

THE WORLD NEWS II

Mass exodus to Lassa as Boko Haram seizes more villages

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Mass attacks abductions have continued in southern Borno villages as Boko Haram militants expand their frontiers, killing men and abducting women for two weeks now without any challenge, thereby causing mass exodus to Lassa.

Refugees from villages including Bidagu, Izzige, Kumamza and Yazza who fled to Lassa where they live in squalor revealed that apart from at least 95 women and children who were abducted in Kumamza, Damboa LGA recently, the insurgents seized more women from Bidagu and Yazza.

Haruna Ibrahim told Daily Trust that his wife, Maria, was taken at gun point from his house in Bdagu village on June 19 when several women were seized from different villages and taken away in vans.

He said the people felt abandoned by the federal and state governments as security personnel were not drafted to the area since the beginning of the latest round of assaults by the Boko Haram who have hoisted their flag in the area.

"I was at home with my wife when they arrived in vans and several motorcycles. As soon as I got wind of what was happening, I sneaked out and drove my motorcycle towards the bush but armed men pursued me with a van. I abandoned my bike and hid. They desperately searched for me before they gave up and took my bike away. I slept in the bush and the next day, I reached a village where I was assisted with food and a pair of slippers, then I trekked to Lassa. Family members told me that my wife was taken away by the gun men. Since then nobody has heard of her", he said.

He said some of the atrocities being committed by the Boko Haram were never revealed to the outside world due to neglect of the area by government and security agencies, adding that there is little hope that the abductees will ever regain freedom, considering the nature of government response to the crisis.

"I may not see my wife, Maria, again because we do not see any serious effort at stopping Boko Haram. No single security personnel was sent to engage the attackers for the over two weeks they operated in the area. While I was running for my life in the bush, I saw a group of Fulani people crying", he said.

The most recent wave of violence started in the villages when insurgents killed 22 people in Bdagu, torched three churches and abducted more than 100 women and children in southern Borno.

A witness, Jai Tanko, said: "On Sunday June 15, 2014 raiders attacked Bdagu, a cattle market day at 2 pm on motorcycles and shot sporadically into the air. They killed 22 men, burnt four vehicles and 15 motorcycles. They also took away 50 motorcycles and six vehicles. We had to leave our homes and become refugees because of continued violence. After the attack on Bdagu, they attacked and burnt Izzige-Damboa, about 15 kilometers from Bdagu and advanced to Kumamza, around seven kilometers from Izzige-Damboa, seizing 95 women and children. Some of the abducted women were pregnant".

He said the insurgents hoisted their flag in the villages and now move about freely, adding, "There is no security presence between the village and Lassa, so it is extremely difficult to evacuate some of the fleeing residents. No government official from the federal or state, no security man, media personnel or traditional ruler has visited us since the attack took place. Our elected representatives and senator have not come either. Until your visit, nobody from the media came to find out about our condition".

"The village I come from, Bdagu, is under Ngurthlavi District and the district head has since fled, so government is fully aware of our situation, some of us are hungry, we lost everything because Boko Haram fighters looted everything from foodstuff to hoes. They piled looted property at a location for a whole day and waited for trucks to evacuate them because nobody challenged them", he said.

Jai said corpses of two young men slaughtered by the insurgents on June 16 in Kumamza were not buried due to lack of security in the village. He expressed fear for the safety of thousands of refugees scattered across an area between the Boko Haram controlled villages and Lassa.

Refugees in Lassa are scattered across small unofficial camps while some manage with their relatives and friends. Many are reportedly trapped or stranded in the bush with no means of transportation to convey them out of the area.

A resident of Lassa who assisted in evacuating women and children from some of the seized villages said many people could not make it to Lassa due to logistics problem.

"As individuals, I and some people here have transported dozens of refugees to this place but we cannot continue because we are out of energy and resources. It is risky and there is no assistance from government or any institution. A Fulani man who assisted us there has just been killed today at a settlement near Yazza", he said.

Ardo Ahmadu, the ward head of Gurjangul Lamba, also a refugee in a Fulani settlement, said his son, Kolo Ardo, who graduated from the Federal Technical College Lassa in 2013, was slaughtered by the insurgents during an attack on

Thursday.

"The settlement is completely deserted. They killed my son and we lost our cows. They dispersed cows during the pandemonium, so they took some and killed many while the rest scattered in the bush. We are taking refuge here. There is no food, no assistance from the authorities. We call on government to help us", he said. They called on the Borno State Governor, Kashim Shetima, the senator representing Borno South, Ali Ndume and members of House of Representatives from Uba Askira and Damboa/ Chibok to come to their aid.

"We are starving here, we have nothing and left our farms behind, if we don't farm this season, we don't know what will happen to us. All we need from the government is security, we were never assisted by government in our farming activities, we are not salary earners. So all we need is security and assistance to go back to our homes. I believe more than 10,000 villagers have been displaced in our area", a refugee said.

Last week, four persons suspected to be spies for Boko Haram were reportedly apprehended by the residents of Lassa and handed over to soldiers. The strangers raised suspicion when they arrived Lassa market on motorcycles. Attempts by our correspondent to speak to the District Head of Lassa, Girema Madu, were unsuccessful.

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