



## Original Research

# The Nuisances of Terrorism and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Over a decade now, Nigeria has been battling a violent threat to its corporate peace and stability occasioned by the terrorist activities of the dreaded Islamic extremist group called Boko Haram, mainly domiciled in the North-Eastern region of the country. Since 2009, when Boko Haram began carrying out its campaign of terror on government establishments, including security apparatuses and schools, as well as local communities and individuals in the affected region up till now, Nigeria has witnessed a steady rise in the incidence of grave human rights abuses. Orchestrated both by Boko Haram and the personnel of government security agencies conducting counter-terrorism operations against the terrorist group, the spate of violations of the fundamental human rights of the citizens has become so worrisome as the trend questions the ability of the Nigerian State to fulfil one of its primary obligations of protecting its citizens from assaults and abuses. This study investigates the dimension of this phenomenon based on data derived from secondary sources, including journals articles, books, publications of the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission, publications of the United Nations and other related international bodies, newspaper reports, and websites. The data were analyzed through the thematic and descriptive-interpretive methods of qualitative data analysis. The study finds that the Boko Haram conflict has caused extreme human rights abuses in North-East Nigeria, including destruction of life and property, forced religious conversions and marriages, cruelty against children and utilization of children in combat, among others. The study recommends that the Nigerian government needs to strengthen the equipment capabilities of the security agencies fighting against Boko Haram and motivate them adequately to decimate the group completely as was done to its equivalent, Maitatsine, in the past, and investigate all credible cases of alleged human rights violations impartially to secure justice for the victims, among others. It concludes that proper application of these measures by relevant authorities in Nigeria would definitely provide the country a way out of the prevailing awful situation.

**Keywords:** *Boko Haram, Human Rights, Human Rights Abuse, Security Agencies, Terrorism*

## Introduction

Africa is one of the most troubled continents in the world. The region is besieged with a myriad of protracted human and physical security challenges that threaten the peace, stability, and development of the States, as well as the safety and wellbeing of the populations. Indeed, mass unemployment and poverty, hunger and malnutrition, prevalence of deadly diseases like HIV/AIDs and Ebola infections, misgovernance and corruption, ethnic conflicts, civil wars, violent agitations over the control of natural resources, among other forms of internal unrests, have plagued the region for many decades. In the last few years, however,

Africa's security situation has deteriorated dramatically following the current spate of terrorism occasioned by the precipitous rise of several terrorist syndicates across a host of the region's parts. To lend credence, countries in the Sahel Belt of West Africa, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are battling the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) terrorist groups. In the Lake Chad Basin, Nigeria, Chad, and Cameroon are confronted with the Boko Haram extremists, while Al-shabaab militants are terrorizing Somalia and Kenya in the East and the Horn of Africa. In Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo is fighting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) terrorists, just as Mozambique in Southern Africa is defending itself against the Ansar al-Sunna group. Likewise, in North Africa and the Maghreb, the States of Egypt and Libya are being challenged by the Hasm militants and the members of the Islamic State in Libya (African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism 2019). The presence and operations of these terrorist organizations signals a new and dynamic security puzzle and burden for both the directly affected individual States and the whole African region.

In Nigeria, which is the main focus of the current study, the onslaughts the Boko Haram terrorist group in the northeastern part of the country have remained overwhelming, and this remains the paramount national security priority for the government and citizens. Emerging in 2009 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in North-East Nigeria, Boko Haram's activities also come with profound international effects since the security of both Nigeria and some of her closest neighbors, namely Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, has been severely affected by the group's violent extremism. Consequently, the assertion is plausible that "the trend of domestic terrorism in Nigeria as exemplified by the nefarious activities of the dreaded Islamic sect known as Boko Haram has become a major concern of the Nigerian government in particular and the international community in general" (Akinbi 2015, 32). Since the Boko Haram terrorism began, it has mainly followed the trajectory of attacks on state and non-state institutions, including security apparatuses and worship centres. The group has also become notorious for creating horrible humanitarian situation and causing extreme human rights violations in Nigeria's North-East States of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe. Through their counter-terrorism operations aimed at quelling Boko Haram's radicalism, the Nigerian security forces have also contributed to these monumental human rights infractions. As Anietie Ewang (2021) confirms, measures appropriated by the authorities of the Nigerian government in fighting Boko Haram terrorism have inflicted pain on scores of the country's most unprotected citizens, who are already undergoing anxiety due to the Boko Haram conflict that has lasted for more than a decade. This study relies on data derived from secondary sources, and analyzed through the thematic and descriptive-interpretive methods of qualitative data analysis to demonstrate how the Boko Haram terrorism has really threatened basic human rights in North-East Nigeria.

## The Nexus between Terrorism and Human Rights Violations

The connection between terrorism and human rights violations is adequately documented in academic literature. Conceptually, the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1566 of October 2004 defines terrorism as:

Criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act. (United Nations 2004, 2)

Similarly, “a UN panel, on March 17, 2005, described terrorism as any act intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act” (Alvi 2022, para. 2). Furthermore, for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2014, 28), “to label an act as “terrorism” is to assert not only that it possesses certain characteristics, but also that it can absolutely not be justified by any political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other consideration.” Based on the above definitions, therefore, regardless of the reason for which it is committed and who is involved, the global human community condemns terrorism in all its forms.

Separately, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) (2016, 19), “human rights are the rights that every human being has by virtue of his or her human dignity”. Human rights also refer to “the sum of individual and collective rights laid down in States constitutions and international law” (IPU and UNOHCHR 2016, 19). For the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, n.d., para. 1), “human rights are standards that recognize and protect the dignity of all human beings.” Among a host of others as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, human rights include, for example, the right to life, liberty, and the security of person (United Nations 1948). Human rights circumscribe the interactions between individual persons in modern society, and the relationship between the individuals and the State (IPU and UNOHCHR 2016; UNICEF, n.d.). Human rights are predicated on the idea that all human persons are born free, and they are thus equal in terms of dignity and rights. Therefore, no individual, notwithstanding the race, color, religion, gender, and other factors, should be deprived of his or her rights as spelt-out in the UDHR (United Nations 1948). Upon the governments of States rests the responsibility for the protection and promotion of the realization and enjoyment of these rights by citizens.

Across the world, however, terrorist acts consistently violate an array on human rights (Dhillon and Mama-Rudd 2016). For the most part, terrorism undermines the ability of governments and their units, and maybe more crucially, the confidence of the citizens in

governments' ability to protect society, mainly with respect to the "preeminent" rights—the right to life and the right to security, without which all the other rights intrinsically become inconsequential (Stewart 2018). According to Cingranelli et al. (2019), human rights and peace have a direct and mutually supporting relationship, while Dhillon and Mama-Rudd (2016) hold that human rights and war do not blend well. Of course, the absence of peace, that is, the prevalence of any forms of internal conflicts, including terrorism and civil wars, severely threatens the actualization and enjoyment of rights by a State's citizenry. As Stewart (2018, 10) observes:

If one accepts that terrorism involves the use of politically-motivated, fear-generating violence to commit criminal acts aimed at harming innocent individuals for the purpose of coercing governments of societies to take or refrain from action, then it clearly violates – indeed, is precisely intended to violate – fundamental human rights (and, more generally, the very concept of rule of law).

Through their acts of terror, terrorists abuse the core tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the related covenants (Dhillon and Mama-Rudd 2016; Stewart 2018), especially numerous "first generation" rights, inclusive of the rights to life, freedom, and physical integrity, as well as second and third generation rights (Stewart 2018).

Beside that "acts of terrorism violate the rights of individual victims, who suffer an attack on their most basic right to live in peace and security" (Stewart 2018, 11), fighting terrorism itself also inevitably raises fundamental human rights concerns. Most definitely, tension normally arises between fighting terrorism and observing human rights (De Klerk 2019). The implication is that terrorism and counter-terrorism create a dilemma for governments. Piazza and Walsh (2010) claim that respect for human rights in the context of counter-terrorism stimulates assaults by terrorists. David (2020) expatiates this point as he argues that both terrorism and measures aimed at countering it usually undermine human rights, in that many of these measures are often interlaced with the presumption that adherence to human rights regulations benefits terrorists and impedes States' effort to fight terrorism decisively. Attempts to deal with terrorism and violent extremism have thus resulted in human rights infractions, leading to sequence of violence and the complication of these international issues (Frank 2017). Hence, whereas counter-terrorism actions are pertinent, they equally pose a threat to human rights that they seek to safeguard (Dhillon and Mama-Rudd 2016). But, the observance of human rights, basic liberties, and the rule of law bolsters potent counter-terrorism operations (De Klerk 2019). The UN itself asserts that States' reactions to violent extremism that regard and safeguard human rights are more potent and sustainable (UNOHCHR 2016). Nevertheless, Guild and Bigo (2018) agree with David (2020) as they affirm that the fight against terrorism is oftentimes premised on the ground that it is politically crucial to take swift and pro-active actions against terrorism.

This mostly makes it difficult for States to avoid abusing human rights during counter-terrorism undertakings. The words of Frank (2010, 2) put this in the proper perspective: “Counter-terrorism campaigns have taken a significant toll on civilian lives and there is substantial evidence of abuses of human rights and freedoms. These have been committed by nondemocratic and democratic governments alike.” States’ counter-terrorism operations endanger a vast array of basic human rights, such as the right to life by means of intentional executions, the prohibition of torture, cruel and inhuman treatment, freedom through indiscriminate incarceration, racial and ethnic categorization, and the right to appropriate procedure. States’ effort to counter inhuman activities of terrorist cells can also compromise other individual rights, including the right to freedom of speech and association; the right to privacy; and social, economic, and cultural rights of population (Dhillon and Mama-Rudd 2016). Yet, it is terrorism that influences the attitude of governments toward individual rights (Piazza and Walsh 2010). Nevertheless, States are duty-bound to ensure that their counter-terrorism measures are in conformity to international laws, precisely international human rights law, international refugee law, and international humanitarian law (De Klerk 2019). This would enable States to substantially minimize the human rights costs of thoughtless approaches to counter-terrorism. For Dhillon and Mama-Rudd (2016), the actions of any States that ignore international law and human rights standards in the course of fighting terrorists can amount to increased terrorism within their territory.

### **Boko Haram Terrorist Group and Its Driving Ideology**

Boko Haram, formally called Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati Wal-Jihad (Egeonu 2021), which translates to the “Group of Al-sunna for Preaching and Jihad” (Ezeani and Chilaka 2013, 209), is an Islamic terrorist group based in the North-East region of Nigeria but is equally in operation in Chad, Niger, and northern Cameroon (Bello 2017; Bureau of Counterterrorism 2013). The late Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf (Philips 2018; Bello 2017; Walker 2012) founded Boko Haram in Maidurguri, capital of Borno State. Its name, “Boko Haram”, which means, “western education is forbidden” in the Hausa language (Philips 2018), “was really a succinct critique and implied rejection of Yusuf’s teachings” (Walker 2012, 7), by those who were not interested in the group’s activities, nor affiliated with it in any forms. In other words, as against the popular notion, the name does not actually explain the sect’s main beliefs. Walker (2012, 7) argues that “Boko Haram,” rather than a distillation of the group’s core beliefs, was a name given to the group by dismissive neighbours who had not joined the sect and had no time for it. It was as if they were saying “those people who go on and on about Western education being a sin.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that Isa (2010) attests that Boko Haram indicates a repudiation and opposition to imposition of Western education together with its structure of colonial social order that substituted and debased the previous Islamic arrangement of the

jihadist state, referring to the defunct Sokoto Caliphate. Boko Haram, however, regards itself as *Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah*, which means Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), and the group's proven connections with Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other Islamist terrorist organizations across the world made it to be pronounced as a global entity in 2015 (Bello 2017). Looking critically, as an organization Boko Haram does not completely repudiate modernism in the real sense, as popularly held. This is undeniable as the sect utilizes and is ever ready to continue to deploy the products of Western education at will, even in its operations, such as mobile phones, video cameras, DVDs, YouTube, explosive chemical substances, automatic weaponry, and cars. Instead, Boko Haram is opposed to those called “yan boko” in northern Nigeria, which in English language translates literally to “child of the book” (Walker 2012).

Yan boko describes the elite class formed by the British colonists in Nigeria, whose minds were regarded to have been diverted from following Allah through easy money and corruptive Western ideals. Those called yan boko are thus seen as corrupt in the spiritual and moral sense, and are bereft of religious sanctity, and having amassed riches by fraudulent means, rather than being devoted to the Muslim *umma* (community) (Walker 2012). This is why “Boko Haram’s ideology is often described as comprising of two stances: opposition to democracy and rejection of Western-style education” (Thurston 2016, 5). The sect considers democracy along with other political ideologies like materialism and individualism as having excluded the need of spirituality in humans (Bello 2017). Boko Haram’s anti-democratic ideology was overtly expressed by Mohammed Yusuf when he stated as follows: “These European educated Muslims [*Yan Boko*] returned home only to confused other Muslims that democracy is compatible with Islam, while jihad should only be for self-control” (Olofinbiyi 2020, 142). As such, Boko Haram pursues the reinstatement of an Islamic state in Nigeria, especially in the country’s northern region. It is opposed to the Westernization of Islamic societies in Nigeria, just as it condemns the control of the resources of the country by a few political elite (Bello 2017).

The ideological premise of Boko Haram’s violent rebellion set by the second leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau, who led it after the death of Yusuf reflects the ideals of Syed Qutb. Qutb was an Egyptian scholar and a prominent personality within the Muslim Brotherhood organization formed in 1928, whose doctrine provides guidance to the majority of terrorist cliques in the world. The sect perceives Western institutions as being detrimental to the actual crux of Islam, and it portrays violence as the singular means of getting the Muslims in northern Nigeria out of the existing arrangement that it conceives as “decades of long persecution” (Bello 2017). Notably, “Boko Haram sees state crackdowns on the sect as the latest manifestation of such persecution” (Thurston 2016, 5). The group thus clamors for renunciation of Western cultures through the deployment of violence as the last resort in the liberation and reinstitution of the standards or principles of Islam in society. The group believes that secularism—the disconnection of government from religion—is despicable and

signifies an intentional disintegration of authority with the purpose of damaging the core essence of the Islam (Bello 2017).

Based on its belief in violence as a decisive tool, Boko Haram has carried out several ferocious attacks within northern Nigeria, especially in the North-Eastern States of Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and Bauchi, killing thousands of people since its rise in 2009, and owing to this, the United States Department of State named the group an international terrorist organization on November 14, 2013 (Akpan, Ekanem, and Olofu-Adeoye 2014; Bureau of Counterterrorism 2013; Blanchard 2014). From 2009 to 2018, Boko Haram's terrorism resulted in the death of more than 30,000 persons and displaced more than 1.8 million people from their homes, with a colossal destruction of property valued at N16 billion (Raji et al. 2021). Boko Haram's extremism presently constitutes the most critical threat to the existence and sovereignty of the Nigerian State in the post-Civil War (1967-1970) era (Ogunnubi 2017; Odo 2015). Following the historic incident of the sect's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in the North-Eastern region of Nigeria in 2014, Boko Haram drew to itself greater global attention (Bello 2017). Outright extermination of this fanatical group has, however, proved to be a herculean task for the Nigerian government up till now.

## **Boko Haram Terrorism and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria**

The Boko Haram sect's terrorism and the counter-terrorism efforts of Nigerian government security agencies have resulted in monumental breaches of fundamental human rights in Nigeria, specifically in the embattled States in the North-East region. This study demonstrates how the prevailing circumstance has fiercely threatened human rights in the country under the following sub-headings: destruction of lives and property; forced population displacements; forced conscription to Islam and forced marriages; cruelty against children and the use of children in combat; and arbitrary arrests, detentions, and extrajudicial killings by government security forces. These are considered in turn below.

### **Destruction of Lives and Property**

The rights to life and property are among the basic human rights to which Nigerians are entitled as bonafide members of the global human community as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 and the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 (as emended). Both Article 3 of the UDHR and Section 33(1) of Nigeria's Constitution guarantee individual right to life. Both documents also declare and uphold a person's right to acquire and own private property in Article 17 and Section 43, respectively (United Nations 1948; Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN] 1999). The Boko Haram militants have utterly ignored these critical provisions of these grand international and national legal documents. Evidently, since the full-scale eruption of its terrorist activities in 2009 up to the present time, Nigeria has seen outright violations of these cardinal rights

by the sect in unprecedented dimensions. Boko Haram insurgents deliberately murdered and injured civilians in assaults across Borno State and in many localities in Adamawa and Yobe States. Consistently, the terrorists have been found in the vile acts of shooting, beheading, amputating, stoning, drowning, burning, and bombing civilians in these states (United Nations 2015). It is difficult to estimate with utmost accuracy the number of civilians that Boko Haram has killed.

Based on available statistics, however, Boko Haram extremists have caused the deaths of over 35,000 people in northern Nigeria between 2009 and 2022, all in a bid to overthrow Nigeria's secular state and establish an Islamic state (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect [GCRP] 2022; Sasu 2022). A larger number of these deaths were recorded in states in the North-Eastern Nigeria, with Borno State being the most menaced in this regard (Sasu 2022). In a different account, Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff, General Lucky Irabor even reveals a gloomier situation as he disclosed in October 2022 that the activities of Boko Haram had resulted in the death of 100,000 people (Daka 2022). Reliable data also shows that over 314,000 persons lost their lives due to the indirect effects of the Boko Haram crisis, such as diseases and hunger stemming from the physical and economic destructions following the conflict in the troubled region (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2020). All these deaths resulting from the Boko Haram crisis have also produced 53,111 orphans and turned 54,000 women into widows (Musa 2020). This is just a glimpse of the pathetic humanitarian situation created by Boko Haram terrorism in northern Nigeria. These irreparable losses of lives have, in turn, enmeshed so many families, communities and people across the North-East into unbearable socio-economic conditions.

On the other hand, victims of Boko Haram's barbarity have constantly disclosed that the group would destroy, appropriate and loot houses whenever they carry out attack. These routines have remained prevalent as components of the group's combat strategy to capture and control territories and deter displaced persons from coming back to their homes. In 2014, for example, several villages, including Lassa in Borno State were entirely burned to the ground, and several eyewitnesses that ran away and went back subsequent to attacks narrated the magnitude of destructions (United Nations 2015). Report obtained by International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows that 40 percent of documented IPDs in North-Eastern Nigeria stated that their homes were completely reduced to ashes or wrecked by Boko Haram terrorists, 26 percent had their homes burnt or battered, while 21 percent had no clues about what happened to their homes (IOM 2015). Many victims detailed how Boko Haram militants occupied and inhabited their houses and looted their assets and foodstuffs. Among other areas, in Baga, Borno State, for instance, thousands of people were forced to leave their homes and they deserted the community overnight because of Boko Haram invasions (United Nations 2015). Aside the fear of the possibility of fresh assaults by Boko Haram, many IDPs in camps across Nigeria have refused blatantly, or expressed reluctance in returning to their communities since their homes have been either totally or partially destroyed and their



valuables stolen by the terrorists. In this case, returning to their communities would mean starting life afresh for most of the IDPs, because they may have to struggle for the rest of their lives building and accumulating from scratch the assets Boko Haram has destroyed or looted.

Disclosures by relevant Nigerian authorities provide rather more insightful facts about the level of destruction of private and public property done by Boko Haram. According to the Governor of Borno State, Professor Babagan Zulum, Boko Haram terrorism has caused property damage worth \$9.2 billion, an equivalent of N3.42 trillion in the harrowed North-East states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. Professor Zulum states that, some of the private and public property damaged or destroyed by the sect include: 400,000 houses belonging to citizens; about 5000 classrooms across government schools; more than 202 health centers; 1,613 water supply stations; 713 energy distribution lines; 800 municipal buildings; and numerous police stations, among other infrastructural facilities (Musa 2020), serving the collective interest and wellbeing of the populace. On the contrary, General Lucky Irabor holds that the extremists have destroyed property belonging to both private citizens and government estimated to worth \$9 billion, which is equivalent to N3.24 trillion (Daka 2022). It is difficult to ascertain which of these statistics is authentic as it pertains to loss of lives and property. Nonetheless, the submission of the authors of the current paper is that destruction of human lives and property to the tune of any of the afore-stated gigantic figures, indeed, makes it undeniable the fact that Boko Haram militancy has really undermined the core aspects of the human rights of Nigerian citizens, which are also pivotal for the realization and enjoyment of other rights.

### Forced Population Displacement

With the exception of Nigeria's Civil War (1967-1970), no other singular violent conflict incident in the country's history has created such a momentous humanitarian catastrophe as the Boko Haram conflict has done. Obviously, the humanitarian crisis in North-Eastern Nigeria is currently among the most acute globally, which was the reason the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) announced, in February 2022, that 8.4 million people were in dire need of humanitarian aid in that region of the country (UNOCHA 2022). Through the brutal attacks and consistent spread of terror by its members, especially across rural civilian communities, villages and towns in the region, Boko Haram militancy, coupled with the kinetic responses of Nigerian military forces, have forced millions of Nigerians to hurriedly flee their ancestral homelands to other destinations for safety, with the accompanying grievous consequences. Precisely, an estimated 2.2 million people in North-East Nigeria had been displaced as of July 2022, because of the Boko Haram conflict, with Borno State contributing the large majority put at 1.8 million people (HRW 2022; IOM 2022). Many of these Boko Haram-displaced citizens are taking refuge in the various internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps established and run by state governments

in the North-East zone, while a sizable number of them have been forced to flee to neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Specifically, the Boko Haram crisis forced more than 280,000 people from Nigeria's North-East region into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (HRW 2022).

The Human Rights Watch (2022) maintains that these displaced people deserted their homes and communities in search of protection from aggression and assaults by both Boko Haram terrorists and Nigerian military forces. In other words, Nigerian security agencies assigned with the task of putting an end to the terrorist operations of the sect also contributed to the displacement of populations in the region. This is in clear violation of Section 41(1) of the Nigerian Constitution, which guarantees the right of any Nigerians not to be evicted from the country nor be denied entry into it (FRN 1999). It also violates the provision of Article 9 of the UDHR, which prohibits any persons from being arbitrarily exiled from their countries (United Nations 1948). Nigerians caught by this phenomenon of violent ejection from their homes have had to bear a lot of grief. In majority of the instances, there have been the displacement of whole communities, leading also to the abrupt splitting of several households due to members running in varying directions for safety (World Bank and UNHCR 2016). Even though the efforts of the Borno State Government, along with other stakeholders, have actually enabled the return and resettlement of over 16,000 displaced people in their communities in Bama Local Government of Borno State (UNOCHA 2018), the overall security atmosphere has been quite precarious due to relentless Boko Haram's assaults on communities within the area (HRW 2022). This is why many displaced persons within and outside Nigeria have refused to return to their communities despite the hardships they are facing in the IDP camps where they are currently taking refuge as a popular maxim has it that "a sick Dog is better off than a dead Lion."

### Forced Conversion to Islam and Forced Marriages

Forced conversions of people of other religions to Islam and forced marriages are a part of the typical ways Boko Haram extremists have profoundly debauched the human rights of Nigerians in the country's North-Eastern region. Evidently, "since 2009, Boko Haram has subjected women and girls to widespread and severe forms of abuses, including sexual slavery, sexual violence, forced marriages, forced pregnancies and forced conversions" (United Nations 2015, 9). Both Article 18 of the UDHR and Section 38(1) of the Nigerian Constitution unanimously and unmistakably proclaim the absolute liberty of any citizen to adopt, take part in, and manifest or promote his or her religion privately or publicly, or switch from one religion to another at will, either as a single individual or in community with others. Under the same Section 38(2), the Nigerian Constitution adds that no individual should be coerced to accept religious instructions, participate in, or be at any religious celebration or function that does not relate to his or her religion. These provisions in unambiguous terms

forbid forcible conversion of any person to other religions other than one's. Furthermore, while Article 16(1) of the UDHR prescribes that marriage should be between men and women of full age, Article 16 (2) of the same document blatantly maintains that marriage shall not be consummated unless with the uncontrolled and absolute consent of any prospective partners. Likewise, the constitution of Nigeria in Section 15(3)(c) encourages inter-religious and ethnic marriages among the citizens as a way of strengthening the unification of the country but does not condone forced marriage.

The Boko Haram extremists are equally infamous for having desecrated these overtly codified national and international human rights legal norms as they have continuously committed the highly atrocious twin-evil acts of forced conversion and marriage, especially against many of their Christian civilian victims. Most notably, Boko Haram fighters penetrated the Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, on the night of April 14, 2014, and successfully abducted a total of 276 schoolgirls. Later, the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau, publicized a video on May 14, 2014, in which he announced that they would sell the Chibok schoolgirls as slaves. Shekau also released a separate video on November 1, 2014, in which he stated that over 200 of the schoolgirls had already converted to Islam and were married off (Vanguard 2014; Botha 2021). Over one hundred of the girls were shown in a rural location putting on hijabs and reciting verses of the Koran in the video (Vanguard 2014). The majority of the abducted Chibok girls were Christians (Tukur 2014; Odunsi 2014). Shekau misconceiveably justifies the group's action of abducting girls and women by describing them as "spoils of war" (United Nations 2015). Based on a list of names and a statement publicized by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) some weeks after the abduction, 165 out of the stated total number of girls abducted were Christian (Odunsi 2014; World Watch Monitor 2018). Pathetically [awkward word choice – please replace, "the girls suffered unimaginable violations of their rights for seven years with debilitating impact on their future" (Wuyo 2021, para. 10). Aside from the Chibok girls, several other women and girls have suffered gender-based violence, including forced marriages, sexual slavery, and rape at the hands of Boko Haram terrorists (United States Department of State [USDS] and Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour [BDHRL] 2023). The Human Rights Watch reported that Boko Haram has held up to 500 women and girls hostage in its camp as of November 2014 and that many of these were forcibly married to the militants (Vanguard 2014), usually after compulsory conversion to Islam.

### Cruelty against Children and Deployment of Children in Attacks

Brutalization of under-age boys and girls and their use in hostilities is one of the major human rights concerns that have arisen from the ensuing Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (2017, 6) recounts that "in 2013 and the first half of 2014, Boko Haram was the main perpetrator of grave violations, in particular the killing, maiming

and abduction of children, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals.” During the second half of 2014 and early 2015, Boko Haram expanded attacks and modified combat strategies, moving from hit-and-run assaults on government institutions to invasions of cities and villages and capturing territories. At that time, events of recruiting and using children in combat operations by Boko Haram inflated just as cases of abductions and brutality, making the group the major agent of extreme human rights abuses (UNSC 2017). Thence, Boko Haram has not only kidnapped and abused multitude of women and girls in the affected region; it has also utilized minors as young as 12 years old in carrying out attacks (HRW 2013).

As the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Virginia Gamba, assertively corroborates, “with tactics including widespread recruitment and use, abductions, sexual violence, attacks on schools and the increasing use of children in so-called ‘suicide’ attacks, Boko Haram has inflicted unspeakable horror upon the children of Nigeria’s north-east and neighbouring countries” (Okafor 2017, para. 3). Teenagers whose ages range from 6 to 15 years, who had been taken hostage, narrated how they were surrounded by plenty of guns and armored automobiles in a Boko Haram camp, and how the group’s members sexually abused and beat them with cables for failing to pray or for praying behind schedule. In Yola, Adamawa State, OHCHR, in April 2015, interacted with four children of ages 12 and 14, who were previously abducted by Boko Haram and were reunited with their families following successful escape from the group. The minors has suffered severe trauma because they were sexually abused and exploited (United Nations 2015). In 2013, Commanders of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), collaborating with government security agencies, stated that they secured the freedom of many children from Boko Haram at the time of an attack launched on one of the group’s bases in Sambisa Forest in Maiduguri, Borno State, that year. Numerous witnesses mentioned that they had seen teenagers in the ranks of Boko Haram during the attacks (HRW 2013).

Researchers working with Human Rights Watch in Maiduguri also noted that they watched a video recording in which security agencies interrogated a 14-year-old boy who explained the part he played in the activities of Boko Haram (HRW 2013). In the middle of 2015, when Nigeria’s security agencies and regional forces apprehended large numbers of Boko Haram suspects in domains formerly controlled by the group, some children were among them because of their presumed fraternization with Boko Haram. It is estimated that the number of children conscripted and deployed in operations by Boko Haram since 2009 is not less than 8,000. It was confirmed that from July 2015 to December 2016, Boko Haram recruited and used 1,560 children (1,010 males and 640 females) in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States. Credible reports were also obtained regarding children who were four years old associating with and involved in the group’s activities. In January 2016, 134 boys who were conscripted into Boko Haram surrendered to the 7th Infantry Division of Nigeria’s security agencies after they had been actively involved in hostilities for almost two years in the Sambisa Forest (UNSC 2017).

Some male juveniles used by Boko Haram were mandated to carry out assaults on their own households as a way of demonstrating their allegiance to the group. The girls were married under compulsion, and they cleaned, cooked, and carried instruments and weaponry for the group. Boko Haram also continuously utilized several male and female minors as human shields and to fulminate bombs, and these practices became prevalent from 2014 (United Nations 2015). The UNSC (2017, 6) holds, particularly, that “they used girls to perpetrate suicide bombing and intensified the use of improvised explosive devices-as-land-mines”. In Damaturu, Yobe State, for instance, Boko Haram used a 12-year-old girl to detonate a bomb at a bus station in May 2015, which killed seven persons (United Nations 2015). This shows that Boko Haram has massively used children in perpetrating its inhuman activities. It suffices to mention, however, that, like Boko Haram, the CJTF created to assist the Nigerian security forces also makes use of children in its counter-terrorism campaign. Indeed, the CJTF recruits and uses children to support the operations of Nigeria’s security agencies (UNSC 2017). Human Rights Watch (2013 para. 7) “observed children who appeared to be aged 15-17 manning checkpoints for the Civilian Joint Task Force in Maiduguri; other witnesses described seeing children manning checkpoints elsewhere in Borno and Yobe States.”

There are further confirmations that the CJTF even uses children who are 9 years old for intelligence gathering tasks, which has become a major cause of concern. For example, in November 2015, two disparate instances occurred where thirty boys and four girls between the ages of 9 and 16 were spotted operating the security gates at Galtimari Primary School in Maiduguri and controlling traffic flow and crowds. During interviews, boys admitted that they were recruited and that they participated in CJTF’s undertakings, which included serving as the group’s informers. The group also used children for search activities, night patrolling and guarding of posts, as well as in conducting arrests of Boko Haram suspects, while others ostensibly took part in combat operations when the group was newly inaugurated. A member of the guard unit of the CJTF disclosed in April 2016 that there were notably massive engagements of children by the group at Bolori 2 and Masori localities outside Maiduguri. During the period from November 2015 to December 2016, the UN confirmed that the group recruited and used 228 children (209 boys and 19 girls). The CJTF’s utilization of children in identifying Boko Haram fighters remains tremendously disturbing because it sets them at the grave dangers of reprisal (UNSC 2017).

Security forces of the Nigerian government also brutalize children as Boko Haram terrorists do. As an example, in Gwange, a neighborhood located in Maiduguri, a woman described to Human Rights Watch how eight military personnel arrested and instructed her 10-year-old son to lie down. They beat the boy with batons and tied him up and kept him face-down along with twenty-two other people in an open-back vehicle and took them away. The execution and torturing of common Nigerian citizens, as well as the abduction and sexual offence against women and girls and the utilization of children in combat operations, are

significant human rights abuses (HRW 2013). This, of course, is irrespective of the parties that may be involved in perpetrating these abuses during conflicts, be it government forces or unauthorized armed groups.

### Arbitrary Arrests, Detentions, and Extrajudicial Killings by Security Forces

Reports of lawlessness and human rights abuses being committed by Nigerian security agencies in the course of fighting against Boko Haram terrorists have been widespread and indisputable. While responding to Boko Haram's offensives, Nigerian security agencies have contributed to the killings or deaths resulting from the conflict through their brutal approaches to dealing with civilians, inclusive of unlawful killings, torture, and unjust arrests and detention (HRW 2022). For instance, Amnesty International divulges that during the heat of the Boko Haram conflict between 2012 and 2015, Nigerian security agencies engaged in extrajudicial executions of above 1,200 persons; indiscriminately arrested more than 20,000 people, largely young men and boys; and engaged in uncountable acts of torture in their attempt to quell Boko Haram terrorism (Amnesty International 2015). At times, the government security agencies detain alleged Boko Haram fighters outside the regular jail complex. The military forces in Borno State operate many prison facilities, such as the Giwa Barracks complex in Maiduguri where they remand people alleged to be associated with Boko Haram, after arrest (USDS and BDHRL 2023).

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) confirms that in domains impacted by Boko Haram conflict, young males are vulnerable to both the risk of becoming Boko Haram targets and being indiscriminately apprehended and imprisoned by the security forces if they are presumed to be associated with Boko Haram. A victim, according to OHCHR, described how he was erroneously taken as a Boko Haram member and incarcerated by the military in Yola, the capital of Adamawa State. The victim spoke about maltreatment and circumstances in prison that result in an average of five deaths on a daily basis in cells where Boko Haram suspects were detained and allegedly constantly assaulted. OHCHR gathered from witnesses that suspected Boko Haram members were denied food and water, and that many drank one another's urine (United Nations 2015). These practices are contradictory to the conventional norms and directly abusive to the rights of the inmates. A major event of unjustifiable killings of civilians by government security agencies was witnessed in Baga in Borno State, in April 2013, where assaults by the security forces caused the death of a large number of civilians. There, security forces purportedly shot non-combatants and displaced 642 residents. Even though that the level at which the claims were established was not determined, inquiries into the incident by trustable governmental sources concluded that the security forces perpetrated extrajudicial and summary killings, maltreatment, indiscriminate detainment, forced disappearance and sexual abuses against civilians (National Human Rights Commission 2013). Records recount the Baga massacre as

a defining moment with respect to the issue of human rights atrocities done by government security forces in conflict situations that have occurred in Nigeria.

The OHCHR equally gathered that there were claims of other atrocities, which included arbitrary killings, torturing, unjustified imprisonment, and protracted seclusion, as well as imposed disappearance carried out by the government security agencies in Baga and Bama areas of Borno State (United Nations 2015). Prisoners also suffered from starvation and lack of water in overpopulated cells in a detention facility in an army barracks, causing the deaths of detainees, however, these charges were not substantiated (United Nations 2015). Normally, the prison and detention facilities across Nigeria have remained in shabby conditions as most of them were built seventy to eighty years ago and thus lack essential facilities. Owing to this, inmates are burdened with crowding, insufficient health care, paucity of food and water, as well as other inhuman and degrading treatments, which usually results in deaths (USDS and BDHRL 2023). Hence, the operations of Nigerian security agencies have raised serious human rights concerns due to certain of the measures they resort to, especially concerning arrests and detainments as persons denied of their freedom in correlation with the counter-terrorism efforts in the North-East zone, have not been guaranteed fair trial. Even though the Office of the Attorney General of Nigeria set-up a special unit in March 2014 to treat cases of terrorism to facilitate speedy prosecutions, OHCHR affirms that, only few cases have been prosecuted, while large numbers of suspected Boko Haram detainees remain in detention centres (United Nations 2015). On the whole, the general state of custodian centers in Nigeria is in itself abusive to the dignity of inmates as humans, in addition to the numerous inhuman treatments meted to them by the government security agencies fighting against the Boko Haram insurgents.

### **Solving the Problem**

The Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria has brought about a disturbing trend in human rights violations in northern Nigeria. Essentially, the reality of the claims of extreme human rights abuses in the troubled North-East region has come to be well-recognized and documented by numerous national and international stakeholders. The main concern of all, however, is finding lasting solutions to the problem. Within this context, the study recommends the following measures:

The Nigerian Federal Government should re-strengthen and motivate the security forces conducting counter-terrorism operations against Boko Haram in the North-East, by further equipping them with requisite sophisticated weaponry, and leveraging all available means to boost their morale to completely exterminate the Islamic terrorist group. Once the Nigerian security forces are adequately strengthened in terms of equipment capabilities, and are well-motivated, they will be in a better psychological condition to wage a more decisive war against Boko Haram. This would increase the chance of the security agencies winning and decimating the sect just as similar groups, such as Maitatsine, were defeated in the past. Achieving this would imply an end to the human rights atrocities resulting from the conflict.

The Nigerian government should institute an extensive and unbiased investigation into all alleged cases of human rights violations emanating from the conflict and properly prosecute the perpetrators, irrespective of whether they are Boko Haram members, the personnel of government security agencies, or members of the Civilian Joint Task Force. By taking this step, the government would not only obtain justice for the victims of human rights abuses in the Boko Haram crisis but would also boost citizens' confidence in it. This effort would also certainly earn Nigeria the commendations of the international human rights community, which would see the action as a major indication of her compliance with established global human rights principles.

Nigerian military authorities and the entire security agencies need to continuously train and retrain their officers and men on human rights ethos and principles, mainly as it relates to conflict situations. Adequate knowledge and awareness of international and national human rights requirements among the personnel of government security forces would drastically reduce the rate of their culpability for rights violations during combat operations. Members of the Civilian Joint Task Force assisting government security forces in the fight against Boko Haram should also be provided with the same training to enable them to avoid indulging in any acts that negate human rights codes, both now and in future times when their support might be needed.

The Civilian Joint Task Force should cease recruiting and using children in any aspects of their counter-terrorism activities, including intelligence gathering as this is prohibited locally and internationally, and it poses immense futuristic dangers to the society. In a joint effort with the National Human Rights Commission and child protection agencies, the Nigerian government should design a scheme to drive the reform of past child soldiers and make them re-join their households. Likewise, the government should offer free psychological and medical care to women and girls that were kidnapped and sexually violated by Boko Haram fighters in the North-East. This would assist the victims in regaining their self-value and overcoming the mental and physical traumas associated with the abuses they have suffered at the hands of the group.

While it is recognized that the Nigerian government is obliged to shield citizens against violations, it should desist from deploying force excessively, particularly in dealing with unarmed citizens during conflicts. In this regard, the government should carefully investigate convincing claims of arbitrary detentions, torture, and loss of lives in the custody of the security agencies fighting against the Boko Haram insurgents in the North-East. All suspected Boko Haram members in the detention centers should be tried quickly in civilian courts and granted access to family members and lawyers as the law requires. Those found guilty should be apportioned due penalty, while those wrongfully arrested and detained should be released and compensated, upon confirmation. In the same vein, minors detained for their alleged association with Boko Haram should be psychologically rehabilitated, equipped with entrepreneurial skills to make better members of society and returned to their households.



## Conclusion

Boko Haram, an Islamic religious extremist armed group based in northern Nigeria, has presented a unique security challenge to the nation since 2009. The continuing campaign of terror by the group has hugely disrupted public law and order and eroded social stability and safety in the mostly impacted States of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe in North-Eastern zone of the country. The enormity of the Boko Haram crisis has drawn both local and international attention. Since its eruption, the Nigerian government has pragmatically responded through the security forces to quell the crisis, but the ultimate desire is yet to be achieved as the Islamist group has continued to execute its terrorist activities until the present moment. Because of the Boko Haram militancy, Nigerians resident in the concerned region have suffered the most effects. These citizens have experienced severe violations of their fundamental human rights by both the Boko Haram elements and the personnel of government security forces fighting to defend the affected region and the nation as a whole from the destructive tendencies of the religious terrorist group.

Specifically, as the study has shown, Boko Haram has caused the deaths of a large number of Nigerians and the destruction of private and public property in the North-East zone; Boko Haram attacks on villages and communities have caused a large-scale displacement of civilians from their fatherlands; Boko Haram militants have forcibly converted persons of other religious beliefs to be practicing members of the Islamic faith and married women and girls by force; Boko Haram has brutalized and used many male and female children in hostilities, while the CJTF assisting the Nigerian security agencies in the fight against Boko Haram has also deployed children in their operations; and credible allegations of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and extrajudicial killings have been leveled against Nigerian security forces working to counter Boko Haram's terrorism in the region. This trend of human rights abuses accompanying the Boko Haram conflict has become exceptionally disturbing and demands urgent plausible actions by the Nigerian government to be ended. In this regard, the study expresses huge confidence in the potential of its recommendations to bring about the desired outcome, if completely accepted and properly implemented.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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