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Friday, July 31, 2009

Calm returns, more troops in northern states

- Yar'Adua turns to govts, monarchs
- Sect leader reportedly killed
From Madu Onuorah (Abuja), Muhammed Abubakar and Njadvara Musa (Maiduguri)

AFTER four days of fierce gun battle between the Nigerian armed forces and members of an Islamic sect, Boko Haram, calm returned to Maiduguri, the Borno State capital yesterday.

The military said that they had successfully crushed the uprising by the extremist Islamic group, Boko Haram.

Consequently, the state government, which imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in Maiduguri and its environs in the wake of the crisis, reviewed it to 9 p.m. to 6.00 a.m.

Also, a police spokesman, Isa Azare, claimed yesterday that the sect's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, had been killed.

The military and police authorities, which also reviewed the crackdown on the fundamentalists in Abuja yesterday, announced the deployment of more troops in the major cities in the North.

Some of the sect members, who escaped the scene of the hostility in Maiduguri, were allegedly seen crossing the borders into some neighbouring countries. Eyewitnesses said the militants shaved their beards, dropped their Islamic robes for T-shirts and Jeans trousers to avoid arrest by security agents.

Others, who were more daring, struck at a police station in the state and burnt it.

The Defence Headquarters (DHQ) yesterday hinted that more troops would today mount a "show of force" in all the major cities in the North to demonstrate its resolve to end the crisis and assured that the government would protect all law-abiding citizens.

The DHQ also released the biodata of the leader of the 'Boko Haram' sect and an insight into the group's modus operandi.

At a joint press briefing by the DHQ, Nigeria Police and the Department of State Security Services (SSS) on the mayhem in Borno, Yobe and Bauchi states, the North-East and parts of Kano and Katsina states, Director of Defence Information, Col. Mohammed Yerima said troops on duty in the affected states were using "the barest minimum force" as they root out

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elements of the religious sect.

The trio of Yerima, Force Public Relations Officer, Emmanuel Ojukwu and Assistant Director, Public Relations of the SSS Marilyn Ogar, said groups raising issues on alleged human rights abuses "are not fair on the security agencies as they battle this sect."

They stated that the security agencies deliberately delayed mopping up operation in the states, especially Borno until all the civilians had left, adding that "all civilians living in the enclave were evacuated. All those remaining in the enclave were their loyalists."

Yerima reiterated that "the group named Boko Haram is rabidly opposed to all forms of western education and civilisation. They consider as their primary target for attacks, law enforcement agents, critical public infrastructure and centres of worship which in their view are opposed to their doctrines. It has been ascertained that the group did not emerge just of recent. They have been in existence as far back as 1995 under different names such as Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra.

"Security agencies have over this period been monitoring and containing their activities even when they transmuted to other names but with the same doctrine of intolerance. For instance, on November 13, 2008, the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf and quite a number of his followers were arrested by the security operatives and handed over to the Inspector General of Police (IG) for prosecution. However, they were subsequently granted bail by an Abuja High Court on the January 20, 2009. Before then in 2007, one of his ardent disciples, Al-amin, who was also the Kano State leader of the group, was arrested along with some of their members after an attack on a police station in the state ; he was also handed over to the police for prosecution. Similarly, between February and April 2009, Yusuf's second in command, named Kilakam, a Nigerien, was on two occasions arrested and repatriated to his country.

"In furtherance of their violent tendencies, the extremists sometime in June 2009 launched an attack on a police station in Bama, Borno State but the police were able to contain their violence which left about 17 of their members dead; the leader of the group vowed to avenge the death of his members and ordered his followers to stockpile arms. Based on intelligence reports, all security agencies were put on alert, which led to the discovery of a hide-out where members of the sect were preparing bombs in Maiduguri .

"Following security reports on the activities of Boko-haram, the group's hideout located at Dutsen Tanshi area of Bauchi town was raided on July 26, 2009 by a joint security team and nine of them were arrested and materials for bomb making and other weapons were confiscated. About two hours later, the group launched another deadly attack on police formations in Bauchi State , unfortunately for them, they were met with heavy casualty. They subsequently struck in Potiskum, Yobe State where they bombed police stations and set inmates free. Between July 26 and 29, these violent extremists have launched sporadic suicide attacks in Bauchi, Yobe and Borno states . Their weapons of offence include Improvised Explosives Devices (IED), AK-47 rifles, dane guns, pistols, daggers, machetes, catapults and clubs."

The Defence Spokesman said the military only got involved in quelling the activities of the sect following the directive of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Paul Dike "to take over the operation of restoring law and order in the affected states. Consequently, the Chief of Defence Staff ordered the military to conduct internal security operation, which is already in progress. We, however, assure the public that the military is in control. In fact, Maiduguri town was cleared of the fundamentalists as at yesterday (Wednesday).

"We implore the public to give security agencies accurate and timely information that will assist in ending the crisis. The issue of religious extremism is not peculiar to Nigeria as it has become a global challenge. Countries including Nigeria are not resting on their oars; we therefore enjoin you, the press and members of the public, to partner us to tame this monster. The time to act is now!"

Ogar, (SSS spokesman) said the leader of the sect, Muhammed Yusuf was born on January 29, 1970 in Girgir village, Jakusko Local Council of Yobe State and is married to four wives and he has 12 children.

Yar'Adua yesterday reached out to the Moslem Ummah ahead of today's weekly Juma'at services across the country. The President, who is on a state visit to Brazil, warned Moslem youths who belong to other sects to avoid joining the Boko Haram group in the disruption of the peace and security of the nation.

His Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, said Yar'Adua spent "quite some time" working the telephones with most northern governors, advising them to mobilise traditional and religious leaders in their respective states to mount a campaign against the sect.

Adeniyi said: "President Umaru Yar'Adua who is currently on State Visit to Brazil today (yesterday) called and spoke to most of the northern governors to advise that they mobilise traditional and religious leaders to mount campaign against Boko Haram that seeks to disrupt the peace and security of the nation."

He expressed delight that many governors from the region had on their own commenced the campaigns against the unacceptable extremists' group and encouraged others to join them.

"The President feels particularly encouraged that some governors have already started implementing this initiative", Adeniyi said.

The group, Adeniyi quoted his boss as saying, should not be the bride of any true Moslem or group, because Islam promotes love and peace among faithful and non-adherents.

There were also reports of an attack on Makera police station, near Kofar Biyu, in the metropolis at 11 p.m. barely two hours after Governor Ali Modu Sheriff visited the enclave.

Sheriff in a special broadcast yesterday, ordered the review of the dusk to dawn curfew imposed on the state capital, Maiduguri and nearby Jere Local Council.

However, despite the assurance by the governor, the city remained deserted as people stayed off the streets. Police still embarked on stop and search of people who came out. Besides, suspects and dead bodies were still being brought to the police headquarters. Unconfirmed reports indicated that the Police College was still subjected to attack by remnants of the insurgents.

Apart from regulating preaching in the state, Sheriff said trouble makers would not be allowed to have access to Borno any longer. Therefore, the Preaching Board, which has remained dormant would be re-constituted, while a bill to regulate preaching would be sent to the House of Assembly.

According to him, this has become necessary, "so that whosoever comes to Borno to preach must obtain permission and follow proper regulatory process to be ascertained, whether he is a genuine preacher or trouble maker. So we will not leave this matter like this, and I can assure the people of the state, we will follow it up and all their structures, wherever they are, will be dismantled."

The demolition of Yusuf's house, which lasted for over eight hours was completed at about 6 p.m. on Wednesday, and it was supervised by the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 3rd Armoured Division of the Nigerian Army, Jos, Maj-Gen. Saleh Maina.

Receiving Sheriff, at the scene, Maina directed the Army to be vigilant and ensure that Yusuf and the remnants of the insurgents were tracked down and brought alive. However, reports indicated the sect leader was sighted at Kernowa, in Marte Local Council on Wednesday night.

The demolished house located in an isolated area, near the Railway terminus, hosts a mosque, a clinic, a laboratory where local bombs were manufactured, sewing machines, various brands of vehicles, motorcycles numbering more than 200, and locally arranged bombs among others.

The main house was destroyed yesterday in the presence of Maina, The Chief of Defence Air Staff (CDS) Chief Air Marshal Paul Dike and Inspector-General of Police (IGP), Mr. Ogonnaya Onovo, are expected in the state capital today.

"The headquarters of the group has been taken over by the security forces. I hereby urge you to go about your normal business from tomorrow (today) as adequate security has been put in place to avoid recurrence of this unfortunate incident.

"Government, private businesses, market places are hereby advised to resume their normal business tomorrow (today). The curfew earlier is hereby amended to 9 p.m.- 6 a.m. until further notice. All those internally displaced who left their houses and fled to take refuge in Army barracks and elsewhere are hereby advised to return to their homes as normalcy has returned."

The governor condoled with families of those who lost their lives and prayed for the repose of their souls.

About 90 people have been hospitalised at the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital (UMTH). The casualties included the police, soldiers, prison officials and civilians. The North-East Zonal Disaster Officer of the Nigerian Red Cross Society, Mr. Aliu Maikano, advised the state government to evacuate dead

bodies from the streets of the state capital.

He told The Guardian that the exercise had become necessary to avoid health hazards associated with the decay of the bodies. Though he said it was not possible to give the exact number of the dead, adding, "we thank God as at today (yesterday), if you go round, you will find out that things are calm, but dead bodies have littered everywhere on the street. We advise the state government to evacuate the bodies before they decompose because people are coming out for normal business."

The North-East zonal coordinator of the National Emergency Management Agency, (NEMA), Mr. Jediel Apollos, said the outfit was constrained by the lack of vehicles to convey relief materials to the three camps.

About 200 followers of the sect were along with deputy leaders allegedly killed in a raid yesterday.

"We have taken over their enclave, they are on the run and we are going after them," Col. Ben Ahonotu, commander of Operation Flush, was quoted as saying.

"Abubakar Shekau was killed along with 200 followers while trying to escape," from a district of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, the police said.

An eyewitness said he counted the bodies of 90 extremists in and around the mosque after the troops had finished pounding the building.

"About 70 bodies littered the areas around the mosque and the base of the Taliban. Inside the house (where Yusuf had been based) we came across 20 bodies," he said.

Some of the fleeing fanatics allegedly cut off their hair and beards

"We spotted dozens of members of Boko Haram fleeing. They stopped by briefly, shaved their hair and beard and discarded their jellabiyah (white Arabic caftans) for Tee-shirts and Jeans," said resident Hamad Bulunkutu.

"They crossed the Gamboru Market River and disappeared from there," agency report added.

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