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NSA unveils non-military strategy to fight terrorism

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- Gunmen kill four in Benue
- Reps probe killings in southern Kaduna

- Army denies rights violation in N'East

TO check the cruel disregard for human life and property in the northern part of the country, the National Security Adviser (NSA), Col. Mohammed Sambo Dasuki, has launched what he labelled a “soft approach to countering terrorism” that will utilise existing structures within and outside the government.

But as Dasuki unveiled the initiative yesterday, gunmen were busy setting ablaze a pregnant woman, killing her son and two other farmers in Makurdi, the Benue State capital. The callousness was perpetrated less than 24 hours after suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked Tulen and Agasha communities in Guma Local Council of Benue State, leaving scores of people dead. Notwithstanding, the House of Representatives made a move yesterday to stem the tide of impunity and callousness when it ordered its Committee on National Security and Public Safety to investigate the recent killings of over 100 people in a southern Kaduna village.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian Army has denied allegations of human rights violation in its fight against terrorism in the North-East, dismissing the allegations as concoctions of the West to present Nigeria as a nation that cannot handle its own affairs or that can never get it right.

The anti-terrorism initiative by the NSA will include implementation of an economic turnaround policy at the end of the state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states. This, Dasuki said, will be implemented through families, communities, civil society groups and faith-based organisations towards building resilience to violent extremism.

The result, he said, will be the development of a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programme “that is both vertical, involving the three tiers of government (federal, state and local), and horizontal, involving civil society, academics, traditional, religious and community leaders. It consists of three streams with different layers of partners: ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), including the civil society.”

The soft approach to counter-terrorism initiative, the NSA stated, will be based on the principles

that terrorism is un-Islamic, counter-terrorism is not against Muslims, encouragement and empowerment of Muslims to speak out against terror, ensuring that Muslim-Christian relations is used to stop terrorists' desperate goal to ignite a religious war and that counter-terrorism is apolitical as the government will build inter-party collaboration for counter-terrorism operations. According to the NSA, "based on our understanding of the economic root causes of terrorism and global best practices in addressing them, we are working with the governors of the six north eastern states to design an economic revitalisation programme targeted toward the states most impacted by terrorism. Working with various stakeholders, we are currently designing a regional economic revitalisation plan. In December 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan tasked leaders of the North-East region and the NSA to develop a joint regional redevelopment plan which will serve as the foundation for a federal-state partnership to revitalise the region's economy." Dasuki further stated that "an inter-ministerial committee, consisting of the Ministries of Agriculture, Power, Finance, Works, Water Resources, Health, Education, Transport, Communication, Culture and Tourism, Industry-Trade and Investments, Solid Minerals Development, Science and Technology, Youth Development, as well as Lands and Housing, along with SMEDAN, the Budget Office, National Planning Commission, development partners and my office, is currently working with the region under the aegis of the Presidential Initiative for the North-East (PINE). I thank our development partners for their role in developing this initiative. "There exists a window of opportunity because communities are already indicating preference for peace and stability, having realised the danger that violent extremism presents both socially, psychologically and economically. More communities are providing prompt and actionable intelligence to security forces that have led to the capture of violent extremists or weapons caches. We realise that every Nigerian has a role to play in countering violent extremism. The soft approach provides us with a frame-work that identifies the roles and responsibilities of every segment of our society: the governors, local council chairmen, national and state assembly members, political parties, trade unions, the private sector, traditional institutions, ministers and other government officials, academics, in fact, a 'whole-of-society' approach that involves everyone vertically and horizontally to confront violent extremism."

Dasuki saluted the immense sacrifices that the military and law enforcement officers have made. "We must also remember the souls we have lost and those they left behind, whole communities that have been sacked and the increasing number of orphans and victims, a large number of whom are children. When we reflect this horrendous damage and feel the pain and loss, we should remember that the only thing left for us to do is to stand up against this violence."

The Guardian gathered that the burnt pregnant woman and her son had gone to farm at Iwenge village, near Welfare quarters located along Makurdi-Otukpo Road where the gunmen attacked and killed them by 10.00 a.m. yesterday.

Irked by the killings, the irate youths in Kanshio village, the affected area, were said to have conveyed the bodies of the deceased farmers to the palace of the Ter Makurdi, Chief Sule Abenga and demanded that the royal father should address them on the killings. The youths barricaded the highway leading from Makurdi to Otukpo, resulting to traffic congestion which lasted for several hours.

But sources at the Ter Makurdi's residence who pleaded anonymity told The Guardian that at the point the gunmen invaded the farm and started struggling with the woman and her son, some passersby quickly rushed to the scene to assist but were over-powered by the attackers.

Abenga, while fielding questions from journalists yesterday said the attack on the woman and her son was mischievous, lamenting that the youths moved the bodies to his house because of the false allegations that traditional rulers have hands in the crisis.

The Police Public Relations Officer, Daniel Ezeala, confirmed the incident at Kanshio village, saying: "There was an attack in that area, somebody was butchered to death and a burnt body was also picked from the farm where the attack happened. The dead bodies were moved to the mortuary and investigation into the matter is ongoing."

The House of Representatives presided over by the Speaker, Aminu Tambuwal, directed the committee to probe the Kaduna killings within two weeks and report back. The lawmakers also urged security agencies to intensify efforts to apprehend those behind the killings so as to bring them to justice.

Unknown gunmen invaded Bondon village of Moroa kingdom in Kaura Local Council of Kaduna State in the early hours of Saturday, killing scores, while many houses and other property were destroyed.

Adopting a motion on the matter moved by Gideon Gwani (PDP, Kaduna), the lawmakers lamented the incessant killings of innocent citizens in the southern part of Kaduna.

Army Director of Defence Information, Maj.-Gen. Chris Olukolade, denied the allegation of rights violation in Abuja yesterday while speaking at a two-day forum on Advancing Freedom of Information Implementation on the African Continent.

Speaking on "Protecting Sensitive National Security Information in the Age of Freedom of Information", Olukolade stated that some reports on human rights violation by soldiers, especially those showing soldiers shooting directly at civilians may have been doctored.

He noted that suspected Boko Haram members who have been caught remain in detention because the Army respects human rights. "If we were to be emotional, nobody will be in detention, going by the amount of atrocities that Boko Haram has committed. But some of them are in detention and are being fed with public food. Some of them are better fed than innocent people. This is because we respect human rights. Reports by the West of human rights violation are to present us as people that cannot get anything right. Our personnel are trained not to violate human rights," he said.

Talking about media reports on the Boko Haram issue and the access to information, Olukolade said that the Nigerian Army has been lenient with the media and has given it enough access. According to him, the anti-terrorism law makes it a crime for anyone to have contact with terrorists, yet media reports have indicated that the press is in contact with the terrorists. "But up till today, we have not prosecuted anyone."

He, however, expressed displeasure with media use of the information provided starting with inaccurate and conflicting casualty figures that are reported all the time as well as the sensational manner of reporting them. While not mentioning any medium in particular, the Army chief cited examples of screaming headlines which he said are sometimes laced with speculations.

Though he wasn't confrontational, Olukolade seemed not to be too comfortable with the Senate debate on defence budget on television because of the sensitive nature of defence structure and processes. He noted that any information revealed may be used by an enemy to overturn defence strategies.

In his welcome address, Executive Director, Media Rights Agenda, the organisers of the conference, Edetaen Ojo, stated that the objective of the conference was to bring together key stakeholders from the West African sub-region and other parts of Africa to share experiences in implementing their Freedom of Information laws; collectively identify the challenges confronting the effective implementation of Freedom of Information laws in their countries and find ways of addressing or mitigating them.

It would be recalled that the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Navi Pillay, had alleged during her recent visit to Nigeria that issues of human rights violation by Nigerian forces occurred in the North-East.

While calling for transparent investigations into such allegations, she noted that it is important that government forces do not exacerbate the problem by taking actions that displace, endanger and kill civilians.

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