

Death Toll Rises as Bodies of 17 Soldiers Recovered in Daring Boko Haram Attack

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Seventeen additional bodies of soldiers who lost their lives while preventing Boko Haram terrorists from overrunning their base last Thursday evening have been recovered by a search and rescue team overseeing the aftermath of the attack, Premium Times has learnt.

The remains of one officer and 16 soldiers were recovered this weekend in the general area of Mobbar Local Government Area, Borno State, multiple military sources told the online news medium.

The soldiers were attacked at their base in Zari Village, north of Maiduguri and near the border with the Republic of Niger.

Troops from 145 Battalion who are leading the search and rescue efforts have transferred the bodies to Maiduguri, Borno State capital, and heart of the Boko Haram's campaign of terror, sources said.

Search and rescue operations have intensified for the remaining soldiers who are still missing in action as of Saturday night.

At least two officers and 55 soldiers have now been confirmed killed in the attack with the latest recoveries, which came a day after it was reported that 40 soldiers had been confirmed killed and 19 wounded in the attack.

The attack is the deadliest against a unit since Boko Haram resumed its attacks against military formations in July.

Scores of Nigerian troops were killed in successive attacks between mid and late July, raising fresh concerns about a resurgent sect amongst top military chiefs. At least 90 soldiers have now been confirmed killed within the past six weeks.

The Army confirmed that Zari attack occurred in a statement late Friday, but Onyema Nwachukwu, a spokesperson for the theatre command in Maiduguri, initially said soldiers killed many Boko Haram insurgents when they repelled the attack.

But when told that there are confirmations that dozens of troops were killed, Nwachukwu, a colonel, said he did not immediately have details of military casualties.

"I am only aware of aerial bombardment and the response of the ground troops that left many Boko Haram fighters killed," Nwachukwu said by telephone last Saturday

afternoon. "But I am not aware of soldiers' casualties and I would not have such information until it gets to my desk."

Nwachukwu could not be reached for comments about the additional recoveries made on Sunday afternoon, as his telephone line indicated it was switched off.

Texas Chukwu, chief spokesperson for the Nigerian Army, who had largely refrained from commenting to the media on the attack, insisted that no soldiers were killed in Zari last Thursday.

"No soldier was killed and nothing was recovered," Chukwu, a brigadier-general, said yesterday afternoon when told that military responders had recovered fresh bodies and evacuated them to Maiduguri, "we do not know where you are getting this information from."

Chukwu also said Boko Haram casualties could not be confirmed because the insurgents usually carry bodies of their colleagues when fleeing from a firefight.

The Nigerian Air Force said it launched aerial bombardment of Boko Haram positions during its response to the attack, and uploaded a short video clip of fleeing terrorists who it said were neutralised.

The latest recoveries of bodies of slain soldiers also come at a period President Muhammadu Buhari was highlighting the success of his administration in decimating the terror group.

Speaking at an interactive session at the weekend with members of the Nigerian community in China during his trip to the country, the president reaffirmed that his government has succeeded in curtailing Boko Haram insurgents in the country, adding that the terror group no longer controls any part of the country.

He attributed the success to operations of security agencies deployed to counter insurgency in the North-eastern part of the country.

"You will all recall that we contested the last election basically on three issues, which includes security, especially in the North-east," Buhari was quoted as saying in a statement by the presidency.