

We're dying

SATURDAY*life*

...Soldiers fighting Boko Haram recount guardroom horrors of over-two-year detention without trial

• 3 dead, 1 sentenced, many gone blind

Molly Kilete, Abuja

Unknown to the public, a number of Nigerian Army soldiers are being held indefinitely in detention under a deplorable condition that is slowly causing loss of sanity and death. This is the findings of a Saturday Sun investigation into the plight of military personnel deployed to the northeast part of the country that is the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency since 2011.

The soldiers, detained since 2016 at the military police guardroom at Maimalari Cantonment, Maiduguri, Borno State, are accused of a range of unintentional offences, such as loss of weapons, negligent discharge of firearm and dislodgment among others.

According to a reliable source, out of the over 70 detainees, three have died, several others have gone blind while one, tried before a General Court Martial (GCM) and sentenced to life imprisonment, awaits confirmation of his sentence by the Army authorities in Abuja. The military source, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told Saturday Sun majority of the soldiers, incarcerated without trial since 2016, were tried only at battalion level before they were transferred to the military police facility.



"The facility is overstretched because of the large number of detainees kept there. Some of the soldiers recommended for court-martial two months ago have been in detention since 2013," he said.

After several attempts, Saturday Sun successfully interacted directly with the detainees and obtained from them interviews that concisely catalogued their horrors inside their guardrooms. Presented below is an excerpt from the transcript of the conversation with the spokesperson for the group.

Hell of a cell

"The guardroom is not anyone's idea of a cell. The space is very tiny, a small cubicle occupied by ten persons. Stuffy, congested and filthy like a toilet. One cannot even lie down. We are not allowed to go outside, for fresh air or to get a glimpse of sunlight. We cannot differentiate day from night. There is no light here--each cell has only one small window--hence, it is perpetually dark in here and many of us, as a result, have gone blind. Some of us suffer from swollen feet. Others have developed one form of life-threatening diseases or the other. A few have died, killed by insufferable heat. Amongst us are old colleagues who are also going through the hardship.

"There was a time we were taken into an underground cell, a dungeon that had no air. As soon as the door was shut, one of our colleagues, a sergeant, fell down gasping for breath. We removed our clothes and began to fan him, but it was too late. We hit the door ceaselessly until it was opened and the sergeant was taken to the hospital. He was certified DOA--Dead On Arrival.

After his death, the remaining soldiers refused to go back into the dungeon located in Giwa Barrack. The underground cell is where Boko Haram terrorists are usually detained. Because of the protest, we were relocated back to the guardrooms. That day, we wept like children--after all the sacrifices we made for the country, we didn't deserve such a shabby treatment.

Starvation and unpaid allowances

"They feed us only once a day, usually around 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Breakfast, lunch and dinner served at once. The meals usually, Eba, rice and porridge beans--including bread for the next breakfast.

Feeding, however, is a privilege for a few, not for everyone. The food arrives with a list of those entitled. The rest of us--especially, those no longer being paid salaries and allowances--are expected to cater for our feeding. Therefore, we depend on the goodwill of our privileged colleagues.

We buy everything we need--food, water and medicine. This has taken away all our savings, everything that we have.

If we are to depend on the food we are given here, we will all die sooner than later. For instance, the rice is oily and coloured; eating it--or too much of it--is like eating poison. That we are alive is by the grace of God.

The supply from the army water tankers is not regular. Hence, we buy water from vendors at N50 per jerry can.

There is no provision for an emergency. Not even a vehicle to convey us to the hospital if anyone is sick in the night or during the day. Those who are ill are forced to pay for their transportation to the hospital—not just our transport fare, which is N100, but also the cost of transporting two escorts to the MRS (Hospital). We spend as much as N500, to and fro the hospital. One bike carries the detained soldier handcuffed by Military Police (MP) personnel, the other carries the second personnel.

Reasons for incarceration

“One of the soldiers here was charged for manslaughter and has been subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment. The soldier did not commit the offence intentionally.

He had been in operation for some years and was obviously suffering from Combat Stress Fatigue (CSR). He woke suddenly from a bad dream—in which he saw himself attacked by Boko Haram insurgents—and began to shoot killing one of his colleagues in the process.

His story is representative of a lot of soldiers who are fatigued and traumatized and in need of proper therapy because it is not easy to be in a war zone and still remain the same.

Some of us are charged for loss of weapons, a frequent occurrence whenever Boko Haram terrorists invade army positions. Contrary to popular opinion, it wasn't that soldiers did not want to fight or fight back; the insurgents usually attack in hundreds and we did our best to fight them.

A large number of the soldiers in detention ended here after sketchy investigations at our battalions. The army hierarchy did not bother with further investigation to ascertain if we are truly guilty or not.

They have also refrained from court-martialing us.

Worse still, we don't have access to lawyers. The ones assigned to us by the army do little or nothing to help us. We do not blame them—they take their orders from the higher command.

We don't have money to hire lawyers; like I said, they have stopped paying our salaries. That is the greatest encumbrance we have, this non-access to a lawyer, that is what is delaying our case, that is why we are still in detention.

A cry for help

“We want Nigerians to know that our ordeal has become unbearable. We are appealing to the Chief Of Army Staff, Gen. Tukur Buratai, to have mercy on us and help expedite our trial so that we would know our fate.

We are also appealing to President Muhammadu Buhari, to grant us amnesty like he did for repentant Boko Haram insurgents.

The Boko Haram fight is a very dangerous war. Most of us have gunshot injuries from our encounters with the insurgents on a number of occasions. We have seen some of our colleagues die in an ambush. We have seen horrible things at the frontline. We are traumatised. It is too much for us to be kept under subhuman condition.

We have families and would love to be reunited with them. Since they stopped our salaries, we had no other means of livelihood. That put our family at risk. Our wives are overburdened and are suffering, as they become the family's sole breadwinners. Some of them have turned into farmers in order to keep body and soul together. Some of us have lost our wives to other men because we can no longer feed them. We appeal to President Buhari to use his good office to look into our case. There is no question about our loyalty. We are still ready to fight and defend our country.”