

The ISWAP Offensive In Diffa: An Explainer

By Fulan Nasrullah on June 23, 2016 · No Comment

Background

The ISWAP offensive in Diffa, Niger, began with the overrunning of Bosso on Friday 3rd June 2016. But before this, ISWAP had been engaged in sustained battles with the Nigerian Army within the massive Sambisa Forest, while simultaneously carrying out a silent campaign of guerrilla style attacks in Southern Borno, rural areas of Yobe State, and infrequently Northern Adamawa State. This is in addition to waging a relentless campaign in Diffa and to a lesser extent in Northern Cameroon where it has to work in tandem with the Khalid Al-Barnawi Network aka Harakatul-Muhajireen.

On 18th April, ISWAP forces -estimated to have been over 1,500 – engaged 113 and 158 battalions of the Nigerian Army (with a combined strength of 1,552 officers and men), in an ambush outside Kareto Town in Northern Borno.

The combined battalions were advancing to open the first major offensive by the Nigerian Army's 8 Division, to clear northern Borno of ISWAP forces.

That 6 hour engagement was only broken off after massive airstrikes were called in by the battalions. The fighting saw more than 120 Nigerian soldiers killed and scores more wounded (according to a tally performed by Nigerian Army Medical Corps personnel), and possibly a hundred insurgents were killed.



Boko Haram were said to have started the attack by launching IEDS on positions of the troops. Photo: informationng

The Kareto battle killed the planned 8 Division offensive to recapture northern Borno before it could be launched, as panicked Nigerian Army planners realized that they had greatly underestimated the

strength of the enemy.

Attention shifted to N'Djamena, the Chadian capital, where the French, through Operation Barkhane, were helping shape the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) from the multinational army it was initially planned to be, into an operational supervision headquarters, that Paris felt was best to handle the situation in the Lake Chad region.

France through Barkhane was planning to use the MNJTF as the platform to run, organise and control a joint Niger-Nigerian offensive (Chadian Generals wary of the heavy casualty rates sustained during previous campaigns in Northern Cameroon and Northeastern Nigeria, convinced President Deby to refuse Chadian participation), to liberate Northern Borno, followed by which mop-up operations would take place to eliminate ISWAP units trapped in Diffa.

Aware of this French directed plan, the insurgency decided to launch what was described by insurgent sources as a limited offensive to clear Nigerien forces from the border areas close to northern Borno, and prevent these areas from being used as a staging ground for Nigerien and or Chadian forces to attack southwards into ISWAP-controlled territory in Borno.

On Friday 3rd June, about 2000 insurgents attacked Bosso – a town of about a hundred thousand people close to the Nigerian border in Diffa Prefecture of Niger – from multiple directions killing scores of Nigerien soldiers and two Nigerian soldiers attached to the Nigeriens.

Overrunning the town, they soon withdrew after spotting drones in the air, anticipating that airstrikes would follow. Past experience has taught them that right after spotting drones tracking their advancing columns, airstrikes from the Nigerian Air Force follows, and they expected French planes from Chad and Niger to come to the aid of their Nigerien surrogates. When airstrikes didn't come, they returned to retake the town on Sunday 5th June 2016, quickly doing away with Nigerien reinforcements that had just arrived.

On Monday 6th June, ISWAP opened the second front of its limited offensive as hundreds of its fighters, many of them of Nigerien origin, crossed into Diffa from Nigeria, overrunning Nigerien troops (many of whom ran away as they came under superior firepower from the insurgents) as it began an advance towards Diffa city, the headquarters of the prefecture of the same name. Simultaneously, ISWAP forces began advancing towards the same objective from the northeast and the east, sparking panic across the entire region.

Not interested in sending Chadian soldiers

President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger flew out to N'Djamena on Saturday night to ask for Chad's help in the form of troops to rollback the insurgency. Because of the high casualties (up to 1600 soldiers) sustained during its 2015 interventions into Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon, neither President Deby nor his generals were interested in sending Chadian soldiers to fight ISWAP or any other Boko Haram group outside Chad's borders. This wariness was born out of the high casualties Chad sustained during its 2015 interventions into Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon.

France, Nigeria and the US supported Niger's pleas for Chad to intervene. Nigeria went as far as to promise to underwrite the full cost of a Chadian intervention in Diffa.

Ultimately, by Tuesday 7th June, a combination of Franco-American pressure and Nigerian money, had softened Deby's resolve (but not his generals) and he had agreed to send troops across the border. According to sources, President Deby made no firm commitment on numbers or when he would send forces across the border. However no sooner than Deby agree to send troops, than the Nigerien Presidency went on the wire, announcing that Chad had committed to sending 2,000 soldiers immediately to relieve Diffa. By Wednesday 15th June, Chadian soldiers had not yet crossed into Niger, and Bosso was still controlled by the insurgents, although Nigerian and (allegedly also Chadian) planes were bombing suspected ISWAP positions threatening Diffa.

For the French and other officers attached to the MNJTF in N'Djamena this provides the perfect opportunity for the planned offensive to liberate northern Borno and seal off the Borno-Diffa border, to be launched, and this time with Chadian soldiers if deployed, increasing the chances of success. Such a plan would involve Nigeria's 8 Division and Cameroonian soldiers (if Yaoundé was dragged in now under guise of liberating Bosso etc.) attacking from the south as Nigerien and Chadian soldiers clear Diffa and push down from the north, if comments by Niger's Defence Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou are anything to go by (see here).

However, a number of political and economic factors suggest this French/MNJTF wish may not be realised under the guise of liberating Bosso now. Apart from the Chadian unwillingness to commit to anything but a limited operation to liberate Bosso, and relieve Diffa city from the threat it faces there is also the problem of Cameroon fighting a bitter war against Boko Haram groups in its north. Cameroon has slightly more resources than Niger but far less than Nigeria or Chad. Nigeria's Army has to contend with a renewed Niger Delta insurgency in the south while maintaining a strong presence in the east where separatist movements are

active and gaining strength while in the North West and Bauchi State a tense situation exists with the Shias. The army is also supporting Nigeria's understaffed, underfunded, under-trained police force in multiple internal security missions leaving no spare capacity to contribute to a campaign to liberate northern Borno.

Even 8 Division's neighbour, 7 Division, is fully engaged in brutal fighting within the Sambisa Forest, where much advertised campaigns to clear the forest of the insurgency have not done much beyond throwing soldiers and weaponry at what is becoming a meat grinder, in addition to fighting at Alagorno, Mandara Mountains, and other areas, where it has found dislodging the insurgents and keeping them out of the area a daunting challenge.



7 Division is engaged in a combat with ISWAP in vast Sambisa forest. Photo: streetsofnaija

With this in mind, it is hard to see where the necessary forces for such an offensive to permanently eliminate the insurgency from northern Borno will be found. The best that can be hoped for under the circumstances, is a recapture of Bosso, and a relief of Diffa from the threat it faces. Anything more could risk Chad withdrawing in the middle of a brutal campaign, the Nigerians unable to throw in the resources necessary for a successful outcome, and the Nigerien Army collapsing spectacularly once the brunt of a campaign in Diffa and the load previously jointly shared with the Chadian Army falls squarely on its shoulders.

Should Diffa Fall

Should the insurgents overrun Diffa, the Nigerien Army will most certainly collapse completely across the rest of the prefecture. This would be realised by a combination of obsolete and inadequate weaponry, poorly paid and terribly trained soldiers, negligible intelligence, and little understanding of the enemy it is facing.

Alone, Niger doesn't have the resources to retake Diffa Region or the city, should they fall to the insurgency. Nigeria's resources are overstretched as it confronts threats that have the potential to destroy its existence as one country. Chad has considerable experience fighting insurgencies but it has severe limitations to its ability to pick up the slack for a weak Niger and an overwhelmed Nigeria.

The fall of Diffa region in its entirety, would give insurgency control over 150,000 sqkms of territory, slightly over half a

million Nigeriens and 150,000 Nigerian refugees – territory which won't be immediately recaptured. The longer the insurgency maintains control over this area, the stronger its systems will weave deeper into the local fabric.

Thousands of Diffans have been recruited by the insurgency – many of them disaffected and religious youth united in a venomous hatred of France, the Niamey elite, and anger at what they perceive as the unjust and oppressive way their people and region have been treated by what they view as a French puppet government in Niamey. Most of these recruits were recruited covertly because of the harsh Nigerien security presence within the area, if that presence were to be removed by an ISWAP capture its ranks could be filled by tens of thousands of 'liberated' Diffan youths.

The insurgency may pause its advance if it captures Diffa city and adjoining areas, and if the effect of such a capture trickles down into a complete collapse of Niger's hold on the greater region. Should it find victory in confrontations with the Nigerien Army easy, it may seize the advantage and grab as much territory as it can, until it meets firm resistance. This scenario played out in northeastern Nigeria in 2013-2015, with the insurgency going on lightning offensives, seizing territory ahead of its **planned schedule** and only withdrawing when the Nigerian Army put up resistance at Konduga and then proceeded to go on the offensive. The insurgency then reverted back to schedule, and went back to traditional guerrilla tactics across all four Lake Chad countries. Such a scenario may likely play out again in Diffa. There is no quick solution to this conflict, and the sooner this is realised, the better for the entire region.

Shortly after this article was written, on 23rd June, the MNJTF announced that it had launched an offensive to clear areas of Northern Borno of ISWAP insurgents. The operation codenamed Operation Gama Aiki (which translates from Hausa as "completing the job") purportedly involves troops and air assets, from all four Lake Chad countries.



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