

Bandits kill many soldiers in Niger

From Abubakar Akote (Minna),
Idowu Isamotu & Abdullateef
Salau (Abuja)

At least 20 soldiers were killed in an ambush by bandits along the Zungeru-Tegina Road in Niger State late Sunday night, witnesses and security sources told *Daily Trust* yesterday.

It was learnt that seven other soldiers and five vigilantes sustained varying degrees of gunshot injuries and were taken to the IBB Specialist Hospital, Minna, the state capital.

Sources said the soldiers were on their way to some communities recently attacked by bandits in Wushishi Local Government Area.

The bandits had, on Friday, invaded several villages in the area, forcing dozens of farmers to flee to Wushishi and Zungeru.

A military source, who spoke to our correspondent on Monday, put the number of the slain soldiers at 20.

The official said those killed were 18 army personnel and two officers of the Nigerian Air Force.

Another source said the bandits were crossing the Zungeru-Tegina Road with a large number of cattle around Kundu village in Rafi Local Government Area when they came in contact with the military personnel drafted to the area and began an exchange of fire, leading to the death of the soldiers.

A resident said: "The information is true; there was an encounter between soldiers and bandits on the outskirts of Kundu village that resulted in the loss of 12 soldiers on Sunday evening."



■ NAF aircraft, MI-171 that crashed near Chukuba village in Niger State yesterday

But the senator representing Niger East Senatorial District, Mohammed Sani Musa, confirmed to reporters in Abuja yesterday that 13 soldiers were killed during the incident. He appealed to the federal government to dispatch military and security arsenals to the troubled areas to save innocent lives and their property.

Musa said: "This is a very serious situation happening at a time we are happy that the issue of banditry is subsiding in our various communities in Niger State."

"The federal government should as a matter of urgency, deploy all its arsenal in order to curtail further spread."

"We have been having a reduction in cases of attacks, but now, it appears as if there is a serious escalation of the situation."

"The most alarming situation

now is that the attacks look like planned work because the bandits are carrying out their operations simultaneously in many parts of Niger State.

"Government should please, as a matter of urgency, take a drastic action on it and save the lives and property of our people."

Attacks worsening humanitarian crisis in Niger – Youth leader

Convener, Shiroro Concerned Youths, Mr. Sanni Kokki, in a telephone interview with reporters in Abuja, said assailants "ambushed and killed 13 soldiers along the Zungeru-Tegina Road in Madaka Ward of Rafi Local Government Area of the state."

Kokki said, "As we are talking now, villagers living around the area are all now moving towards Erena."

"This is another problem again because people are being displaced

from their traditional homes to unknown destinations.

"We are having another humanitarian crisis in our hands with the economic challenges confronting our people."

NAF confirms helicopter's crash

NAF spokesman, Air Commodore Edward Gabkwet, in a statement, said the MI-171 Helicopter on a casualty evacuation mission crashed at about 1.00pm yesterday near Chukuba Village in Niger State.

He did not disclose the number of the officers onboard, but the helicopter is believed to have a capacity of over 20 passengers.

There were, however, reports that the helicopter was shot down by non-state actors and that the pilot died. This could not be independently confirmed by *Daily Trust*.

Gabkwet explained that the

aircraft had departed Zungeru Primary School enroute Kaduna, but was later discovered to have crashed near Chukuba Village in Shiroro LGA.

He also did not state whether or not there were casualties.

He said efforts were still ongoing to rescue the crew and passengers on board the helicopter. He said preliminary investigations had commenced to determine the probable cause of the crash.

Military silent on soldiers' killing

The Defence Headquarters was yesterday silent on the killing of its personnel.

The Director of the Defence Media Operations, Major-General Edward Buba, neither answered several phone calls nor replied to a text message which our correspondent sent to him for confirmation of the incident.

But a military officer, who asked not to be mentioned, simply said more than eight soldiers were killed in the incident.

"It is very sad to hear about this development, my brother. Of course, some of our colleagues paid the supreme price for the incident that happened during the weekend. I can't ascertain their number. I only know that at least eight of them are no more," the officer said. It would be recalled that last year, 15 soldiers and seven policemen were killed by bandits in Niger State. Locals had alleged that there were collaborators within communities.

Chairman, Shiroro LGA, Akilu Isyaku Kuta, yesterday said the security situation in the area had deteriorated in recent times.