

Boko Haram seizes key multi-national military base in northern Nigeria

Thomas Gaist
8 January 2015

In a surprise attack launched early Saturday, the Islamist militant group Boko Haram seized control of a strategically important military base in Baga, a Nigerian town near the Cameroonian border.

At the time of the attack, the base was serving as the headquarters of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a counter-terrorism unit that includes troops from Nigeria, Chad and Niger. The MNJTF base received a shipment of “new sophisticated weapons” just two days before it fell to the Boko Haram militants, according to *AllAfrica*.

The capture of the MNJTF base comes amid a wave of attacks that has left the Islamist militant group in control of virtually the entire northeastern state of Borno, as well as a number of towns in neighboring Yobe State, including Babbangida, Damaturu, Damagum, and Geidam. Including the most recent offensive, the Islamist group has captured more than 24 towns during the past six months.

At least 1,600 locals, including many children, were forced to flee the area in the wake of the attack on Baga, according to Abdulkadir Ibrahim of Nigeria’s National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA).

The fall of Baga represents a major blow against the central government, leaving the Islamist militants in exclusive control of strategic border crossings into neighboring Niger, Cameroon and Chad and clearing the way for a future assault on the northern capital of Maiduguri. At a meeting Tuesday with Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathon, governors from the nearby states of Yobe, Borno, and Adamawa pleaded for reinforcements from the central government to counter the growing insurgency.

Nigerian security expert Abdullahi Bawa Wase told AFP that the fall of Baga, “has put a lie to the Nigerian government claim that it is on top of the situation.”

“It is a serious symptom of defeat on the side of the government,” he said. “Their next move is predictable, which is expanding their territory southwards.”

“Baga was one of the last remaining towns [in the state] that was under the control of the Nigerian federal government,” African political analyst Ryan Cummings told *Deutsche Welle*.

“When you look specifically at the northern regions of Borno State around the Lake Chadian border, a lot of the urban centers

and local government areas in that region were already under the control of Boko Haram,” Cummings said.

The Baga base fell despite receiving support from “military advisers and surveillance provided by some Western countries,” according to International Crisis Group (ICG) analyst Nnamdi Obasi.

As part of the same offensive, Boko Haram fighters captured some 40 boys and youth in the northeastern region. The group carried out at least two other mass kidnappings last year, seizing some 300 schoolgirls in April 2014 and nearly 100 more hostages in August 2014. The US seized on the kidnapping of the schoolgirls in April to justify an expansion of its military presence in Nigeria, deploying teams of military “advisors” and FBI and CIA agents to collaborate with the Nigerian security services and launching regular military surveillance flights over the energy-rich country.

There are already signs that the latest Boko Haram offensive will be used as a similar pretext for further escalation of US military intervention in Nigeria and throughout West Africa.

The *New York Times* responded to the series of attacks with a report that was carefully tailored to bolster the case for just such an escalation, titled “With Schoolgirls Taken by Boko Haram Still Missing, US-Nigeria Ties Falter.”

The *Times* report—written last week from Stuttgart, Germany, where AFRICOM’s headquarters is located—warns that efforts to retrieve the girls and halt the Islamist insurgency have failed.

“Tensions in the U.S.-Nigeria relationship are probably at their highest level in the past decade,” said a former top State Department official for Africa quoted by the *Times*.

The Nigerian military is “in tatters” and is often incapable of supplying troops with the most basic provisions including ammunition and reliable means of transportation, according to anonymous AFRICOM officials.

“Ounce for ounce, Boko Haram is equal to if not better than the Nigerian military,” a US official told the *Times*.

“We’re now looking at a military force that’s, quite frankly, becoming afraid to even engage,” said top Pentagon official for Africa Alice Friend in statements to Congress last year.

Local officials have similarly warned of the group’s growing strength in relation to the government. “Boko Haram are better armed and are better motivated than our own troops. Given the

present state of affairs, it is absolutely impossible for us to defeat Boko Haram,” Borno Governor Kashim Shettima said in February 2014.

Morale within the Nigerian military is bottoming out, with entire units refusing to enter into battle with the Islamist insurgents, according to reports. “Because of low troop morale, in several cases forces have outright refused to mobilize against Boko Haram when ordered to do so,” an analysis by the CIA-linked US think tank Stratfor noted.

In mid-December, a Nigerian military court handed down death sentences to more than 50 government troops for allegedly mutinying against their officers when they were ordered to assault towns seized by Boko Haram.

Recent reports indicate that the insurgency is spilling over the country’s borders and drawing neighboring governments into the conflict. Last week, Cameroonian warplanes launched strikes in response to recent attacks by Boko Haram fighters on a number of villages—including Makari, Amchide, Guirvidig, and Waza—on the Cameroonian side of the border. On December 28, a force of some 1,000 Boko Haram militants succeeded in temporarily seizing a military base held by Cameroon’s “Rapid Response Battalion” in the town of Achigachia.

These incursions are straining the resources of the Cameroonian military, according to an analysis published Tuesday by Stratfor entitled “Boko Haram’s Territorial Ambitions May Expand From Nigeria to Cameroon.” Boko Haram’s turn to a strategy based on “actively conquering terrain” has proven “extremely successful,” and the group may soon launch “more sustained operations” in Cameroon, according to Stratfor.

Boko Haram has already killed scores of Cameroonian soldiers and gained hundreds of new recruits during a series of similar cross-border raids in 2014, according to Reuters.

The militant group has grown with astonishing speed, from a tiny religious sect to a force capable of conquering large sections of Nigeria. Founded in 2002, Boko Haram’s initial members were recruited at its original headquarters, a religious school located in the capital of Borno province. The group subsequently built up its forces from schools and base camps in the Nigerian hinterland, before launching an armed struggle against the government in 2009.

The frequent use of extra-legal arrests and executions by the Nigerian military, especially against the Muslim population in the north, has stoked sympathy for Boko Haram and contributed to increasingly successful recruitment by the group.

The group has also benefited from the support of affluent layers within Nigeria and has recruited forces from the ranks of student youth and unemployed college graduates, according to a BBC report. The rapid growth of Boko Haram was enabled by its ties to well-connected “rich families” associated with the government, AFP reporter Aminu Abubakar told the BBC.

“People believe the government didn’t want to crack down on

these people because their parents would get angry,” said Abubakar.

The Boko Haram leadership maintains extreme secrecy and isolation from its own members, issuing orders through infrequent meetings with a small group of deputies, according to experts cited by *BBC News*. The group’s leadership has benefited in recent years from growing international ties, both to other jihadi groups and their financiers in Saudi Arabia.

The rise of Boko Haram and similar groups across Africa is the outcome of the cataclysmic social conditions created by decades of imperialist domination. Across the continent, US-backed regimes enforce conditions of social misery, characterized by rampant illiteracy, poverty, lack of employment opportunities and the breakdown of tribal family structures, providing fertile ground for recruitment by militant groups.

Despite living in one of the largest oil producing nations in the world with Africa’s wealthiest economy—GDP surged from some \$260 billion in 2012 to \$510 billion in 2013—the vast majority of the Nigerian population now scrapes by on less than one dollar per day. Nearly five million of Nigeria’s primary school-aged children are currently without any access to formal education.

The growing US intervention in Nigeria is a linchpin of AFRICOM’s efforts to establish a permanent military presence in the most strategic areas of the continent. Since its founding in 2008, AFRICOM has launched more than one thousand operations of varying sizes across the African continent, according to US military documents published by TomDispatch.com. AFRICOM has conducted joint operations and training with at least 49 of Africa’s 54 governments, and maintains forward operating bases in at least 10 African countries.

During the 2013 French invasion of Mali, AFRICOM temporarily deployed US Special Forces units to several nearby countries including Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Senegal and Niger. US drones currently patrol the skies above large stretches of the continent, including the entirety of North Africa, and US advisors are orchestrating operations by the Kenyan, Ugandan and Ethiopian militaries in the Horn of Africa and South Sudan.

In May 2014, the Pentagon ordered some 80 US Air Force drone specialists and other surveillance technicians to Chad. US military and civilian officials stated at the time that the deployment would lay the foundation for a region-wide expansion of drone operations and that Chad was chosen as an especially suitable staging area for future operations inside Nigeria. •



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