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Thursday, July 30, 2009

Fighting rages, death toll hits 300 in Borno

- Schools, govt offices, hospitals shut
- Sect's leader uses children as shield
- AC, others condemn Yar'Adua's absence
From Mohammed Abubakar, Njadvara Musa (Maiduguri), Adamu Abuh (Kano) and Charles Akpeji (Jalingo)

HEAVY bombardments by the nation's forces on suspected strongholds of Boko Haram, the northern-based Islamic sect that is championing a 'Jihad' (holy war) in the region, continued yesterday.

Unconfirmed reports said that the death toll from the clash had risen to 300 while thousands of the residents had been displaced in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital.

The leader of the sect, Mohammed Yusuf, was reportedly using some residents of the heart of the clashes, the Maiduguri Railway Terminus Areas (MRTA), as human shield.

In Jalingo, Taraba State, security agents have located a school where the sect trains its members while in Kano, the state government has demolished a mosque used by the armed group.

A senior government official in Maiduguri claimed that 4,000 people had fled their homes as troops and militants engaged in battles for the fourth day.

The opposition Action Congress (AC) has described President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's trip to Brazil in the face of the crisis as ill-timed.

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) spokesman Apollus Jediel said about 1,000 people fled their homes in Maiduguri yesterday alone and appealed to the state government to assist the displaced persons.

Militants seeking to impose Sharia law throughout the multi-religious country attacked a police station in Bauchi State on Sunday. The violence spread to three other states,

hundreds of people are reported to have been killed in the violence. Police said most of the victims were

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militants.

Yusuf's residence was shelled by troops on Tuesday evening, along with a mosque where many of his followers meet, but he allegedly escaped.

"The house and the mosque have been pulverised and reduced to rubble. To be honest with you I don't think the campaign will be finished within the next day or two," a police officer said.

Yesterday, the Borno State government advised residents of the six areas adjoining the scene of the fighting to stay indoors as the attack on the militants continued, to avoid being hit by stray bullets. The areas include Kumshe, Floor Mills, Kasuwan Shanu, State Low Cost, Kofar Biyu and Gamboru Police Station.

The police in Borno also said yesterday that they had concluded arrangement to return the 180 women and children allegedly lured to Maiduguri from Bauchi and nine others from Bukuru in Plateau State under the guise that they were going for Islamic Jihad.

Police spokesman, Isa Azare, commended the state government for its pledge to assist the command transfer the women and children back to their Bauchi base.

He said the Deputy Governor, Adamu Shettima Dibal, has promised the state government's financial assistance to the police to enable them transport the people back to their places, but it was not clear as at press time if the promise had been fulfilled.

Azare would, however, not give the exact details of the casualties, saying it was difficult to give a precise figure, given the fact that the operation was on-going. "You know it is not appropriate to give any figure of casualties now, because, apart from the sects members that were killed, there are a good number of policemen that are still missing. Until after the operation when the coast becomes clearer, nobody can give a definite number of those who have lost their lives."

But The Guardian learnt that the two hospitals in the state capital had been finding it difficult to accommodate the growing number of victims. For instance, it was learnt that the mortuary of the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital (UMTH) had been filled to capacity. As a result, bodies were being dumped at the car park, at the Umaru Shehu Ultra Modern Hospital, Bulumkutu.

However, concerns were being raised as the expected capture of Yusuf appeared far- fetched given the inability of the combined military and police operations to capture the sect leader, who, is said to be taking human shields to avoid arrest. As a resident told The Guardian, the military is incapacitated by the fact that Yusuf had tactically resorted to human shields to avoid arrest.

For instance, at the Shehu North, men of the Operation

Flush 11 were seen beating a retreat having been overwhelmed by the high number of the sect members who were said to be coming out in their hundreds from their hide-outs. The area is close to the palace of the Shehu of Borno.

Col. Ben Ahanotu, commander of Operation Flush 11, confirmed the fears as he said residents taken hostage, including women and children of the sect members, numbered over 1,500, adding that "we cannot raze down Yusuf's residence and the mosques right now (yesterday). There are a lot of people in the houses in the MRTA and two main residential areas of Maiduguri and Jere council areas."

A statement by the Director of Press Affairs to the Governor, Usman Chiroma, also confirmed that Yusuf and his followers were using the civil populace as cover".

He quoted Governor Ali Modu Sheriff as advising all residents of the affected areas to stay indoors to avoid endangering their lives.

Maj.-Gen. Saleh Maina, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 3rd Armoured Division, Jos, who is leading the offensive, ordered his men to suspend the shelling to allow civilians to move out of the area to reduce human casualties, because the fundamentalists live in the State Low Cost Estate, Shehu and Abaganaram."

The Guardian further learnt that at about 1p.m. yesterday, the five armoured tanks deployed to the MRTA, were stationed 500 metres away from the sect's stronghold. One of the armoured carriers was on Tuesday attacked and its tyre was punctured, while advancing towards Yusuf's house and mosque.

While a combined force of 500 soldiers and policemen took strategic positions at all the entries to the area, Ahanotu, in a message to The Guardian disclosed that more than 65 sect members were killed while they were fleeing the platoon soldiers to Yusuf's house and mosque.

He said the joint military and police was able to arrest the second in command to the leader of the sect, Bukar Shekau, while Yusuf, was still with some members holed up in the house. Unconfirmed reports claimed that before the capture of Shekau, both men were sighted in military camouflage.

Shekau, according to military intelligence sources at the Maiduguri Government House, is providing useful information and means of arresting Yusuf and his armed members.

Meanwhile, all schools, markets, banks, the Maiduguri Monday Market and Musa Usman Secretariat complex that houses 18 ministries and parastatals have remained closed. Besides, the major streets in the metropolis, including the ever-busy Post Office-Airport Road and Shehu Laminu Way that lead to the MRTA were

deserted.

The Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, Mohammed Ali Ndume, has blamed the Federal Government for not acting enough to reign in the terrorists, in spite of the earlier security information available to it.

The lawmaker, who represents Damboa/Chibok/Gwoza Federal Constituency in the House of Lower Representatives maintained that the government was briefed early enough ahead of the possible out-break of the crisis, but did not act promptly.

The Kano State government, which yesterday expressed concern over the Islamic militant's presence in the North, demolished a mosque in Wudil used by one of the group's leader, Salisu Al- Amin Wudil.

The state government described the activities of the group as unfortunate in view of the fact that the Ibrahim Shekarau administration had been committed to peaceful co-existence and religious harmony amongst residents of the state.

In a statement signed by Adamu Abdullahi, the government reiterated its commitment to the goal of ensuring the security of lives and property of all residents.

The Managing Director of the Kano State Urban Planning and Development Agency (KNUPDA), Malam Hassan Na'Abba confirmed the demolition of the mosque and the residents of the militants' leader.

Na'Abba said the mosque was situated in a location in Wudil not within areas earmarked for the constriction of residential and religious buildings.

In Jalingo, the sect's school located at Angwan Lariya, the state capital, was said to be solely dedicated to the teaching of ethics opposed to western civilisation.

Confirming the report, the Chairman of the Moslem Council of Nigeria (MCN), Alhaji Inuwa Jauro Manu, blamed the security agencies and the Ministry of Education for allowing such a school to exist in the state.

The school, reportedly named Alfurqan Islamic School, is located on the same street as the Motor Traffic Division (MTD) of the Nigeria Police.

Manu, who was visibly dejected, said even though, the "sect called itself a religious organisation, its actions and activities does not conform with Islam"

The proprietor, whose name was given as Malam Salihu, was said to have fled to Maiduguri along with some of his followers and their families two days to the mayhem in Borno.

AC has described as ill-timed and ill-advised the current three-day official trip to Brazil by Yar'Adua, at a time the

country was in the throes of violence triggered by the misguided and self-styled 'Nigerian Taliban' sect.

In a statement issued in Lagos yesterday by its National Publicity Secretary, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, the party wondered what was so compelling about the trip that it could not be deferred in the national interest.

"At the last count, four states in the north have borne the brunt of the violence unleashed by the senseless members of this sect, and dozens of lives, including those of security agents, have been lost while property worth billions have been damaged.

"In addition, hundreds of our citizens have been displaced and left deeply traumatized, while there is palpable fear across the country that the violence may either spread further or degenerate.

"It is therefore unconscionable that the President, who is the father of the nation, could take this time to travel to Brazil, instead of visiting the affected areas and offering succour to the people affected," AC said.

"The President's hastily-arranged media interaction before his departure, during which he commented on the crisis, has done little or nothing to change the fact that the timing of the trip was bad," the party added.

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