

# Nigerian Army facing questions as death toll soars after prison attack

By Adam Nossiter

Well over 500 people were killed in Nigeria last week when security forces responded to what the military portrayed as a jailbreak attempt by the Islamist group Boko Haram, making it one of the bloodiest episodes yet in the military's five-year counterinsurgency campaign, according to officials in the northern town of Maiduguri.

As inmates streamed last Friday through the opened gates of Giwa Barracks, a notorious military detention center in Maiduguri, a military plane fired on them while soldiers on the ground also opened fire, killing scores, a senior hospital official in Maiduguri said.

"The aircraft opened fire from the sky," he said. "The aircraft picked them easily from up top."

Other officials in Maiduguri corroborated his account and went further, asserting that the overwhelming majority of those killed were detainees imprisoned on flimsy or no charges - and not proven insurgents, as claimed by the military.

The episode was reported last week but far lower death tolls were given in most accounts, with the Nigerian military announcing only that there was "heavy human casualty on the terrorists" who it said had attacked the prison.

The accounts given this week cast doubt on that narrative. The hospital official said he had later counted more than 500 corpses. "As they bring them we count; we load them into the vehicles for mass burials," the official said, requesting anonymity for fear of retribution from the Nigerian Army.

Before Friday's killings, Giwa had been a target of sharp criticism directed at the Nigerian military, with human rights groups, citizens and civilian officials saying the detention center was crammed with hundreds of innocent young men rounded up in the military's random sweeps in Maiduguri, the heart of the Boko Haram insurgency.

Rights groups have documented the disappearance and death of many of these young men, never formally charged, inside the Giwa Barracks, describing torture, starvation and mistreatment.

But after the massacre last Friday, "Giwa Barracks has been devastated. Destroyed," said Maikaramba Saddiq of Nigeria's Civil Liberties Organization.

Two other senior officials in northern Nigeria, as well as Mr. Saddiq, confirmed the elevated death toll, with several saying it could rise to 1,000. Photographs taken at the hospital shortly afterward show scores of bodies of

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young men on the ground, spread over a wide area.

If these accounts are correct, the killings would considerably exceed previous single-day death tolls in the military's fight against Boko Haram. Up to 200 were killed a year ago in the village of Baga on Lake Chad - deaths attributed by citizens and rights groups to the military - and nearly 300 were killed by Boko Haram in an attack on the city of Kano in January 2012.

Last Saturday, the day after the attack in Maiduguri, the main hospital was besieged by anxious relatives hoping to identify or claim the bodies of loved ones.

"Close to 1,000 came to the hospital," the hospital official said. "We had to chase them away. The military would never allow them to claim the bodies."

The officials in Maiduguri said

this week that most of those killed were detainees at Giwa Barracks who fled when the gates were unexpectedly opened early Friday morning.

"When they went out of the barracks, that is when gunfire was opened on them," said Senator Ahmed Zanna, who represents Maiduguri in the Nigerian Senate. "And that is how most of them died. Yes, they bombed the detainees," he said, referring to the military.

"Ninety to 95 percent of the detainees were innocent people," Mr. Zanna said. "They were just rounding up people. People were just rounded up and taken into custody." Mr. Saddiq also said that those killed were "innocent people" who were not affiliated with Boko Haram, adding that some of them had been killed by citizen vigilantes with stones or machetes.

Maj. Gen. Chris Olukolade, the military spokesman, disputed the assertions that the detainees killed were not militants, saying that "you can't differentiate attackers from those who joined them."

General Olukolade added that "when they were being pursued, definitely many of them died en route" as the military fired upon them. He said the militants' "attempt to get entry into the detention facility" resulted in deaths as well. Some detainees

were "lynched" in the community, he said, and he also suggested that some deaths involved "natural causes," without clarifying. He said he did not have a figure for the number killed last Friday.

The hospital official said that most of the hundreds of corpses were those of Boko Haram members. Asked how he could be certain, he said that "notes" were found in their pockets with the names and phone numbers of relatives.

Much about the episode remains unclear, such as how attackers were able to penetrate one of the most heavily fortified sites in northern Nigeria, in daylight. The assault, which the military called a Boko Haram raid, has not been claimed by the group, though it often does not claim responsibility for attacks. No Boko Haram member, living or dead, has been presented to the media, despite the military's claim last week that "many of the terrorists and their weapons have been captured."

Local officials challenged the military's account, illustrating the tension over the government's counterinsurgency campaign.

"They managed to eliminate those who were in detention," said Mr. Zanna, the senator. "The whole episode is to kill the inmates. That's all."

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