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## Empowering Borno 'civilian JTF'

By IBRAHIM ALIYU

THE relative peace in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, as a result of the dismantling of the Boko Haram insurgents' strongholds by the military Joint Task Force was interrupted recently by a new wave of attacks on schools by the sect.

Two of such attacks which took place on June 17 against Government Secondary School, Damaturu, Yobe State and Ansarudeen Private School, Maiduguri, Borno State, resulted in the killing of 16 students and two teachers. The most recent attack occurred on Saturday, July 6, when gunmen invaded Government Secondary School in Mamudo village, near Potiskum, Yobe State. About 41 students were killed. The school's student hostels and administrative block were also burnt down.

Though the new development is disturbing and has drawn fresh public outrage against the sect, both the government and the military authorities have assured that measures are in place to curtail future attacks. According to the JTF spokesman, Lieutenant-Colonel Sagir Musa, the sect is "attacking soft targets such as schools to show the world that they are still strong and to instill fear in the minds of the people, especially youths in Maiduguri and Damaturu."

Colonel Musa's assessment of the situation is definitely not far from the truth. The day after the June 17 attack on the Ansarudeen Private School in Maiduguri, Boko Haram issued an audio clip threatening to deal with youths in Maiduguri and Damaturu for assisting the military. The sect also warned parents to call their wards to 'order.'

Indeed, the attacks on schools by the sect and its declaration of an all-out war on the youths could be aptly described as its response to the activities of the Borno Vigilance Youth Group (BVYG), an organisation or movement formed by the youth to complement the efforts of the JTF troops in the manhunt for fleeing sect members. Though poorly armed, only with sticks, cutlasses and knives, members of the vigilance group have been braving the odds since early June, this year, to hunt for terrorists by conducting stop-and-search operations



Erelu Olusola Obada, Minister of State, Defence

at strategic locations of Maiduguri.

In defiance of the risk of Boko Haram reprisals, more youths have continued to join the effort, which the chairman of BVYG, Abubakar Mallum, said is a patriotic venture aimed at assisting security agents identify and arrest members of the sect. According to him, "our involvement in the manhunt for these killers was based on the belief that we would be able to identify insurgents faster and easier than the soldiers on patrol in their vehicles. We organised ourselves into different groups, took positions and conduct searches on vehicles."

Mallum says that members of the BVYG which is now popularly referred to as the "Civilian JTF" will not relent in its cause until the state is completely rid of the Boko Haram terrorists and peace reigns. He admitted that the youths were well aware of the risk and danger involved. "We know the (school) attacks were aimed at rattling us to abandon the noble task we have started of exposing Boko Haram members in our areas," he stated.

However, some people have expressed concerns over the activities of the vigilance group. Their major concerns include the safety of the youth and how to ensure that members

of the group do not engage in lawlessness which would be counter-productive. Against this backdrop, a notable human rights activist in the North, Mallam Shehu Sani, warned that "it will be a big mistake to allow the vigilantes carry arms to respond to Boko Haram attacks as it will be a way of breeding another breed of insurgents." But the military authorities have allayed such fears, stating that the civilian JTF group normally operates under the watchful eyes of the military JTF and they are not armed. They only assist the military.

Generally, people are happy with the activities of the "civilian JTF" manned by youths in Borno State and are calling on youths in the other affected states to emulate them. It has often been said that the support and cooperation of the civilian populace is necessary to ensure the success of government initiatives to stamp out the insurgency in good time. That is what is being demonstrated by the youth of Borno State and it is working.

A member of the House of Representatives from the state, Honourable Kyari Gujbawu, in a television interview commended them, noting that apart from the Boko Haram suspects arrested with their assistance, a lot of arms, which could have been used by terrorists to wreak havoc on the society had been intercepted during the stop-and-search operations.

Former head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, speaking on the Hausa Service of the **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)** recently, also appreciated the initiative of the Borno Vigilance Youth Group.

General Gowon, who noted that the Goodluck Jonathan administration was doing its best to restore peace in all the 12 states in the North experiencing security challenges, declared that "it is only when communities along with their youths provide such vigilance and monitoring support that the current security challenges could be overcome."

However, the appreciation of the Borno civilian JTF will not be complete without acknowledging that they need empowerment for more effectiveness. But this empowerment is not in terms of arming them, but by streamlining their activities and helping them to be better organised, well supervised and law-abiding in the discharge the noble cause they have undertaken in service of their fatherland.

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