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World



ALL
COUNTRIES
3,583,000

Confirmed
ALL
COUNTRIES
1,162,724

Recovered
All
countries
251,537

Deaths

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who kills who? The macabre tally of a dirty war

NEWS



By archyw | April 22, 2020 | 6 | 0

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A funeral after an attack by Boko Haram
jihadists on December 14, 2019 in a village

in northeast Nigeria. AUDU MARTE / AFP

The great narrative of the fight against
terrorism in the Sahel generally focuses on
the atrocities committed by the insurgents
and not by the governments that fight
them. In Nigeria, however, the security
forces and their auxiliary militiamen are
killing more people than Boko Haram. They
are the cause of the death of more than
55% of the victims of the conflict listed
between 1^{er} January 2007 and December
31, 2019 by the NigeriaWatch project from
articles in the local press and reports from
human rights organizations.

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several villages in northern Nigeria
Very vulnerable, civilians are the first
victims of the clashes. They are literally
caught between the hammer and the
anvil because they are always suspected
of sympathizing with one or other of the
parties to the conflict. Since 2013, the
creation of militias has even accentuated
the problem. Communities with vigilante
groups were attacked by Boko Haram
because they collaborated with the
government. As for those who had
dispensed with militias, they were rounded
up by the army because they were

suspected of supporting the insurgents, particularly if they had not been subjected to violence. That's why they didn't generally feel the need to establish vigilance committees that could get them in trouble.

Collateral damage... deliberate

In the form of massacres, reprisals, extrajudicial executions or ill-treatment of detainees, the Nigerian security forces have killed many civilians, especially at the height of the repression, after the proclamation of the state of emergency in 2013. In Rann, on the border with Cameroon, in early 2017, the Nigerian air force also attacked a displaced persons camp by dropping Belouga cluster bombs, which, in principle, are prohibited by the international conventions. If the authorities have publicly acknowledged their "error", authorized and anonymous sources maintain that it was in fact a deliberate action by the general staff against the nutritional centers of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Graphic produced by Elodie Barbe with the help of Andrainolo Ravalihasy from the Population and Development Center (Ceped) at Paris-Descartes University.
NigeriaWatch / IRD

The Nigerian army, in this case, was customary. In incidents which have never been tried, it had already bombed hospitals in Biafra in 1969, then vehicles of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Liberia in 1993, all of which were initialed and, in theory, protected by the symbol of the Red Cross. In Rann, in 2017, the objective would

have been to “punish” the ICRC because it refused to work with army escorts and because it persisted in maintaining its own networks of contacts with the insurgents, under the terms of main principles of international humanitarian law.

Since then, the situation has changed further. As of 2018, the Nigerian press no longer reported cases of civilians killed by state agents in conflict zones. The most benevolent analysts assume that the security forces would indeed have realized the need to spare the population to win the hearts and minds of the inhabitants in the face of an invisible enemy. Since 2019, the entrenchment of the army in “supercamps” has also helped reduce the number of reprisals against villages following Boko Haram ambushes against military patrols. But most likely, local journalists have simply been instructed not to write any more about civilians killed by government forces.

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In a country like Nigeria, which has long been ruled by military dictatorships, it has always been difficult to conduct military investigations. Some journalists paid for it with their lives during the 1980s, while others continued to be censored after the return of civilians to power in 1999. On June 4, 2014, for example, an article from *Daily Trust* which exposed the corruption of generals who privately sold plots of land theoretically intended to erect a new barracks in Abuja. At the time, all copies of the newspaper were seized by the military, which blocked delivery trucks en route to sales outlets, and emptied them of cargo

in the name of the security imperatives of the fight against terrorism.

In May 2015, the coming to power of Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north of the country and a former soldier, certainly brought renewed hope as to Nigeria's ability to end the insurgency after the departure of President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian civilian, accused of deliberately allowing the conflict to rot. On the spot, it is possible that certain journalists then sought to improve the situation to contribute to the rapprochement between the population and the security forces.

But the enthusiasm of the early days quickly subsided. In Borno, local national media correspondents have started to complain about the pressure to stop reporting incidents that could damage the military's reputation. For his part, the Chief of the Land Staff, Tukur Yusuf Buratai, boasted of having won the communications war by mastering information that the government of President Goodluck Jonathan had failed to filter. He also insisted on the need to have journalists on board.

The impunity of the security forces

In March 2017, the authorities notably set up a special commission which was supposed to investigate abuses by the army and which, in practice, served to perpetuate the impunity of the military by laundering them of accusations of human rights violations. Never published, the report which she gave to the chief of staff

two months later admitted that prisoners had been able to die because of the poor conditions of their prolonged detention, in particular in the famous barracks of “the elephant” (*giwa*), in Maiduguri. None, in this case, had the right to a trial or access to a lawyer. But the commission was to absolve the military of any arbitrary arrest, torture or extrajudicial execution. And for good reason: all of its members had been appointed by the army, none had any judicial training and no one bothered to hear the testimony of victims of human rights violations, not to mention gathering evidence or use the findings of forensic pathologists.

Under such conditions, the status of those killed during hostilities could have been largely manipulated by the military. In defiance of the principle of presumption of innocence, many civilians arrested during a roundup and died during their detention were, for example, immediately considered as insurgents when they should never be tried and they did not enjoy the protection due to prisoners of war. To clear itself of its responsibilities, the army has in particular made it a habit to have families who wanted to recover their children’s bodies sign a certificate attesting that their loved ones were indeed followers of the jihadist sect. As a result, the identification of the victims’ status was made more biased by the fact that, at the same time, the security forces were trying to minimize the number of dead in their ranks while emphasizing the number of civilians killed by Boko Haram.

Civilian victims of the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria between January 1, 2007 and December 31, 2019. Graphic produced by

Elodie Barbe with the help of Andrainolo Ravalihasy from the Population and Development Center (CPD) at Paris Descartes University.

To hide its many defeats and not to demoralize the troops, the Nigerian army has thus adopted the habit of secretly burying its soldiers in mass graves around Maiduguri (3). In 2019, the head of the Senate Military Affairs Committee, Mohammed Ali Ndume, was one of the few to publicly admit that she had lost more than 840 men since the declaration of the state of emergency in 2013. This rare bout of openness has also earned him admonitions and being accused of playing the enemy's game. Obviously, the numbers are actually much higher. Security sources suggest rather the loss of 800 men in 2018 alone, possibly up to 3,000 in 2019.

In general, the authorities do not publish data on the victims of the conflict. Released in bulk at episodic press conferences, their death numbers are far too vague to be verified, dated and located. For geographic, cultural and political reasons, it is certainly difficult to identify the status of the victims. First, without access to rural areas, many incidents escape the attention of the media and, in many cases, the humanitarian organizations themselves. In a Muslim environment, moreover, funeral rites force the victims to be buried very quickly and leave little time to conduct any investigation in a country which, in any case, has no civil status. Religious norms also prohibit the digging up of bodies and dissecting them for forensic purposes.

Discover our series In Maiduguri, the ghosts of Boko Haram refuse to die But the government does not intend to depart from its account that the security forces would only kill “terrorists”. He has no intention of compensating the victims of these abuses and of setting up a commission of inquiry which would be empowered to locate mass graves, exhume corpses and have autopsies performed to establish the real responsibilities. At the end of the Biafra War (1967-1970), he had already chosen to promote reconciliation and reconstruction without publishing an official list of those killed in the conflict. There was no cemetery or commemorative monument so as not to reopen the wounds of the past. This helped draw a line under the Nigerian army’s war crimes, a position that will be just as useful in erasing the abuses of the war on terror.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos is Director of Research at the Research Institute for Development (IRD) in Paris. He founded the NigeriaWatch project there, which he directs.

Mohammed Ali Ndume, a troublesome governor

Senator for the constituency of Borno South since 2011, Mohammed Ali Ndume had already been suspended from his duties in 2017, accused of defamation because he had unsuccessfully demanded an investigation into fraudulent contracts for the importation of armored vehicles. Favorable to negotiations with the jihadists of Boko Haram, he was also briefly detained in 2011, suspected of complicity with the

insurgents.

It turned out that he had in fact been the victim of a settling of scores. Indeed, he had just joined the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and had been elected senator as opposed to the formation of the outgoing governor of Borno state, Ali Modu Sheriff, who was targeting the constituency for one of his protégés, Asabe Villita. In the process, the said governor was also accused of terrorist sympathies by the PDP candidate, Ahmed Zanna, who won the seat he coveted in the constituency of Borno-Central.

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos