

# Buratai: Perilous Trip With A Courageous Army General

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There was no visible civilian presence in the town. Every government structure, including the local government secretariat, hospital, and schools had been reduced to rubbles and chars. Telecommunication masts had been brought down, street lights were destroyed with electric cables lying crisscross on the roads.

The army chief commended the soldiers for holding their ground even as he urged them to "keep up the good job" they have been doing. He added a home truth: "there is more work to be done."

Buratai assured the soldiers of improved welfare even as he relayed the greetings of President Muhammadu Buhari, who is the commander-in-chief. According to him, "we all know we have a task to clear this general area of these criminal elements once and for all, so that we all can go back to our normal soldiering business."

Midway into the COAS' inspection of parade, I noticed unusual movement and even some of my colleagues sensed that something had gone wrong. But the army chief, to whom the information was communicated silently, did not show any sign of worry. He calmly cheered the soldiers and gave them his full support.

Shortly afterwards, we got to understand that the worst had happened. The convoy of the advanced team had ran into an ambush of Boko Haram terrorists, at a hamlet not more than five km away from Mafa where we were. With our fears bottled, as we did not want to irritate the two colonels we were travelling in the same vehicle with, we watched in amazement as the COAS bid his convoy to move on.

Minutes into our resumed journey, the convoy slowed down with radio messages blaring somewhat disturbing messages of how the ambush situation was being handled. Minutes after, the soldiers in the advance team radioed back that the situation had been contained. The convoy was now moving at a careful but tactical speed as we drove through parts of the route said to be the most dangerous.

From the radio communication, we were made to understand that a gang of about a dozen Boko Haram terrorists hiding in some of the deserted houses by the road side, had opened fire on the convoy of the advance team. A soldier was killed and three others badly injured; but the troops were able to effectively respond with superior fire power that killed 10 of them.

As we moved a few more kilometres away from Mafa, some eagle-eyed soldiers using binoculars were able to pick some Boko Haram terrorists moving in the bush together with some herdsmen. The COAS ordered the convoy to halt and directed the soldiers to round up the suspects who were arrested. A brief investigation revealed that



The reporter during the trip

four of them were actually Boko Haram terrorists who took part in the ambush the advance team suffered.

The soldiers freed the herdsmen who narrated that they were being forced to move with their cattle to give some kind of disguise to the fleeing Boko Haram terrorists. The four suspects were immediately handcuffed and taken back to Maiduguri, the state capital. A family of four, with a sick mother, riding on a donkey, were also investigated by soldiers. The head of the family explained that his wife was shot by Boko Haram terrorists some days back and he needed to take her and his sick child to the hospital. Buratai ordered that the family be conveyed in one of the vehicles to the hospital for proper medical attention.

The wheels of the vehicles we rode in, ran over several empty shells of munitions fired from RPGs, Ak-47s and other high calibre guns, as we advanced closer to the scene of the ambush. At that point, we knew we were entering into the stronghold of Boko Haram and things changed. Soldiers in the advance team and those leading the convoy of the COAS had to charge their way through the deadly spot that was made more dangerous by thick foliage on either sides of the road. The soldiers, under the command of the number-one soldier, did not give Boko Haram space to embarrass them, as the air became charged with deafening shooting from various kinds of troops' rifles.

The two senior uniformed officers and the driver of our vehicle wore a kind of oracular calm, not minding what was going on in the minds of we 'the bloody civilians' at that precarious moment of our dear lives. Their minds appeared to be set on getting to the next destination, at all cost. We were truly petrified. The convoy moved on to Dikwa, 85km away from Maiduguri, where we met over 4000 IDPs who were being protected by Nigerian soldiers in the deserted town after

their rescue from the strangle hold of Boko Haram.

The COAS was welcomed with cheers from the IDPs who thanked him profusely for bringing in the soldiers to save them. General Buratai was still as calm as though he was in the comfort of his office in the Army Headquarters, Abuja, as he addressed the IDPs in the local Kanuri language. He chatted and teased some of the old men who spoke on behalf of other IDPs, assuring them that their plight would soon come to an end, as soldiers were working tirelessly to reclaim Boko Haram territories so that the federal government could organise their return back home.

Some of the villagers who spoke with the army chief said more than five of their members were slaughtered by Boko Haram the previous night. They begged the COAS to keep the soldiers with them until the terrorists are wiped out. Moving through Dikwa town left everyone with a chill as to the kind of life Boko Haram had forced people under their conquest to live. Every signpost in the town was defaced with the black-and-white insignia of Boko Haram. Anyone who had visited Dikwa some two years before now would shed tears on seeing what had become of the bubbling town of commerce and agriculture. Like Mafa and other villages on the highway, Dikwa is now overgrown by grasses.

Most of the electrical and telecom installations had also been destroyed, solar street light poles had been pulled down and their panels and batteries removed and the pipes cut into tiny halves. A soldier informed me that most of the solar panels had been aggregated in a certain camp where they were used to provide uninterrupted electricity to the terrorists, while the pipes were used in coupling improvised bombs at the laboratory of the town's secondary school.

The COAS who was not happy that the signposts of Boko Haram were still standing boldly in various parts of the town, ordered soldiers to bring them

down at once before we departed the seat of Dikwa Emirate where even the multi-million naira and beautifully built palace of the Shehu of Dikwa now lay in ruins, as Boko Haram turned it into their operational headquarters and hostel of their Amir.

Our journey had yet to end. We proceeded to Ngala, but this time, through rough earth road. The tarred road ended just after Dikwa, because the contractors handling the Maiduguri-Gamboru Highway reconstruction abandoned the project in Dikwa with heightened Boko Haram attacks.

We bumped and galloped our way slowly to Ngala. Our fears heightened with the fact that if we come under any attack, our escape would be hampered by the bad road.

A few kilometres to Ngala, two air force helicopters came hovering over our convoy. This heightened our fears even the more. But Colonel Usman in his usual calmness simply said "that is the Chief of Air Staff (CAS)." He was also to make the trip to Dikwa but from the air.

We were somehow thrilled when the CAS radioed in from his chopper, communicating with the COAS on ground, both updating one another the general situation in the area.

Finally, we arrived Ngala, our most feared destination. But we met a large troop of soldiers in high morale there.

The journey to Ngala, ordinarily shouldn't take more than an hour but it took us about three hours to get there. Soldiers were in high spirits, singing and dancing to the music blaring from the tape of the public address system brought by the Information Unit of the Army Directorate of Public Relations.

One soldier said in a loud voice as he danced: "Ngala is our street and we are good to go, because Boko Haram is now history."

After a brief inspection of parade, the army chief delivered his address and sanctioned the soldiers' next move to free Gamboru border town, which is the heart of Boko Haram enclave within that axis. Group photographs were gladly taken with the COAS, whose presence at the deadliest frontline charged the morale of the soldiers.

It was time to muscle our way back, the same way we came. At Logomani village, one of the tyres of the army general's vehicle got punctured and we had to stop at that deadly spot until the tyre was fixed and the journey resumed peacefully, until we all heaved a heavy sigh of relief in Maiduguri at about 5pm.

As I pulled off my helmet and the fragmented jacket that had doubled my weight, I doffed my cap for a man of courage: General Tukur Buratai.

He led by, example and told Boko Haram in no ambiguous tone that Ngala belongs to Nigeria, and one else.

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