



The Uplifting Africa Program

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Why Did Boko Haram just Surrender by the Thousands?



Leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, reported dead. Photo Credit The Defense Post

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Why Did Boko Haram just Surrender by the Thousands and how can Nigeria take Advantage of this?

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Troops of the Boko Haram in Nigeria, Photo Credit Vanguard News

Introduction

Boko Haram, a jihadist group that has been terrorizing Northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region for over a decade, saw its largest wave of surrender since the birth of Boko Haram in the mid-2000s. The surrender was sent in motion by the death of the group's leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021. According to the Council on Foreign Affairs, Nigeria's conflict with Islamic insurgencies is responsible for 350,000 deaths, three million internally displaced people, and more than 310,000 refugees. The New York Times interviewed top-ranking members who recently surrendered and revealed that Mr. Shekau took his own life by detonating an explosive device after being cornered by Boko Haram's rival sect - Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). In 2016, intra-party rivalry led to Boko Haram being split into two factions, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lid-Da'wati wa'l-Jihad (JAS) and ISWAP. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), of the 350,000 deaths that the Islamic insurgents are responsible for, children under the age of five years old account for more than 90%. In addition, Nigeria's National Security Adviser Babagana Monguno,

said that Malam Bako, who succeeded al-Barnawi as leader of the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), was “taken out” by troops in mid-October 2021.



First Lady, Michelle Obama, Pleads to Bring Back School Girls held Captive by Boko Haram
Photo Credit, New York Times

Boko Haram first made waves in August of 2011 when they claimed responsibility for a suicide bomber who drove a car into the United Nations (UN) headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria’s capital. This was the deadliest attack in UN history killing 23 personnel and injuring more than 80 others. Then in 2014, the group sparked international outrage after they kidnapped 247 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok. The kidnapping of the Chibok girls sparked a global social media campaign that created the famous hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. The hashtag was supported by then-U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama.

Operation Safe Corridor

The route Boko Haram members took to surrender is part of a Government operation called Safe Corridor. Operation Safe Corridor was initiated by the Nigerian Government in 2016 and designed to degrade Boko Haram. One way it achieves this is by providing a safe exit for members who want to defect from the jihadist group. Once a militant surrenders to government authorities, he or she is placed into a reintegration camp that readies them for transition back to civilian life. The realization that the Nigerian government could not defeat Boko Haram solely by violent military action led to the creation of operation Safe Corridor. The offer of amnesty is appealing to low and mid-level members of Boko Haram who were forced to join the group. Many of the low-level members are ordinary people that Boko Haram rely on for day-to-day functions such as trade, food, supplies, transportation, and spying. Boko Haram exploits the local economy and population for

funding and recruitment, respectively. High unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and weak-to-nonexistent social services make people vulnerable for recruitment by Boko Haram. In other words, the jihadist group provides the basic necessities that the government cannot, creating a relationship of dependency.

Operation Safe Corridor has three main issues. First, it attracts people who do not meet the criteria of the program. Operation Safe Corridor seeks low-level combative and non-combative members from either ISWAP and JAS, although it has attracted a number of people outside of its target group such as civilians trying to flee Boko Haram controlled areas, a couple of high-level militants, and minors being mistaken as child soldiers – none of which require a reintegration program. The second issue is the long and gruesome journey from the point of surrender to a reintegration camp. Past participants have described years of transfers from detention center to detention center and reported being held in confinement unsuitable for human habitation. Common practices in detention centers are told to involve beatings, interrogations, and torture by the guards. Brutal behavior from Nigeria's security forces are not unheard of. Between March and mid-April of 2020, the National Human Rights Commission recorded 105 human rights complaints against Nigerian security forces. The recent #EndSARS movement, which gained international notoriety, reminds us of the extent of systemic police brutality in Nigeria. Thirdly, Operation Safe Corridor has been highly criticized by citizens and politicians for giving low-level Boko Haram recruits impunity and using donor money towards their reintegration. In light of these imperfections, the Nigerian government should implement the International Crisis Group's recommendations to reform Operation Safe Corridor's screening procedures, confinement standards, captive treatment, and prosecute high-level jihadists.



Area where the Boko Haram are active, Photo Credit: The Economist

Regional Response

A challenge of defeating Boko Haram is in organizing a regional response. Regional action by Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon is necessary because Boko Haram's base is located at an intersection of four international borders. The Lake Chad region is undeveloped and vacant of government presence, giving way to porous borders. Large military offensives by the Nigerian government have proved successful in pushing Boko Haram sects out of Nigeria but is undermined by a lack of commitment from neighboring countries to secure their own borders. Also, because of Nigeria's limited security apparatus, they cannot maintain law and order throughout the vast and extreme regions in the North. Due to these difficulties, Nigeria's former President Ebele Johnathan, who served from 2010 until 2015, looked to China and Russia for weapons and training and hired a private military company out of South Africa to aid in securing the Borno state – Boko Harams birthplace and recipient of the most devastation. Despite President Johnathan's efforts, along with permitting Nigerian and Chadian troops unrestricted access to fight across Nigeria's borders, Boko Haram had persisted.

Mr. Johnathan's predecessor, and current president, Muhammadu Buhari took initiative to reinvigorate the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) which the African Union approved in March of 2016. It is composed of the four countries that border the Lake Chad region: Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. Overseeing the MNJTF is a civilian body called the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). General Ibrahim, commander of MNJTF, said that so far at least 3,600 militants have surrendered since August and that the numbers are increasing every day in both Nigeria and Cameroon. Other estimates, such as that by the New York Times, can range up to 7,000, although this discrepancy is likely because the Times included the militants as well as their family members who have surrendered alongside each other. Together the MNJTF has a force just over 10,000 troops. As of mid-2019, Boko Haram's membership is estimated to be 5,000-7,000. With 3,500-5000 belonging to ISWAP and 1,500-2,000 pledged to JAS. Despite these promising numbers, General Ibrahim said that the Lake Chad region is still experiencing daily village raiding and conflict between ISWAP and JAS.

What does a massive surrender of Boko Haram mean for Nigeria?

Boko Haram may be on their back. However, as long as poor economic conditions and underdevelopment persist in the Northeast, Boko Haram still has a reliable source of recruitment. Nigeria must take advantage of Boko Haram's state of flux, at the moment they lack strong leadership, they are fighting a multi-front war, contending with intra-party conflict, and weakening commitment by the daily surrendering of comrades. The Nigeria government should stimulate the Borno state's economy, expand and improve Operation Safe Corridor, strengthen the MNJTF, and hold strict accountability and transparency regarding the security forces' conduct.

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