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Hundreds of decomposed bodies found in Borno

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Governor Kashim Shettima

Hundreds of decomposed bodies including those of women and children were discovered by a government committee in Damasak, northern Borno State weekend.

The committee was set up by Governor Kashim Shettima to assess the level of destruction in towns and villages recovered from the insurgents.

It has the responsibility to rebuild, fumigate and provide essential services to make the settlements safe for displaced residents to return.

The victims were suspected to have been killed by Boko Haram insurgents as they fled the town following an onslaught by Chadian forces to recapture the town.

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Credible sources said decomposed bodies littered the streets while many others were discovered inside houses, shallow graves and rivers that have dried up on the onset of the dry season.

The committee spent the weekend recovering and burying remains of the victims under the watchful eyes of Chadian troops who sacked the insurgents from Damasak some weeks ago.

Witnesses and government officials told Daily Trust that the insurgents carried out the massacre during their reign of terror that lasted several months in the fishing community.

Senator-elect Borno North Senatorial District, Alhaji Abukakar Kyari, said there was "large scale atrocity" committed by the insurgents in Damasak and other towns and villages in northern part of Borno State.

However, Kyari denied suggestions that among the victims were some of the 500 children abducted by the militants a few months ago.

It was said that the children were locked up in an Arabic school in Damasak and that they died of suffocation and hunger.

Kyari said: "I have full knowledge of what the committee did in Damasak and the fact is that there was nowhere that bodies of over 500 children was discovered.

"Of course, many people have been killed but nobody or group brought all the dead bodies to one place.

"What really happened was that following the liberation of Damasak by Chadian and Nigerien forces and a visit by a committee that we set up, we again sent our people there on Saturday (25th April) and they worked assiduously in recovering many dead bodies.

"I cannot tell you the precise number of dead bodies but they are many. The people that went to Damasak divided themselves into various groups, recovered the bodies and buried them in various graves," he said.

Kyari said some bodies were recovered in Kareto and others in Damasak.

He said preliminary investigations suggested that some of the fresh corpses were those of insurgents killed by Chadian and Niger Republic troops.

Speaking in the same vein, the Principal Information Officer of the local government, Babagana Mustapha, said they had made videos and taken pictures of the atrocities committed by the insurgents in Damasak.

"Based on the mandate given to us, we went to Damasak on Thursday after passing through parts of Yobe State and Diffa in Niger Republic.

"We were ushered into the town by Chadian forces led by a General who has a Nigerien officer as his second in command.

"Some troops escorted us to various places and we saw the level at which human beings were massacred. We saw corpses in Dutse, in Gashigar and in Damasak...they were many," he said.

"We were also informed that hundreds of decomposed bodies of Boko Haram insurgents were in the bushes. But the troops from the neighbouring countries said they had nothing to do with them; they said it was the responsibility of Nigerian

government to bury the bodies.

"But they assured us that we could feel free and go back to our dwellings whenever we wanted," Mustapha said.

On the discovery of 500 children in a school, Mustapha said, "I only heard of that story after we returned from our findings but honestly speaking, we didn't see anything like that."

It would be recalled that in the past two months, more than 60 towns and villages that were hitherto occupied by the Boko Haram were liberated in at least 20 of the 27 local government areas of Borno State.

Damasak was liberated by Nigerian and Chadian forces in the second week of March.

Few days after the liberation, the Chadian military high command took some journalists to Damasak to see things for themselves and interviewed some of the survivors.

At the time, an unnamed military source told the international media that over 70 mostly beheaded bodies were found in a shallow grave near a bridge on the outskirts of the town.

Similarly, the BBC Hausa Service and Reuters news agency reported that surviving residents of Damasak said about 500 children had been kidnapped by the Boko Haram.

Some of the parents said the children were abducted when the Boko Haram took over the town during their territorial conquest in parts of the state.

However, both the Nigerian and Chadian forces refuted the stories.

A resident of Damasak who is now in Maiduguri but does not want his name mentioned called for elaborate investigation into the story about the missing children.

"We strongly believe that the nearly 500 children found in the school in Damasak were those abducted by the Boko Haram during their occupation of the town and adjoining villages.

"They must be the ones killed when troops from the neighbouring countries were approaching to reclaim the town. Remember that both the Chadian and Nigerian military denied the report of the kidnap after they liberated the town.

"But look at what happened now...all the children were found dead in a school and though we are not experts, it is evident that they died because of suffocation, thirst and hunger. There was no ventilation in the classes, nothing, no medication," he said.