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Nigeria: Killing of 30 Civilians in Maiduguri - JTF, Residents Trade Blames

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BY HAMZA IDRIS, 13 OCTOBER 2012

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Maiduguri — The alleged killing of 30 civilians following a bomb blast in which a soldier was reportedly killed has set the Joint Task Force and Maiduguri residents against each other, again.

THERE is apparent disquiet in Borno State following last Monday's bomb blast allegedly planted by Boko

Haram insurgents which reportedly killed an army lieutenant, two soldiers and then injured many security personnel.

Witnesses said after the explosion of the Improvised explosive device (IED), which hit a patrol vehicle of the Joint Task Force (JTF), soldiers went berserk, killing civilians, burning houses, business premises and vehicles. But the JTF had since denied the allegations.

What transpired on that faithful day has ignited fresh clamour for withdrawal of soldiers and other security personnel, who were deployed to Borno State in 2011, following the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Sources said for many months, security operatives are not happy with the disposition of Maiduguri residents. "The Boko Haram insurgents are doing what they are doing, because residents are not exposing them...it is very common to see a bomb planted by the shoulder of a busy road," an angry soldier, who lost a colleague to a blast on independence day, said.

"In fact, the residents harbour them whenever they (Boko Haram members) are looking for escape route after killing our troops," he added.

But the businessmen along Lagos Street and residents of Gwange area, who were mostly affected by the recent rampage, accuse the soldiers of harassment instead of providing them with security in the restless Borno State, and are even calling for the withdrawal of soldiers from the streets of Maiduguri and environs.

"The atrocities going on in Maiduguri is worse than what obtains in Somalia. People are being killed and their wealth destroyed by the soldiers. Following the recent attack, even new cars displayed for sales were vandalized...we want them (soldiers) to go," a resident said.

However, Weekly Trust reports that, notwithstanding the clamour for their removal, the soldiers are being celebrated in some parts of Maiduguri.

"Despite their imperfections, the soldiers are doing wonderful works. I can assure you that if not because of them, the lawlessness in this town will be unimaginable," Sumayya Yusuf, a civil servant, said.

Our correspondent reports that a shopping mall and some shops attached to the state Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) secretariat were all burnt, allegedly by soldiers during a manhunt for suspects.

The recent encounter has indeed taken its toll on the economy of the state, because many people have been thrown out of jobs. "And what do you expect when youths are losing their sources of livelihood; don't you think that they would be an easy recruit for continued revolt?" Samuel Thliza, a social commentator in Maiduguri,



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asked.

Again, the angry residents are being supported by what many people call "Abuja politicians" comprising senators, members of the House of Representatives and other federal government political appointees.

Investigations have shown that most of the politicians who have since relocated to Abuja with their families are granting interviews to the media from the comfort of their houses in the federal capital. Many elected and appointed politicians have never visited Maiduguri or their constituencies in the last one year for fear of being killed by the Boko Haram fighters, who have declared war on security agents, politicians and other government establishments.

On the other hand, the JTF says there is no going back and that the Boko Haram must be defeated at all cost.

Governor Kashim Shettima, on his part, expressed shock over the recent incident, saying the military must exercise restraint and called on residents to cooperate with security agencies.

He also condemned the "Abuja politician's" support for the withdrawal of soldiers, describing the call as untenable.

Two days after the Gwange incident, Shettima had reportedly held meeting with chiefs of security agencies in the state where he reportedly hammered on the need for strict adherence to the "Rules of Engagement" in their task of restoring law and order.

Sources close to the governor said Shettima has equally commended the effort of the JTF in tackling the Boko Haram insurgency. The source said the governor was also using

various channels to appeal to the conscience of members of the Boko Haram to lay down their arms and dialogue with government.

"The approach to the imbroglio is like a two-way traffic, but the most important thing is that the governor has condemned those who are calling on the Federal Government to withdraw the JTF troops from the state," the source said.

Our correspondent reports that Shettima has never supported the call for the withdrawal of the military from the State, but repeatedly said the solution does not exclusively lie in military might. Even before his election in 2012, he has repeatedly said the Boko Haram problem is a political one.

"It is a phenomenon born out of social exclusivity. It is a political problem that needs a political solution and



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Insha Allah I would strive to continue exploring the peace option," he told Weekly Trust, shortly before his inauguration in May, 2012.

Shettima said the most potent option for addressing the problem is by addressing poverty, illiteracy and joblessness in the northeast.

"Believe me, if the Federal Government withdraws the JTF from Borno, all of us will be chased out of the state by insurgents," the governor said, while speaking to journalists on the recent happenings.

Residents alleged that over 30 people were killed by soldiers and the number of burnt houses and business premises was put at over 100.

"All the carnage was masterminded by JTF operatives who were all out to take revenge over the killing of their (soldiers) colleagues," Munkaila Aliyu, whose house was burnt, said.

Aliyu said many families had been rendered homeless. "I am not a statistician, but you can imagine what it means when almost 100 houses were burnt," he said.

On Tuesday, some bereaved families invited journalists to go and witness the burial of their loved ones. They insisted that "angry soldiers" killed many civilians, though the JTF said only one civilian was killed and that his death was as a result of the injuries he sustained from the blast that also killed soldiers.

Resident Alkali Abubakar told Weekly Trust that he counted three dead bodies allegedly dumped inside the Gwange Cemetery by some soldiers.

"Personally, I saw when soldiers killed three people and dumped the corpses inside the cemetery, it was this morning (Tuesday) that the corpses were taken away by their relatives," he alleged.

"And you know that Gwange Cemetery is far from the scene of the blast, more than three kilometres...I wonder if the three people have anything to do with the blast, they were only running for their lives," he said.

In a press statement to newsmen, Lieutenant Colonel Sagir Musa said the JTF did not kill and assault civilians in Maiduguri.

According to the statement, "...There is no established or recorded case of extra judicial killings, torture, arson and arbitrary arrests by the JTF in Borno State."

The JTF, however, admitted that there were reported cases of excesses by its men in the course of maintaining

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law and order.

"Very few cases of unprofessional conduct by some personnel are documented and those concerned were punished while others are undergoing legal processes and Court Marshal," the statement said.

Col. Musa said the major concern in Maiduguri is the planting of IEDs on roads which had killed some soldiers and many civilians.

"Often, the terrorists ask people to leave the area for them to do what they call 'God's work'. This veiled threat by the terrorists always results to mass exodus of the people out of their residences for fear of the terrorists' attacks. It should be noted that the JTF has lost some of its personnel to the adversaries through roadside IEDs and gunfire from residential areas, trees and roof tops during patrols," he said.

Weekly Trust reports that the tops of hundreds of Neem trees standing by the roadside and in red spots like Abbaganaram, Budun, Lawan Bukar and other areas have been cut off.

"The peace being enjoyed in Borno State is as a result of efforts of men and women of the JTF as well as the goodwill of patriotic citizens," the statement by the JTF said.

"It is important to state that terrorists killed were during gun battles with JTF troops. Arrests and seizures made are always

displayed for the press to see and understand the enormity of what the troops are facing and the sacrifices made daily to keep the state safe," the statement added.

On the alleged burning of houses, cars and business premises, the JTF said it was the blast that caused the mayhem and not its men.

"The attention of the general public needs to be drawn to the effects of these IEDs, which contents include acid and highly inflammable substances that propagate blasts and thermal effects which set houses and shops around the vicinity on fire.

The JTF said some of the houses and shops along Gwange and Lagos Street "had IEDs which went off as a result of the fire triggered by the initial blast (of Monday)".

Some residents viewed the "defence" by the JTF as plausible. "On the same building, how can a bomb destroy the upstairs and leave the downstairs?" Jummai Babagoni, a boutique owner, whose shop was affected on Lagos Street, asked.

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In July, 2011, shortly after the infamous "Kaleri Mayhem", in which soldiers allegedly killed many people and burnt many houses in Kaleri area, a suburb in Maiduguri, after a bomb blast, the Borno Elders Forum, had issued a statement calling for the withdrawal of soldiers from Maiduguri.

The elders said in their statement that the call for the withdrawal of soldiers was "borne out of the prevailing outrageous security situation in Maiduguri city and environs."

They believed that since the commencement of current conflict in Borno, the situation has been deteriorating and that the expectation that the intervention of the military in the conflict might bring the situation under control has been grossly misplaced.

The elders said the presence of thousands of weapon brandishing soldiers on the streets of Maiduguri has turned the situation "into a nightmare, the worst Maiduguri has ever seen."

They alleged that hundreds of youths had been killed by soldiers for no known reason other than that they are young people, adding that "the level of human suffering in Maiduguri has reached its peak and Borno is faced with horrific and horrendous humanitarian crisis."

Some of the members of the Borno Elders Forum include, elder statesman Dr. Shettima Ali Monguno (Chairman, Imam Baba Gana Asil (the Imam Idaini of Borno), Alhaji Garba Abba Satomi, Alhaji Bukar Bolori, Alhaji Usman Gaji Galtimari, Alhaji Kyari Sandabe, Brigadier General

Abba Kyari (rtd), Air Vice Marshal Al-Amin Daggash (rtd), Alhaji Shettima Ali Kidaji, Ambassador Ahmed Yusufari, AIG Zanna Laminu Mamadi, AIG Muktar Alkali, Alhaji Tijjani Bolori, Alhaji Bulama Mali Gubio, Alhaji Umar Abba Shuwa, Alhaji Ibrahim El-Zubairu, Mallam Ibrahim Mustapha and Alhaji Gambo Gubio, among others.

Observers say for the military to succeed in their mission in Borno State, they actually need the cooperation of the elders and that in a situation whereby the elders are not favourably disposed to military might, the effort in restoring peace will be in futility.

"You see, in any military warfare, the clue to success is the cooperation of the people and in a situation whereby the people who are being protected are not cooperating, you will continue to have circle of violence," a lecturer at the University of Maiduguri, who does not want to be named, said.

For now, the obvious is that many families had been displaced and Governor Shettima has set up a committee to ascertain the level of damages recorded in the recent violence with a view to paying compensation to the victims.

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The committee chaired by the Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Baba Kaka Bashir Garbai while the Permanent Secretary, Government House Security, Alhaji Zanna Garga is to serve as Secretary.

What is not certain is whether the JTF will ever get the support they need from residents of Maiduguri in the midst of the ensuing mutual suspicion even as pundits are skeptical about the viability of the state government in continuing with the payment of compensation to victims with monies that should have been channelled to other endeavours.

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