

Hundreds trapped as B/Haram hoists flags in Marte

From Misbahu Bashir &
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Hundreds of people have been trapped in towns and villages after Boko Haram fighters dislodged Nigerian troops in Marte Local Government Area of Borno State over a week ago.

Credible sources told the *Daily Trust* that the terrorists loyal to the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) have also hoisted their flags in many places including military outposts in New Marte and Kirenowa, the biggest town in the local government.

On Sunday, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Attahiru issued a 48-hour deadline for the troops of Operation Lafiya Dole to recapture Marte from Boko Haram terrorists.

He also directed them to reclaim Kirenowa, Kirta, Wulgo, Chikingudo, and many other communities around Marte and Ngala local government areas.

Our correspondents report that after weeks of attempts to capture the strategic town, Marte fell into the hands of Boko Haram on Monday, February 15.

It was learnt that the terrorists have also taken possession of the military formation in Marte, including high profile fighting equipment and vehicles.

Army installations under the 22 Armoured Brigade in Marte, including the 153 Infantry Battalion located in the same base were expected to provide security in the area. It was learnt that the brigade commander has been redeployed.

Sources said following the departure of the Nigerian troops, Boko Haram fighters have stationed their fighters in strategic locations while others are serving as police, giving directives to locals who were unable to leave places like Kirenowa and others.

"The terrorists have taken people in the town hostage. They are now in control of mosques, hospitals and other government buildings," one of our sources said.

Another source said: "They are in absolute control of Marte and environs, giving directives as to when people can go out. It is like what happened years ago when they established their territory in the outskirts of Kirenowa close to Nigeria's border with Cameroon."

"People would have to take permission from them before doing anything. I pray that Nigerian authorities would mobilise and reclaim the town soon," he said.

Marte is over 130 kilometres from Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, and is located on the western coast of Lake Chad.

Following the attack by Boko Haram, the military operatives in the town had to relocate to Dikwa, 90 kilometres to Maiduguri.

What the COAS said about Marte

During his visit to Dikwa, Maj. Gen. Attahiru while addressing the troops at the Army Super Camp 9 at Dikwa, which also fell into the hands of Boko Haram on February 19, but recaptured by troops 24 hours after, said they should go back to Marte.

An impeccable source told the *Daily Trust* that the Brigade Commander of the 22 Brigade in Dikwa, Brig. General Y. Ibrahim, has also been redeployed.

"I have just spoken to the Theatre Commander and the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of 7 Division. You must not let this nation down. Go back and do the needful and I will be right behind you," he told the troops, warning them not to allow themselves to be over-run by Boko Haram insurgents.

"You are aware of the recent attack on Dikwa and Marte. You should not allow this to happen again. Go after them and clear those bastards," he said.

Many Super Camps were established during the days of the former Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General Tukur Buratai (rtd) and they were meant to serve as safe zones from where troops could launch serious offensives.

How Boko Haram fighters took over Marte

Daily Trust reports that at least seven Nigerian soldiers attached to the 153 Infantry Battalion in Marte were killed after the terrorists attacked the area about nine days ago.

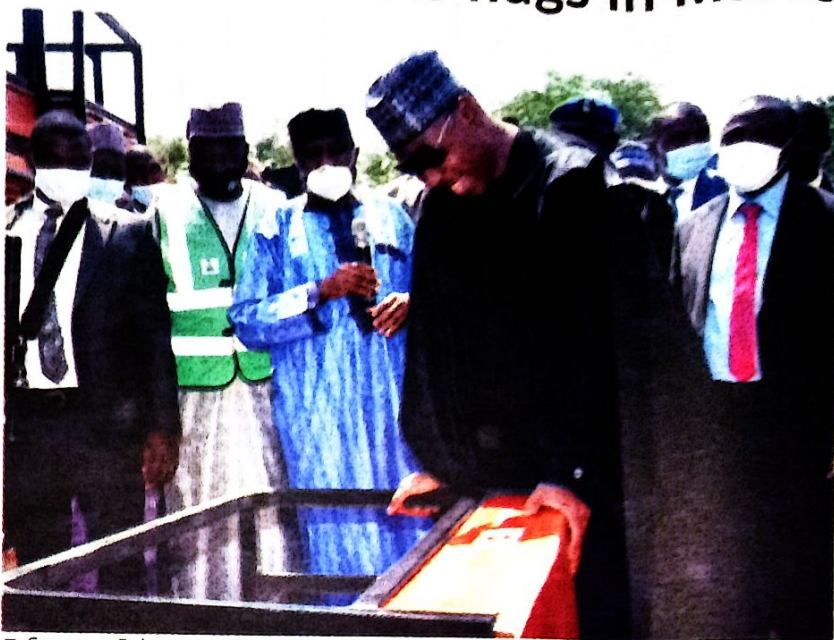
A source said there was a serious confrontation between the troops who had to retreat, leaving the terrorists behind in the town.

"Only a truck and two staff cars were salvaged. All other heavy military ranged weapons were destroyed or taken as booty," the source said. He said most of the attacks by the insurgents on the installations were launched "from the Monguno road area but during the last assault, the insurgents unexpectedly came from the Dikwa side."

"And before then, they have gained access to the town and mixed with the returnees. There was no way any soldier could counter a shooter's shot because definitely civilian returnees will be killed."

Even when air support arrived, the jets could not fire any weapon to counter them. Of course, soldiers had to move to Dikwa town."

In December 2020, the Borno State Government resettled 500 displaced



■ Governor Babagana Zulum of Borno State appreciating one of the 40,000 two-seater desks donated by the North-East Development Commission (NEDC), while the Managing Director of the Agency, Mohammed Alkali looks on during the commissioning in Maiduguri yesterday

Photo: Joshua Omirin

families in New Marte and sources said many of them are still there at the mercy of Boko Haram.

One of the returnees in Marte, Kullima Ibrahim, who succeeded in fleeing, said residents were enjoying relative peace before the recent attacks.

I'm confident troops will reclaim Marte - Zulum

Governor Babagana Umara Zulum of Borno State has expressed confidence that the Nigerian troops would reclaim Marte and environs within the 48-hour target given to them. The governor made the statement on Monday at the official launching of the North-East Development Commission's Rapid Response Intervention Projects (RRI).

"I want to assure that my administration is in full support of the military and other security agencies to recapture Marte Local Government Area, which was attacked and currently under the occupation of Boko Haram."

"These renewed attacks in some parts of the state, especially in Dikwa and Marte and other resettled communities would not deter the present administration in its recovery, reconstruction and resettlement drive in the state," Zulum stated.

Troops must rescue residents on time

Speaking on recent developments in Dikwa, a security expert, Salihu Bakhari, said: "Between the last three months of 2020 and now, the ISWAP fighters had launched daring attacks on Marte more than six times and were repelled by the Nigerian troops until the

latest attack.

"ISWAP has interest in places like Marte because it has large swath of unmanned borders and its fighters can easily move in and out of Nigeria with their supplies, including food and logistics such as weapons."

A Public Affairs Analyst, Abubakar Mohammed Kareto, said that Marte is economically important to the government and the people and urged the military to do everything within their reach to ensure that it is well protected.

"Marte is an important economic town not only to Borno but Nigeria. Marte has 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres) of wheat and rice when Boko Haram first attacked the town in 2013."

"All these were left to rot that time; Chad Basin Development Agency alone lost 200 metric tonnes of wheat as a result of the exodus of the attack in 2013 according to the agency. Apart from this economic and agricultural strength of Marte, its proximity to the shores of Lake Chad and other major Boko Haram operational camps, Marte is indeed a place of major interest to Boko Haram."

"Therefore, the government should not allow the insurgents dominate Marte and its environs. We need Marte to boost our wheat production and to ensure that the Chad Basin Development Agency return when it is safe."

"The directives given by the chief of army staff with a defined timeline to recapture Marte is a morale booster to the troops and demonstration of seriousness. This action will also help in winning the hearts of the locals,"

Kareto said. Another security source feared that the people trapped in Marte and adjoining villages could be indoctrinated by the insurgents if nothing was done urgently.

But one of the army commanders in Maiduguri said: "This marching order is very timely... Our troops are actively working to ensure that we clear them from the entire general areas."

Daily Trust recalled that Marte was sometime in 2012 taken over by the Boko Haram fighters who held sway for over two years at the height of their territorial conquests.

However, on February 2, 2015, the Nigerian Army recaptured the town from the terrorists including big towns like Gamboru, Mafa, Mallam Fatori and Abadam, among others.

5 slaughtered in Damboa

No fewer than five internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been slaughtered in Damboa Local Government Area of the state on Sunday.

The IDPs reportedly went in search of firewood outside Damboa town when the incident happened. According to a member of the local vigilance group, Abu Damboa, the IDPs were declared missing when they did not return.

"We got the report that some IDPs were missing. So, we swung into action but later found five of them beheaded two kilometres away from the scene where they were falling trees," he said.

Humanitarian sources also confirmed the incident, saying the victims have been buried according to Islamic rites.