

NEWS.

We're closer to rescuing Chibok girls, says govt

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Category: National Hits: 31 • Print



- **Suspected Boko Haram Islamists kill 7, civilian JTF arrests three**
- **Over 4, 000 Borno, Yobe pilgrims may not be airlifted from Maiduguri**

HOPE of ever getting the abducted Chibok secondary school girls out of captivity was rekindled Monday as the Federal Government, dispelling mounting concerns and scepticism over that possibility, announced that it

was closer to their rescue.

Coordinator of the National Information Centre, Mr. Mike Omeri, announced this during the routine briefing on the abducted schoolgirls and general security situation in the country.

He dismissed the accusation by the Chibok community elders that government was not carrying them along on the rescue mission, stating that the centre has been open enough and has always been communicating, as was being reported by all the media.

However, he said would not give any security information if the community elders were asking for that. Also, he said the centre would not want to speculate on the reported escape of 60 women from the Boko Haram den because it does not have information on it.

Unfortunately, suspected Boko Haram terrorists disguised in army uniforms killed seven people in an attack near the northeastern border with Cameroun late Sunday, residents said yesterday.

The gunmen, five of whom were also killed, razed a police station and a military camp during the attack as they "split into three groups and launched simultaneous attacks on the military camp, the police station and other buildings in the village," a resident of the targeted Krenuwa village in Marte district, Abor Grema, said.

Six residents were shot dead while a member of a local vigilante force formed to help the military was also killed, Grema said, narrating that the man was "dragged from his home and slaughtered on the streets" by extremists who returned to Krenuwa later in the night to revenge against the locals who had fought alongside the military.

Same Sunday, some members of the vigilance group in Borno State, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), arrested three suspected Boko Haram members at the Maiduguri timber shed. The suspects were said to have concealed their rifles in a pick-up van loaded with dried fish, before offloading it at Baga Fish Market at about 10.35am.

The suspects, as confirmed yesterday by military sources in Maiduguri, were later handed over to the 7 Division, Nigerian Army.

Also, unknown gunmen on Sunday night opened fire on a group of Muslim worshippers in Bukuru in Jos, Plateau State, injuring three during tarawi prayers, after the day's fast.

The Secretary of Bukuru Elders Committee, Bala Baba Mohammed, confirmed the incident, saying that the gunmen opened fire at a group of worshippers in a mosque. It was also learnt that two of the victims, Lawal Muhammad and Bashir Iiyasu, have been hospitalized in Jos while the third has been discharged.

The Media and Information Officer, Special Task Force, Capt. Ikedichi Iweha, confirmed the attack but added that the situation was under control.

Meanwhile, 45 of the 63 abducted women and children from Damboa and Chibok villages, who reportedly escaped earlier, were re-kidnapped on Sunday after an attack on military and police formations in Damboa last Friday.

Nevertheless, troops have cleared and taken over Balmo forest in an operation that lasted throughout the weekend. Prior to the operation, Balmo forest, which stretched from Bauchi to Jigawa states, with links to the fringes of Sambisa forest, was used by terrorists as bases and hideouts.

According to a statement by the Director of Defence Information, Maj.-Gen. AC Olukolade, during the operation, terrorists and armed gangs operating in the forests were completely rooted out while some were captured, including two foreigners suspected to be mercenaries.

Also taken were weapons and such equipment as power generating sets, communication equipment, vehicles, motorcycles, foodstuff and kitchen utensils. In another development, over 44 terrorists have died in Kerenoa and adjoining communities following an encounter with troops who repelled their attack on the communities.

Armed with IEDs and other high calibre weapons, a large number of terrorists had carried out a pre-dawn attack on the communities but met stiff resistance from the troops. Many of them, as well as weapons and ammunitions were also taken.

Meanwhile, troops on routine patrol around Banki and Miyanti in Borno State fought through an ambush laid by terrorists during the weekend, resulting in casualties on both sides. Six soldiers were lost in the encounters while the wounded are receiving treatment.

In the meantime, over 4, 000 pilgrims from Borno and Yobe states may have to be relocated to a nearby airport, from where they would be airlifted to Saudi Arabia for this year's pilgrimage following the recent closure of Maiduguri International Airport over insecurity.

The alternative airport, according to the National Hajj Commission (NAHCOM) sources yesterday could be the Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport (MAKIA) or Gombe Airport.

The Guardian also learnt that the Arafat day and Eid-Adha would hold within the first week of October, while airlift of regular pilgrims could be completed before September 29, except for officials and those traveling by international routes.

However, the Nigerian military cannot rashly move into the notorious Sambisa forest so as not to endanger the lives of the abducted schoolgirls. An officer who just returned from a year tour of duty in the forest told The Guardian that the girls were being held as human shields.

Pleading anonymity, the officer explained that the Nigerian Armed Forces have completely surrounded the forest but quickly conceded that the sheer size of the reserve, which is several thousand square kilometers, means that the terrorists could still operate at will from their base deep in the jungle.

The officer expressed confidence that even without adequate equipment, Nigerian soldiers could flush out the terrorists if they have the go-ahead, adding however, that the terrorists have mined the forest with Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).

Nevertheless, he lamented that the Nigerian Armed Forces still lacked the right anti-insurgency equipment despite the huge budget for defence. He said: "We have done our beat. We have mapped out the area and have the insurgents surrounded.

In any case, a member of the House of Representatives, Abdul-Rahman Terab, said yesterday that contrary to widely held notion, the Boko Haram Islamists started as far back as 2002, when Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was president.

Speaking when he appeared on the House of Representatives correspondents' Hot Seat series, the lawmaker, whose constituents have not known peace in the past four years, said the group was launched in Kanamma, Yobe State, then tagged Taliban, lamenting that 80 percent of the sect's destructive activities was under-reported.

According to him, before then, most of the members were normal adherents of Islam, who had mobilised themselves mostly from Indimi Mosque in Maiduguri, until extreme views set in.

"The major war was launched in 2009, when the leader of the group, Sheikh Mohammed Yusuf, died; then

Abubakar Shekau, who was second in command, took over. For those of us who were there, that is part of our own history that we know."

He encouraged the Federal Government to accede to the demand to swap prisoners for the Chibok girls. And faulting the notion that the emergency rule in Borno was not achieving desired results, he noted: "I represent three local councils with a population of about 650,000.

"We have only one barracks in Bama, which is the 212 Battalion, with just about 200 officers. In normal situation, when there is an attack, the military will have to get the express approval of Mr. President, being the Commander-in-Chief, to move out of their barracks for any kind of operation at any given time.

"With the state of emergency, it means they can run around. At least we have some units in Gamboru Ngala, some in parts of Kalaberge, some on the shore of Lake Chad, which are not barracks. No matter how weak we think our security agencies are, go round and check."

On his part, the Sultan of Sokoto and President-General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Alhaji Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar 111, has linked the nation's current security challenges to the 2015 elections.

Speaking when he hosted newsmen in the state, he said it was all about people trying to put themselves at vantage point to gain extra mileage ahead of others, lamenting, however, that the blood of innocent people was being shed.

Though the sultan would not elaborate on the linkage, he said that politics had become a do or die affair in the country as politicians see it as a destination rather than a vehicle to a destination.

He reiterated his support for dialogue with Boko Haram, particularly for the release of the abducted schoolgirls, saying that there is nowhere in the world that force has been successfully used to resolve insurgency. He alleged that those opposed to negotiations do so because their daughters were not among those abducted.

Urging all Nigerians to come together as one big family to address the problems afflicting the country, the NSCIA head observed that despite the huge number of churches and mosques, adherents of the two major religions have failed to practice what their holy books say.



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