

Boko Haram escalates offensive in Nigeria's Borno State

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Boko Haram fighters launched a renewed assault on Baga and other towns in Nigeria's northeast state of Borno last week. The militants shot at civilians indiscriminately and torched entire settlements with gasoline and homemade incendiaries, according to reports. Conflicting reports have placed the death toll at anywhere from scores to hundreds to as many as 2,000.

The new attacks came just one day after the group overran a multinational military base in the town, controlled at the time by a counter-terrorism force specifically tasked with combating the insurgents.

A local official told the BBC that Baga, a town of 10,000 "has been burnt down" and is now "virtually non-existent."

"The towns are just gone," said another Borno state official.

In the wake of its most recent successes, Boko Haram now controls 11 local governmental units, including some 20,000 square miles in the northern states of Yobe and Borno which are home to more than 1.5 million inhabitants, according to the British daily *Telegraph*.

The insurgency appears to have largely driven the Nigerian government out of Borno, rendering 20 out of 27 districts inaccessible to the governmental and international aid agencies, according to Borno State Emergency Management Agency chairman Grema Terab.

Perhaps 30,000 Nigerians have been displaced as a result of the recent fighting around Baga, adding to the some 1.7 million refugees produced by fighting between the government and Boko Haram insurgents since 2009. Thousands of refugees have flooded across border into Chad, with some 1,000 remaining stranded on an island in the center of Lake Chad, according to UN statements Friday.

While Boko Haram initially relied on sabotage and guerrilla tactics to expand its territory and weaken the influence of the official government and fought primarily using AK 47 rifles, the group is acquiring more advanced weaponry, including RPGs, armored combat vehicles, anti-tank rockets and surface-to-air missiles.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magrheb (AQIM) first publicly

announced its financial and logistical support for Boko Haram in 2010, according to Voice of America. UN reports from 2011 also found that Boko Haram fighters trained at AQIM camps inside Mali. Nevertheless, the US-led NATO alliance directly armed and provided logistical and technical assistance to AQIM forces during the 2011 Libya war, as top US and NATO military officials have openly admitted.

Despite its fanatical anti-government rhetoric, Boko Haram's leadership has engaged in negotiations with the Nigeria state. Boko Haram representatives met with a team led by Nigeria's National Security Adviser and a top Nigerian general in Mecca in August 2012, according to a West Point study.

Boko Haram has cultivated international ties and foreign patrons, reportedly receiving funding from Al Qaeda-linked civilian organizations based in Saudi Arabia and Great Britain, such as the Saudi Islamic World Society and UK-based Al-Muntada Trust Fund, and maintains a permanent diplomatic delegation in Saudi Arabia.

Boko Haram is able to recruit fighters among impoverished elements in Borno's peasantry and urban underclass. According to *African Arguments* the mass of the population is increasingly hostile to the local commercial elite which—together with remnants of the dynastic feudal class that ruled Nigeria and portions of neighboring countries for some 1000 years as part of the Borno Empire—has dominated provincial affairs since the early years of British colonial rule at the end of the 19th century.

Borno's peasantry has flooded into the state's capital at Maiduguri and nearby towns since the 1970s, as the rapid growth of Nigeria's oil sector and the country's increasing integration into the world market has disrupted the local economy and traditional social structure.

In conditions of unending mass unemployment and economic crisis, the flood of rural poor into the cities and towns has led to the emergence of an underclass of homeless youth, students and even professionals with no prospects of securing normal employment, providing fertile ground for the growth of extremist militias.

Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf, born in 1970, built a following by preaching a variant of fundamentalist Islam spliced with superficially "revolutionary" populist appeals. Yusuf cultivated the appearance of being an uncompromising opponent of the country's government and social system.

Under Yusuf's leadership, Boko Haram entered into de facto alliances with local power brokers during the early years after its founding in 2002, reports indicate. Since 2009 and especially in the past year, however, Boko Haram has launched increasingly ambitious attacks on government facilities and civilian areas.

The group's growing web of relations with foreign militias and wealthy donors may explain this increasing brazenness in confronting the local and national elites and its turn to the unrestrained scorched-earth tactics on display last week; an analysis suggested by *AfricanArguments.com*. Since Yusuf's execution by the government in 2009, leadership has been assumed by Abubakar Shekau, a self-described theologian.

From its founding in 2002, Boko Haram appears to have benefited from millions of dollars in "seed money" for new militant groups that flooded into Nigeria after 2001, according to research by the International Crisis Group (ICG). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the declaration in 2001 of the "Global War on Terror" by the Bush administration, efforts were evidently made by Al Qaeda to develop new fundamentalist militant groups in Nigeria, according to the ICG.

"I can tell you from talking to lots of conservative Muslims in Nigeria that there was a lot of money coming into northern Nigeria [in 2002], there are many sources of that money. One of those sources was from al Qaeda," an analyst with the ICG told the *Daily Beast*.

ICG's analysis strongly suggests that Boko Haram was launched by Al Qaeda militants whose close historical ties to the US-backed Saudi monarchy as well as to the Central Intelligence Agency have been well documented.

The most violent and bloodthirsty factions within the international jihadi milieu, such as those fighting for regime change in Syria, have received military, financial, logistical and technical assistance from the CIA and US military.

Like those of other ex- and neo-colonial countries, Nigeria's government functions as a criminal syndicate in its own right, with theft of public funds by top state officials virtually standard practice. Nigeria's security forces are engaged in constant low-intensity warfare against the workers and oppressed masses, carrying out hundreds of extra-legal executions and disappearances annually, according to research by Amnesty International.

The overriding priority of the Nigerian state is to uphold capitalist property and defend the interests of foreign and

domestic investors, insuring that virtually all of Nigeria's growing economic surplus continues to be channeled into the pockets of the domestic ruling elites and foreign corporate-financial interests.

With a major portion of funds allocated to the military routinely stolen by top officers, the military caste has a stake in continuing Nigeria's participation in the "war on terror." "Many of our top military officers are gaining from what is happening here because it means that a lot of money is coming in their direction," said Bishop Oliver Doeme.

The insurgency will inevitably be used to justify expanded military activity by the imperialist powers in West Africa. Responding to recent Boko Haram attacks in Cameroon, President Paul Biya called for international military intervention in the region to combat the group this week.

"A global threat calls for a global response. Such should be the response of the international community, including the African Union and our regional organizations," Biya said Thursday at Cameroon's presidential residence.

In November 2014, Cameroon received 120 military vehicles as a "donation" from the German government.

These moves are ultimately aimed at offsetting the growth of Chinese influence in the highly strategic region. China has made major moves to develop its ties with the Nigerian ruling elite, recently supporting Nigeria for a permanent place on the UN Security Council, as part of general efforts to expand Chinese economic and political clout on the continent. In 2010, China signed a \$23 billion contract with the Nigerian government to build petroleum processing facilities, and has since assisted Nigeria to launch a commercial satellite.



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