

35 SOLDIERS KILLED IN AUGUST 4 CLASH WITH BOKO HARAM

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Gen Chris Olukolade

How many soldiers actually lost their lives last week when they clashed with the deadly Islamic insurgents – *Boko Haram* – in Borno State?

And why would the military authorities play down on the number of deaths of their personnel only for them to detail the military plane last week to pick relations of the actual number of soldiers who died in the clash for their burial?

This is the riddle that family members and friends of the deceased soldiers are trying to unravel.

Sunday Independent investigation has shown that contrary to reports by the military command in Borno State that only two soldiers were killed in last Sunday's (August 4, 2013) clash between the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and *Boko Haram* insurgents, 35 soldiers lost their lives in the encounter.

Spokesperson for the Joint military Task Force (JTF), Lt. Col. Sagir Musa had earlier said the MNJTF successfully repelled *Boko Haram* terrorists attack when the insurgents launched twin attacks on **Mobile Police Base and Bama town.**

His words: "Terrorists using sophisticated weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) launched attacks at about 6:45 a.m. on August 4, 2013. The encounter led to the death of one policeman and 17 *Boko Haram* terrorists; two soldiers were also wounded."

Musa also added that two soldiers were killed in another separate attack on the operatives of the MNJTF.

But findings by this newspaper during the week revealed that 35 soldiers, not two, died from the Sunday attacks while soldiers from Lagos State brigade had majority of the casualties.

On Thursday August 8, a team of soldiers from Borno State arrived Lagos to break the news of the soldiers' death to their families. It was during the visit that *Sunday Independent* scooped that 35 soldiers were killed by *Boko Haram* operatives in the said attack.

The team which came to Lagos via a C130 military aircraft visited a number of Barracks in Ikorodu, Ojo, Yaba, Apapa and Ikaja to break the unpleasant news to families of the deceased soldiers. They also informed the families that they would be airlifted to Maiduguri the following morning to witness the burial.

On Friday, wives and children of the deceased soldiers were airlifted to Maiduguri where the soldiers were buried amidst uncontrollable wailing as the 35 gallant soldiers were laid to rest in military tradition.

But more troubling is that some soldiers are still missing, including the commandant that led the ill-fated unit. But unconfirmed sources indicated that the commandant might be complicit in the attack.

Sources said such a blow on the military and without a corresponding loss on the part of the insurgents could only mean that the commandant had given them an order that was deliberately meant to make them vulnerable.

While what happened on Sunday was still sketchy, *Sunday Independent* gathered from sources that the affected troops were part of the team that was to be relieved by Nigeria's peace-keeping troops from Mali.

According to one source, the troops had disarmed and were preparing to eat their meal when, perhaps, a mole amongst them alerted the insurgents. Though GSM services have still not been restored in the state, it is still unclear what means the alleged mole used in tipping the insurgents, though satellite phones cannot be ruled out.

The source also said the insurgents, decked in foreign military camouflage, came in different Hilux trucks and ambushed the soldiers when they were vulnerable.

But when this newspaper asked whether such a take-down was possible under normal military operational procedure, the source said it was impossible. According to the source, "your weapon is your wife if there is an ambush; 35 people cannot be easily cut down without some of the soldiers pulling out their weapon for a fight-back. I suspect that they were not even close to their weapons during the attack and that was what must have accounted for such a huge loss."

When asked if it was also possible that departing troops could handover their weapons while still in the state, the source said it was also abnormal. According to him, such could only happen inside the aircraft that would be taking them back to their destination.

One of the soldiers who died in the attack, *Sunday Independent* gathered, had in the last telephone conversation with his father, said he was scared that they might not return alive. He told his father that the insurrection they were facing was serious.

Contacted on Saturday, the military high command preferred to keep mum on our fresh findings.

The cell phone of Army spokesman, Brigadier-General Chris Olukolade was switched off when *Sunday Independent* contacted him. No response also came from him when an sms was sent to him. However, another senior officer insisted that the number of soldiers killed during the attack was only two.

Meanwhile, the commander of the military Joint Task Force (JTF), Major General Jah Ewansiah, has told Governor Kashim Shettima of Borno State that 12 soldiers and seven policemen were killed in recent attacks in Borno by suspected members of the *Boko Haram*.

Sagor had last week denied that up to a dozen officers were killed in the Malumfatori attack on soldiers by the *Boko Haram* on August 4.

The JTF spokesman had claimed in a statement that only two soldiers and a policeman were killed in the attack as well as another attack in Bama. The JTF had earlier claimed that it killed 32 *Boko Haram* members in the two attacks.

Ewansiah, however, revealed the casualty to Shettima, when the latter visited the JTF headquarters on Friday to condole with the Task Force over the ugly occurrence.

"We have lost 12 soldiers in Malumfatori and seven policemen in Bama attacks. But despite that the JTF is resolute and committed to ensure that peace is completely restored in Borno State, even if it means losing their lives," Ewansiah said.

The governor donated N1million to the families of each of the deceased soldiers and policemen.

According to him, as a responsible and responsive government, it became necessary to condole the families in appreciation of the supreme sacrifice the gallant soldiers paid in the course of restoring peace in the state.

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