



BOKO HARAM FRESH ATTACKS: FEAR HEIGHTENS IN MAIDUGURI, ENVIRONS



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Written by Hamza Idris, Maiduguri Hits: 1457

There is fear in Borno State following fresh wave of attacks by Boko Haram in towns and cities surrounding the state capital, Maiduguri, which have left scores of people dead in the last two weeks.

Locals said the insurgents launch attacks and take people hostage with little or no resistance from security forces.

There are also accusations that following the winding up of the Joint Task Force, JTF, and the establishment of the 7 Division of the Nigerian Army, the modus operandi of the military has remained anything but proactive, a development which observers believe gave the Boko Haram fighters upper hand.

"Our fear is that we only have 'peace of the graveyard' in Maiduguri because all the villages surrounding it are under siege," said Barrister Sam Yusuf, a public commentator. He said the way Boko Haram fighters are launching attacks on villages, security outfits and on the highways has made life increasingly difficult for the people.

"Travelling on the major roads leading to Maiduguri is now nearly impossible, especially for the poor man because he or she can be attacked and killed," Barrister Yusuf said.

Our correspondent reports that in the past two months, there was peace in Maiduguri largely owing to the activities of the youth volunteer group, known as 'Civilian JTF' which sprang up in July and has been collaborating with military forces.

The collaboration between the youth and security forces has helped in containing the activities of the insurgents because throughout the period, no killing was recorded in the state capital except on 14th September, when a policeman shot dead a civilian JTF following a misunderstanding.

However, the opposite is the case in almost all towns and villages outside the state capital where within the period, many people were killed, allegedly by Boko Haram fighters.

While most of the attacks occur unnoticed because of the closure of mobile networks, verifying those that come to public notice has remained a challenge for newsmen.

In most cases, instead of defending the civilian population, the security personnel reportedly retreated from their duty posts because of the superior power and the



persistence of the insurgents.

"The biggest problem is the so-called peace in Maiduguri. If you read the art of war, you cannot claim victory when your enemy has effectively established his tentacles around your house...he can strike anytime," a senior political scientist at the University of Maiduguri, who sought anonymity, said.

"Now, people cannot come to Maiduguri with ease from Gombe and Biu through Damboa road," he said, adding that the situation is the same along Konduga-Bama road that leads to Yola in Adamawa State and Banki, a border town between Nigeria and Cameroon.

Investigation by this reporter shows that in northern Borno, the insurgents have crippled social and economic activities of the people with attacks on markets, offices and on the highways. The Maiduguri-Baga road is now a shadow of its former self as commuters are not too keen to ply it.

Most top government functionaries, politicians and businessmen from Maiduguri have avoided the Maiduguri-Benishiek-Damaturu road preferring to travel to Abuja by air.

A visit to the Maiduguri Airport on Sunday showed the affluent buying flight tickets, while touts made brisk business getting tickets for clients through the back door.

Some people interviewed said what happened in Benisheik on Tuesday, September 17, 2013 was a pointer to the deteriorating security on the road which also links Nigeria with Chad, Cameroon and Niger republics from the northeast.

Also apart from the over 140 corpses recovered from bushes by officials of the Borno State Environmental Protection Agency (BOSEPA), following Tuesday's attack on Benishiek by the Boko Haram, our correspondent reports that farmers in the area are still recovering corpses in their farms.

During a visit to the area on Sunday, a farmer Muhtari Kabir Jinga said he and his colleagues discovered about 13 decomposing corpses.

"After four days of staying away, I decided to visit my farm which is off the major road to Maiduguri from here (Benisheik.). I was shocked when I saw two corpses in the farm," he said.

Jinga said he reported the matter to an Imam in Benisheik. "Two of my colleagues, Baban Saude and Malam Habu, also saw decomposing bodies in their farms. It is sad for human lives to be so wasted," he added.

"People who were shot in the leg or hand and still had the strength ran but collapsed deep in the bush," Bakura Ali, a community head in Benishiek, said.

But Abdulaziz Kolomi, an environmental assistant at BOSEPA said he was not aware of the corpses discovered by the farmers in the bushes. "I cannot confirm or deny what the farmers said because our search teams restricted their activities to 150 meters off the main road," he said.

Kolomi said he stands by the initial casualty figure. "Fifty five bodies were recovered on Wednesday and 147 on Thursday," he said.

Caretaker Chairman of Kaga Local Government Area Alhaji Bunu Kaigama had earlier told Governor Kashim Shettima that 14 persons lost their lives in the town but that unspecified number were killed along the road to Maiduguri.

Daily Trust reports that many people have fled their homes in Benishiek and the few that remained said they did not leave only because they don't have the means.

"People have to leave because they have lost their houses and means of livelihood, such as shops, cars and vehicles," Massa Ibrahim, a villager said.

It was gathered from residents that 15 trucks, 18 vehicles, eight motorcycles and six bicycles were set ablaze by the sect members, who were said to be about 300 in number. The terrorists also set ablaze about 150 houses and shops and made away with 10 vehicles from Benishiek town.

The gunmen also set ablaze the military base in the area, the local government secretariat and the house of the district head, Abba Aunoma. The damage inflicted on the village made life unbearable for the people as there were no shops, water, electricity and other basic needs.

Despite the timely intervention of Governor Kashim Shettima who approved N50 million for the rebuilding of the town and N250,000 for each of the families of the 14 people killed, the people of Benishiek are still in confusion and agony.

The locals said their plight became aggravated when soldiers and the police retreated at the height of the attacks.

An elderly woman who had joined the youth vigilante (name withheld) said midway into

the siege by the insurgents, most of the soldiers and the police on duty removed their uniforms and fled. "The fact is they are grossly under equipped," she said.

Commander of the 21 Armoured Brigade, Colonel M.I Yusuf said the troops were forced to leave when they ran out of ammunitions.

Despite the tension in the area, locals said some of the women and children abducted by the insurgents have returned to Benishiek but most of them had to leave again because their houses were burnt.

A community leader, Jibrilla Kanube said: "The Boko Haram members came and took away our entire foodstuff, and with nowhere to sleep. We thank the governor for coming but we hope he will closely monitor the distribution of the rebuilding package. We are yet to see anything."

While the people of Benisheik were still grappling with their predicament, the Boko Haram insurgents on Thursday evening and Friday morning laid siege on the Maiduguri-Gombe road during which they attacked Bulabulin Ngaura and Damboa killing 22 persons.

People who are familiar with the terrain said the insurgents usually sneak out from the Sambisa forest to lay ambush and go back to their hideout without leaving a trace.

During Thursday's attack, a source said a bullion van was intercepted and three people killed. And on Friday, the assailants stormed Damboa, killed 14 people and set many buildings on fire.

And before the Benisheik and Damboa attacks, the people of Gajiran in Nganzai local government area in northern part of Borno also had their share of the mayhem perpetrated by the Boko Haram.

Unfortunately, the facts emerged many days later when Governor Shettima sent the Commissioner for Justice, Barrister Kaka Shehu to commiserate with the people of the area.

The insurgents killed three people, injured 11 others and destroyed 32 buildings.

A soldier, who does not want to be named, said the Boko Haram fighters are giving them headache but, "I believe if the right thing is done, we can confront the Boko Haram. We want more powerful weapons. We want assurance that when we die, our wives and children would be compensated and they would not be chased out of the barracks overnight," he said.

For now, all the entry points to Maiduguri are flashpoints in the Boko Haram conflict and something urgent needs to be done to secure peace in the state capital and environs.

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