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Nigerian troops heading into Boko Haram territory on the day a state of emergency was declared in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States in June last year. It is beginning to look like a case of underwhelming force confronting an implacable foe.

Boko Haram: Nigeria's military on the spot

Posted by: Festus Eriye in Festus Eriye 13 hours ago

Sometime in 2011 a private in the Nigerian Army was arrested by agents of the Lagos State Environmental and Special Offences Task Force for driving in the dedicated Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lane at the Obanikoro area of the city. Angered at the audacity of the officials, the man left and soon returned with his comradesin-arms and a full-blown army-police clash ensued.

In my column that weekend I excoriated soldiers who thought they were above the law simply because they wore fatigues. I suggested that whole lot of them be shipped off to the North East where they could work out their aggression tackling a Boko Haram sect that was fast becoming a nuisance. At that point government was still addressing the issue mainly using the police and secret service.

I soon received a text message from an officer who while taking my caustic comments in good humour denied that military men only had contempt for the police. He pointed out that the army was always being called in to clean messes left behind by the Nigerian Police. He boasted that if the military were the ones handling the young insurgency, they would sort it out in three months.

This week I was reminded of that boast as the death toll from the attack on the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Gujba Local Government Area of Yobe State hit 60. In nearby Adamawa State, a further 32 persons lost their lives in separate attacks by Boko Haram in three towns. Overall the body count for February is over 300 and rising.

Early in December last year, the sect swept unhindered into Air Force bases located near the Maiduguri airport. They left in their wake scores killed and five aircraft razed. It was a stunning and embarrassing blow to Nigeria's military pride, and it occurred with the armed forces firmly in charge of managing the war against the insurgents.

Eight months after President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe, and gave the military extensive powers to stamp out the killings, the performance of the military is

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under scrutiny. Disturbing questions are being asked and nobody is providing answers.

Frustrated and angry governors are raising posers. Bewildered legislators are scratching their heads wondering what on earth is going on. The questions cover everything from strategy to rules of deployment, funding and motivation.

Borno State Governor, Kashim Shettima, got things going by claiming the insurgents were better equipped and motivated than Nigerian soldiers. This very serious charge drew a typically defensive riposte from President Jonathan who offered to withdraw the troops for one month to test the theory about their ineffectiveness.

For his part, Adamawa State Governor, Murtala Nyako, has made the equally grave claim that there may be Fifth Columnists sabotaging the efforts of the military from within. The allegations arise from a string of strange deployments that preceded the Buni Yadi slaughter and some other recent high profile attacks.

Wondering why soldiers were always late in arriving at scenes of incidents, he said: "In Buni-Yadi, Yobe State, the soldiers withdrew from checkpoint hours to the attack. Who ordered the withdrawal? In Shuwa and Michika, soldiers withdrew, shortly after that Boko Haram attacked, who ordered the withdrawals"?

"We also have the case of Gen. Mohammed Shuwa who was killed in Maiduguri by the so-called Boko Haram. There is an army unit there, but they didn't respond during the attack. Who told them not to respond?

"The Air Force base was raided in Maiduguri. There was a military base nearby; who gave the base the order not to respond during the raid on the Air Force base?" Questions, questions!

As though worries about unseen hands manipulating the situation were not bad enough, we now have to contend with reports of soldiers in Adamawa abandoning their checkpoints and fleeing into the bush leaving five villages at the mercy of the insurgents according to reports by Associated Press.

Why would soldiers who are trained to kill or be killed, who are supposed to provide protection for the people, cut and run before the enemy? It all comes down to the same issues of equipment and motivation raised by Shettima. Anyone would beat a retreat in the face of superior firepower.

They would definitely scamper before insurgents who joyfully embrace death if they see no reason to die for their country. It is not just the hapless troops in the middle of nowhere who have to deal with the question of motivation. How many are willing to die for Nigeria? It just becomes an issue because it is the business of the military to die, and turning tail before the enemy is one of the most serious offences a soldier can

So how do we begin to turn things around seeing as current efforts are doing very little to deter the terrorists? The first battle that needs to be won is that of finance. Reports indicate that the insurgents who struck at Buni Yadi drove into town in nine brand new Toyota Hilux vans. Each of these vehicles cost more than N6 million at today's prices. How many do they have in the fleet? Who's paying for them? Individuals and organisations with very deep pockets obviously.

But no matter how rich they are they cannot be more endowed than the Nigerian state. That is why it is scandalous to even imagine that the insurgents can be better armed than our soldiers. What do we spend our huge defence budget on if troops can't get the armament they need to prevail in battle?

The ongoing war against terror provides the window to review not just the pattern of defence expenditure, but the entire structure of our military. All over the world countries are reforming their armed forces based on their peculiar security challenges. It is obvious that for Nigeria in the foreseeable future those challenges would be terroristic - rather than conventional.

In addition to throwing more money at the problem in a targeted way, we need to throw in more troops. Yobe State Governor Ibrahim Gaidam has made this demand and he should be supported. We can learn from the example of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When it seemed like the security situation in both countries was spiraling out of control, the Americans implemented a "surge" policy that introduced thousands of new troops into the theatre of conflict. The upshot was that the spiral of violence was contained. The North East is crying out for a surge that limits the room the enemy has to maneuver.

But that surge should not contemplate the temporary relocation of the Nigerian Army's headquarters to the North East as suggested by senators. That would simply be an empty knee-jerk reaction that will not materially change much. If anything it exposes the nation to psychologically devastating attacks against symbols of the Nigerian state like happened with the assault on the Nigeria Police headquarters in Abuja.

Much has been said about addressing social and economic conditions that provide a ready recruitment pool for terrorists. It is hard to fault that. Still, the point needs to be made that Boko Haram is unique. They are an implacable foe that would settle for nothing less than victory for their evil ideology. The only thing that can stop them is defeat. That is why it is important to get our military strategy right.

There's no question that some progress has been made in limiting their activity to the North East. These days stories of IEDs going off in city centers in the North West are rare occurrences. Still more needs to be done. It begins with the military and President being humble enough to admit that their current strategy is not working and is in urgent need of a review.





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