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Violence escalates in Borno, Yobe

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More lives were lost on Wednesday as the clashes between security forces and members of an Islamic militant group, Boko Haram, entered its fourth day in Borno and Yobe states.

About 43 of the Islamic militants were killed in Hawan Malka, on the outskirts of Potiskum in Yobe State and 10 in Maiduguri, Borno State, where soldiers and policemen shelled the residence of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf.

The officer commanding the operation, Col. Ben Ahanotu, said there were at least 250 armed men guarding Yusuf's home.

Ahanotu added that papers and personal items found on the bodies of some young men either killed or arrested indicated that many of them came from neighbouring Chad and Niger.

The Borno State Police command's Public Relations Officer, Mallam Isa Azare, who also confirmed the development, said that the Police had launched a manhunt for Yusuf.

Azare added that the deputy leader of the sect, Bukar Shikwa, had been arrested in Maiduguri.

In Bauchi, Bauchi State, where the violence started on Saturday, one of our correspondents learnt that security agents killed two more members of the group. But there was calm in the city on Wednesday evening.

Agence France Presse, the British Broadcasting Corporation and Reuters had earlier on Wednesday quoted unofficial sources as claiming that the casualties recorded on Wednesday had shot up the death toll in the violence to between 260 and 304.

However, a human rights group, Civil Rights Congress, however, told Cable News Network that the number was about 400.

But as news that the crisis had escalated in Borno and Yobe states filtered into Abuja, the Acting Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Ogbonna Onovo, dispatched one of his deputies, Mr. John Ahmadu, to Maiduguri to personally coordinate the security situation there.

Reports said that sounds of gunfire were heard through Tuesday night in Maiduguri, hours after President Umaru Yar'Adua ordered the armed forces to crush the movement "once and for all."

According to the reports, Yusuf's whereabouts has remained unknown after his home and a mosque came under heavy shelling.

Residents said the soldiers had closed in on the last of the militants, amid allegations of summary executions by the security agents.

One witness, Abdul-Mumini Hassan, told the AFP that gunbattles continued throughout the night and were concentrated in the Bayan Quarters where Yusuf's home is located.

"We kept hearing sounds of gunshots throughout the (Tuesday) night. I believe the

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moonlight enabled them to fight," he said.

Another resident, who refused to give his name, said that the fighting in Bayan subsided shortly before dawn but that gunfire was heard in the adjacent neighbourhood of Ungwar Shanu.

He added that soldiers and police were combing the entire city of Maiduguri, searching house-to-house for Boko Haram followers.

A police source also told the AFP that "fighting is still going on in five flashpoints in the city but it is more intense in Bayan Quarters where the leader of this group has taken position.

"The house and the mosque have been pulverised and reduced to rubble," the officer said.

He said the offensive to rout the militants was likely to take longer than previously thought because the neighbourhoods also had a large concentration of non-Islamic militants.

"To be honest with you I don't think the campaign will be finished within the next day or two. Part of the obstacle the troops are facing is that there are still civilians in some of these neighbourhoods. Therefore troops need to be cautious," the officer added.

Another police source said at least 3,000 residents had been displaced in the state, with many seeking refuge at military barracks. Scores of others were at the state police headquarters where they huddled among the corpses of slain militants.

"At the moment, there are over 3,000 people who have fled their homes in Bayan Quarters, taking refuge in Maimalari army barracks. They are largely Christians and non-indigenes like the Igbo," the source said.

The security operatives had earlier freed about 100 women and children held by the sect in a building in Maiduguri.

Among them were mothers with small children, some of them nursing newborn babies.

An earlier report suggested the number of those freed was about 180 but the figure was later revised downward.

Some of the women told the BBC that their husbands were followers of the sect, and that they had been forced to travel to Maiduguri from Bauchi State.

The Borno State Police Command PRO, Azare, said the Bauchi State Government had "agreed to provide necessary logistics to transport and re-unite the affected women and children with their relations back home."

In Bauchi, the police said on Wednesday that they had begun a mop-up operation to flush remnants of the Boko Haram.

One of our correspondents gathered that about 100 members of the sect had been arraigned in courts between Tuesday and Wednesday while the remaining would be charged on Thursday (today).

According to the charge sheet, the militants were arraigned for unlawful procession, gathering and possession of dangerous weapons.

In Wudil, Kano State, police and physical planning authorities pulled down a house and mosque belonging to the leader of an extremist sect, Salisu Al Jaswy. The demolition was carried out around 4pm on Wednesday.

Police spokesman in the state, Baba Muhammed, a Superintendent of Police, disclosed that five persons had so far died while 53 were arrested.

Meanwhile, Onovo has said that the group would be uprooted soon as the Police were capable of providing security for all Nigerians.

He added more security measures were being taken to make sure that the crisis.

It was also learnt on Wednesday that 1,000 more soldiers had been deployed in the troubled states.

A military source said the additional troops were imperative so as quell the crisis on time.

It was gathered that the soldiers were sent from Calabar, the Cross River State capital.

"We really want to get this job done in the shortest possible time, therefore, we have received reinforcements of 1,000 troops," the source who asked not to be named because of military protocol said.

"They arrived this afternoon to complement troops on the ground," he told the AFP in Maiduguri.







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