

Monday 17 March, 2014 Updated 7:50

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Military Repels Boko Haram's Pre-dawn Attack in Maiduguri

15 Mar 2014

Views: 35,894

Font Size: [a](#) / [A](#)



Armed soldiers on the streets of Maiduguri

- ***Over 350 terrorists killed***
- ***24-hour curfew imposed***
- ***UN worries about human rights abuses in affected communities***

By Michael Olugbode, Senator Iroegbu and Chineme Okafor

The notorious Boko Haram terrorists Friday staged a daring pre-dawn attack on Maiduguri, Borno State in what the military said was an attempt to free their detained colleagues at the Giwa-Amu Military Barracks in the town. But the attack was repelled by the military, leaving about 350 terrorists dead.

The Director, Defence Information (DDI), Maj-Gen. Chris Olukolade confirmed the attack and said in a statement that "pockets of terrorists apparently in a move to boost their depleted stock of fighters this morning attacked a military location in Maiduguri with a view to freeing their colleagues in detention."

The military authorities have also imposed a 24- hour curfew in Maiduguri. "The curfew starts from 2pm and will be on, until the security situation improves.

Residents are instructed to keep indoors," Olukolade said.

An eye witness said residents of the town scampered for their lives when the terrorists arrived early yesterday morning, following massive shootout between soldiers and the terrorists.

Another eye witness said: "Some residents of the town fled from the places under attack to safer places. Some others fled to the government house for safety. Some have moved from the periphery of the town that is easily susceptible to attack to the centre of the town. Soldiers have barricaded everywhere to make it impossible for the insurgents to move easily."

According to sources who spoke to THISDAY yesterday, the terrorists' well-calculated attack to free their detained members backfired when some of them were killed in the process of bulldozing the detention walls, while more were killed by the Military in an attempt to escape.

In the same vein, the sources said that other members of the group also ran out of luck when enraged members of the public lynched them, in addition to the spirited efforts of the civilian JTF.

According to an eyewitness account, the combined efforts of the ground troops and air force bombardment overwhelmed the insurgents, while more were also killed in their attempt to escape to the forests.

"So many of them were killed; it was a total confusion and those killed could be over 350 and maybe more," the eyewitness said.

After shootings stopped, soldiers and youth vigilante group were seen combing Maiduguri for escaping terrorists. Corpses were also seen littering parts of the town. Many of them are believed to be those of the sect members.

According to Olukolade, the attack has been successfully repelled with heavy human casualty on the side of the terrorists.

He noted that the terrorists killed included those they came to rescue and that many of the terrorists and their weapons had been captured, while only four soldiers were wounded and are being treated.

He also rebuffed the report that the University of Maiduguri was under siege by the terrorists, saying that it was only shrapnel from the exchange of gun-fire that strayed into the university, killing one and injuring another.

He said: "Hot pursuits by land and air operations are ongoing along with cordon and search of surrounding localities. No institution has been reported attacked, although the effect of firing from the encounter could be noticed in surrounding facilities in Maiduguri. Details will be given later."

Olukolade said yesterday's attack in Maiduguri was likely in response to the intensity of military attacks on Boko Haram strongholds in camps at Talala, Monguzum, Sambisa forests, Gwoza, Mandara mountains as well as the general area of Lake Chad. "The camps have been destroyed and many insurgents killed," he said.

Olukolade also confirmed that large cache of ammunition, medicinal and food supply were captured along Lake Chad basin when the enemies tried to smuggle them into the country.

He said that in the ensuing shoot out, several Boko Haram members, mostly foreign elements were killed, and seven captured with few soldiers sustaining injuries.

Meanwhile, suspected members of the Boko Haram terrorists have attacked Pulka in Gwoza Local Government Area of Borno State, killing 11 persons and injuring three others.

The insurgents who attacked the town on Wednesday night were also alleged to have torched a Catholic Church (St. Peter's Catholic Church, Pulka) where they vandalized the priest's house and office.

Pulka is a border town with Cameroon and 119 kilometres southeast of Maiduguri, the state capital.

An eyewitness told journalists that the terrorists came in Toyota Hilux vehicles, with one of their leaders ordering that the parish's Reverend Father be brought out to be dealt with but said that none of the houses should be set ablaze.

The eyewitness said the parish priest was however not in town. "God never wanted him to die so soon. On his return this afternoon to Pulka, he was greeted with the corpses of 11 members of his church who had been slaughtered in cold blood," added the eyewitness.

The eyewitness, who spoke to journalists yesterday on phone, revealed that many people have fled the town to the hill tops for safety.

He said that the border community had been severally attacked by the terrorists, noting that the district head of the area was slain early last year, while 29 other residents were killed in 2012 and 2013.

"The military should step up their operations here. Pulka has become one of the escape routes of the terrorists fleeing to Sambisa Forest," the eyewitness said.

In a related development, the United Nations (UN) has said that instances of human rights violation by Nigerian forces deployed to fight off terrorist in the North-east may be contributing to delays in winning the war against the group.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay yesterday stated that while the actions of Boko Haram have increasingly grown with targets on vulnerable groups, the federal government's deployment of security troops to the affected region has equally come with various reported forms of human rights abuses which may be fostering Boko Haram's activities.

Pillay noted in a press conference in Abuja that although, the UN condemns in totality the activities of Boko Haram, it is however wary of such reported human rights abuses which it said could have served in creating a fertile ground for Boko Haram to recruit more people into its fold.

She explained that the federal government had accepted to facilitate access to the affected areas both for humanitarian agencies and human rights monitors, including those deployed by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), to as a matter of fact deter further excessive acts, combat impunity and help dispel any unfounded rumours tarnishing the reputation of the forces engaged in the extremely challenging task of combating Boko Haram.

"The actions of Boko Haram have grown increasingly monstrous. The group has targeted some people simply because of their religion or professional occupation and indiscriminately killed and maimed many others. They have burned down houses, churches, clinics and schools.

They have murdered children in their beds. Some of its members are reported to have abducted and raped women and girls. Close to half a million people have been displaced inside Nigeria and some 57,000 are now reported to have spilled across borders into neighbouring countries. Farmland has been abandoned, and the food security in many areas has most likely been compromised as a result of the terror that Boko Haram has sown," Pillay said.

She further explained: "In such circumstances, the government has of course had no option but to deploy the army and other security services. However, it is vital that government forces do not exacerbate the problem by taking actions that displace, endanger or kill civilians.

"Many people I have met with during this visit openly acknowledge human rights violations have been committed by the security forces and these have served to alienate local communities and created fertile ground for Boko Haram to cultivate new recruits."

The High Commissioner stated that while the scales of such abuses are not clear, the government is evidently aware that they are counter-productive.

"I was assured by the National Security Adviser (NSA) that steps are being taken to rectify excesses. A good first step came in the form of the establishment of a joint investigation team by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to review cases of those detained during counter-terrorism operations against Boko Haram."

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