passed through several military checkpoints while delivering ransom money to the terrorists. The allegations could not be independently verified, and Nigerian military authorities have repeatedly denied accusations of complicity with terrorists.

Still, survivors insist the camps continue to operate openly inside Rijana Forest despite their proximity to military formations.

The question many grieving families now ask is simple: how can such camps continue to exist for years without being dismantled?



*Winner of the HART Prize for Human Rights 2026, **Mike Odeh James**, is a veteran conflict reporter and security analyst in Nigeria. He investigates the abduction of civilians, attacks on indigenous communities by extremist groups, and military operations in northern and central states.*