

‘JTF killed 15 innocent boys playing football’ • It is not true, he should just confess –

Army

October 23, 2012 by Oluwole Josiah and Fidelis Soriwei [127](#)
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JTF spokesperson for the Northeast, Lt. Col Musa Sagir and Senator Ahmad Zannah (Borno Central) accused of sheltering a Boko Haram commander
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The war of words between the Joint Task Force in Maiduguri, Borno State and a senator accused of sheltering a Boko Haram commander took a dramatic turn on Monday. The embattled Senator accused the JTF of killing 15 boys playing football on a field in the city, an allegation which this newspaper was unable to confirm yesterday because of the tense security situation in the Maiduguri.

Senator Ahmad Zannah (Borno Central) made the grave allegation while denying a report credited to the JTF that Shuaibu Bama was arrested in his house. Zannah, who had said that the suspect was arrested in the house of a former governor of the state, also blamed the JTF for the escalation of violence in the city.

Our correspondents report that though the JTF has been

accused of extra-judicial killings in recent times, it wasn't clear if the Senator's allegation was an attempt to shift attention from himself or get back at the task force.

Two weeks ago, there were reports that soldiers had gone on the rampage after a bomb believed to have been detonated by Boko Haram killed an army officer in the city.

Eyewitnesses had told journalists that soldiers opened fire on residents indiscriminately and burnt houses and shops. An *Associated Press* reporter, who went round the city after the alleged killing, said he counted 30 bodies. Nurses at a hospital in the city later told a *Reuters* reporter that they saw 30 bodies in civilian clothing after the shooting.

However, the army had debunked the report, saying that its men did not harass or kill civilians on the day of the incident.

Lieutenant Colonel Sagir Musa, spokesman for the JTF, had told AFP that, "there was no incident involving the killing of 30 civilians. Also, there was no arson and harassment by the JTF troops in Borno State."

On Friday, the JTF had said that Bama, who was high on its list of wanted terrorists, was arrested by task force troops in a serving politician's house in the Damboa Area of Maiduguri.

But Zannah, who admitted that Bama is his nephew, said that the JTF wanted to frame him up because of his stand against the task force's excesses. He then cited the killing of the young football players as one of such excesses.

He said, "They are not operating in the way they are supposed to operate in that state. I'm sure you must have read a little of what has been happening: the burning of some houses and shopping plazas. This is just a small portion of what is happening, because all these things are not exposed.

“Let me tell you something, just the day before yesterday (Saturday), without any provocation, they went and killed innocent boys playing football at a field – about 15 of them. They just shot them all, everybody ran away and they took their bodies to the hospital.

“The constitution does not allow them to kill people at will. I have started exposing them. We have been quiet for some time and when we saw that nothing was happening, nobody is restraining them, so we had to speak out because people are just being killed unnecessarily.

“They don’t consult the leaders in Borno State at any given time. They went there and just started harassing people from the outset. They have never contacted or tried to sit down to discuss with the leaders of Borno. I am ready to stick out my neck to do anything that will bring security to this country.”

The lawmaker accused the JTF of teaming up with his political opponent in the last election to smear him. He vowed to seek redress.

“I will seek redress in court. The allegation is grievous and I will go to court to clear my name. My historic defeat of the former Governor of Borno State, in the person of Ali Modu Sheriff, at the poll has not and will not go down well with many forces and individuals in this country.

“Therefore, this latest campaign by the Military Joint Task Force in Borno State to disseminate falsehood against me is a campaign to rope me into the JTF dragnet, declare me a Boko Haram member, financier, sympathiser, or even activist and declare my seat vacant.”

The senator insisted that though his house was searched on the day Bama was arrested, his nephew wasn’t found there.

He said, "They searched my house, they brought out all the men inside my house, asked them to sit down outside the scorching sun of Maiduguri and then asked them whether they knew Shuaibu Bama. So, one of the boys volunteered to take them to the place...eventually, they went and arrested the man in that (another politician's) house.

"That was exactly what happened. But I was really surprised to see that these people have started saying that they arrested Shuaibu in my house, which is not true, and I will not take it lightly."

Zannah said he did not know Bama as a member of Boko Haram, even though he knew him to be of a "bad character".

When contacted, the Director Army Public Relations, Brig-General Bola Koleosho, insisted that the JTF arrested the terror suspect in Zannah's residence.

Koleosho said that the senator's claim that the JTF wanted to set him up because of his criticism of the military was flawed. He urged the Senator to own up.

Koleosho said, "Sincerely speaking, you don't call a dog a bad name to hang it. Please does it add up? We are all stakeholders in this Nigerian project. There is nobody in JTF that can do that. Of course except if he is saying that everybody in JTF is mad.

"When does it become an offence or an illegality to play football? While we don't want to join issues with the senator, this doesn't simply add up.

"Look, the JTF has been in Maiduguri for quite some time and we have been facing the problem. What the senator is saying that the JTF wants to set him up because of his criticisms is not true. He has admitted that the boy is his nephew. He should own up that the boy was found in his house.

“The JTF still stands by its word that the boy was arrested in the senator’s residence; the JTF insists that the wanted terrorist leader was arrested in his house. You see, we are all Nigerians. What are we setting him up for? There is no need for that. Seriously speaking, the JTF cannot come down to such a level.”

But Senator Ali Modu Sherrif, who is also the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the All Nigeria Peoples Party, described Zanna as a “drowning man”.

A statement issued on Monday by his Special Assistant, Mallam Umar Duhu, accused Zanna of desperately “looking for somebody to hang for his sins” on.

The statement says “It is also on record that the State Security Service has invited Senator Zanna to clarify his involvement with the suspect and his links with Boko Haram.

“Given his recent political encounter with the immediate past governor, now the BOT chairman of ANPP, Senator Ali Modu sheriff, he appears desperate to settle scores by dragging Ali Sheriff into the controversy.”

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