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B'Haram Kills 43, Burns Three Borno Villages

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• Regional Leaders Agree To Keep Taskforce under Nigeria • Pledge \$300m For Anti-Terror War

By Chesa Chesa - Abuja

Again, gunmen suspected to be members of the Boko Haram sect stormed Matangale, Buraltima and Dirmanti in the restive Borno State, burning them down and killing at least 43 people, residents told AFP on Thursday, the latest in an upsurge of attacks by the militants.

Dozens of rebels on motorcycles stormed the villages on Tuesday, opening fire on villagers before looting and burning homes, AFP quoted fleeing residents as saying.

News of the assault was slow to emerge due to poor communication in the region after the insurgents destroyed telecom masts in previous attacks.

According to Dala Tungushe, a resident, "they came around 4:00pm on 20 motorcycles... three gunmen on each and attacked Matangale, before proceeding to Buraltima and Dirmanti.

"They killed 43 people and burnt all the houses in the three villages after looting food supplies," Tungushe, who fled Matangale to Biu, some 90 kilometres (56 miles) away, said.

Matangale was worst hit by the attack as the gunmen opened fire at an open well outside the village where residents had gathered to fetch drinking water and do their laundry.

"The Boko Haram gunmen opened fire on the crowd at the well where they killed around 16 people," said Bulama Karuye, another resident.

"In all, we lost 43 people in the attacks. All the three villages were completely (razed)"

He said the number of casualties could have been higher, had some villagers not been away at a weekly market about 40 kilometres away.

Hundreds of residents of the affected villages, particularly women and children, fled to nearby Damboa town where they sought refuge in a primary school, both Tungushe and Karuye said.

They said the attackers came from nearby Sambisa Forest, a major Boko Haram stronghold from where hundreds of women and children kidnapped by the militants were rescued during recent military operations. Troops and local hunters from Damboa pursued the fleeing attackers into the bush and a gunfight erupted".

"The soldiers and the hunters brought back a pickup truck and some motorcycles they recovered from the Boko Haram attackers... but we don't know how many of the gunmen they killed," Tungushe added.

Over 150 people have been killed by Boko Haram since President Muhammadu Buhari assumed power on May 29, vowing to crush the militants and end their bloody six-year stranglehold on the region.

The attacks came within hours of Buhari attending a meeting of the Group of Seven industrialised nations (G-7) to present a wish-list on which the need to win the insurgency war featured prominently.

Meanwhile, the President, who returned to the country on Monday night has held series of meetings with Nigeria's defence chiefs on the best way to win the war, which started in 2009.

On Thursday, the President hosted an extra-ordinary summit of the Heads of State and Government of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and Benin at the Presidential Wing of the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport.

He was joined by Presidents Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger Republic; Idriss Deby Itno of Chad; and Boni Yayi of Benin Republic; while President Paul Biya of Cameroon was represented by the his Defence Minister.

At the meeting, Buhari rejected a proposal for a six-month tenure for the Nigerian military commander of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) currently battling the insurgents.

The force has headquarters in N'Djamena, Chad and comprises troops from Chad, Cameroon, Niger Republic and Nigeria, and is currently commanded by Major-General Tukur Buratai of the Nigerian Army.

Instead of rotating the headship of the joint task force among the contributing countries, Buhari urged his colleagues to allow Nigeria retain the command until the sect is defeated.

At the end, the leaders bowed to Buhari's wish.

The leaders, in a communiqué at the end of session, also agreed that the remaining top positions be shared among other participating countries and rotated every 12 months.

The leaders also agreed that the sum of \$300 million be contributed to fund the operations of the taskforce. Nigeria's former President, Goodluck Jonathan had already offered \$100 million, a commitment Buhari intends to honour.

Aside this, the regional leaders sought the support of the African Union, the United Nations and strategic partners like the European Union, France, United Kingdom and United States of America for the MNJTF.

Reacting to the meeting, Malte Liewerscheidt, Senior Africa Analyst at Verisk Maplecroft, said: "The G7's unprecedented pledge to support the country, details of which are still to be worked out, reveals the level of trust key international leaders place in Buhari's leadership."

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