

12 Soldiers Killed, Dozens Missing in Battle with Insurgents

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- ***Concerns mount over fate of \$1bn arms purchase fund***

By Kingsley Nwezeh with agency reports

At least 12 Nigerian soldiers were killed and dozens of others are missing after fighting with Islamists in Borno State, three military sources said yesterday.

This is coming as the \$1billion earmarked for the purchase of arms and ammunition to aid the military in the fight against terrorism in the North-east region is now mired in confusion.

But the army said it repelled the attack in which it said one soldier was killed and another injured. The fighting followed an attack on Friday by insurgents in Gudumbali Local Government Area – a part of Borno where Boko Haram breakaway group Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) is influential.

Reuters quoted sources as saying the poor communication network in the remote area delayed details of the attack being relayed.

The attack, the sources said, was carried out on a military base and a nearby community in the Gudumbali Local Government Area of the state.

The three military sources, all of whom are soldiers who did not want to be named, said at least 12 soldiers were killed and dozens missing after the fighting.

But the army, in an emailed statement, said the insurgents opened fire on troops while aid materials were being distributed in Gudumbali.

“The troops, however, fought gallantly and outmanoeuvred the attackers inflicting heavy casualties on them. Unfortunately, a soldier paid the supreme price during the encounter, while another was wounded in action,” said the army in the statement.

The biggest loss of military life in the last few months occurred in late November when around 100 soldiers were killed by ISWA militants who attacked an army base in Metele, Borno State.

However, sources said 28 militants were killed, while the army reported that it lost less than 40 soldiers.

The North-east is home to two Islamist insurgencies: Boko Haram and ISWA which broke away in 2016 and is now considered by security experts to be the stronger of the two.

The federal government in June ordered thousands of people who fled the conflict with Boko Haram to return to Gudumbali, one of the most dangerous areas of northeast Nigeria. Officials cut off food and other aid to those who refused.

Meanwhile, the \$1billion earmarked for the purchase of arms and ammunition to aid the military in the fight against terrorism in the North-east region is now mired in confusion.

This is coming as a group, Society for Good Governance (SGG), accused the federal government and state governors of playing politics with such an important national intervention, the absence of which has led to death of many soldiers in the North-east region.

It said if government could not account for the \$1 billion security fund for Boko Haram, "then our position is that it has been diverted for the purposes of 2019 elections, and we will be left with no other option than to seek legal redress."

The mystery is located in the fact that several government agencies and institutions have all denied accessing the fund.

The denial is coming as hundreds of soldiers have died owing to lack of equipment and inadequate salaries and allowances for those fighting in the war front as claimed by some soldiers who survived the Metele attack.

In the heat of the Metele attack by insurgents in Borno State, the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General Yusuf Buratai, informed a bewildered country that the Nigerian Army was yet to receive any fund or equipment purchased from the fund.

He took the position when he spoke to journalists in Maiduguri recently saying: "You know the process of funding is another major issue. The bureaucracy and so on is another issue. Approvals are given but before you really get the money out is another challenge. "So, the people are talking or the media has been talking of \$1 billion that has been approved but I tell you up till today, the fund that is supposed to come from that amount to the army in particular, is still in the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN).

"The Ministry of Defence is yet to access the fund. When the ministry gets the fund, they will get the right equipment for us as proposed," he said.

THISDAY checks at the Ministry of Defence revealed that the money was domiciled with the Nigerian Governors' Forum (NGF). A competent source at the ministry said the governors had made a pledge to make a contribution to the security fund through the Paris Club refund. "The ministry is yet to access any such fund. The money is with the governors. They pledged to help raise it in support of the war against insurgency. But at a point they wanted their state houses of assembly to legislate on it," he said.

But at the NGF, a reliable source who spoke anonymously to THISDAY noted that the claim by the Ministry of Defence "made no sense."

According to him, "This claim is a mere conjecture. It does not make sense at all. Let's look at it. The Paris Club refund is about N522billion. The \$1 billion they are talking

about is N350 billion.

“Does it really make sense that the governors would pledge such amount and be left with N277billion? Would that be enough to pay workers’ salaries and solve other pressing needs of states?

“I am not aware that the Governors’ Forum made such a pledge. But I know that they have made significant contributions in terms of equipping security agencies.”

However, further checks showed that security fund came from the excess crude account which was actually approved by the NGF.

The approval was given after a meeting of the National Economic Council meeting in April 2018.

“We are pleased with the federal government’s achievements in the insurgency war and in that vein, state governors have approved that the sum of \$1 billion be taken from the excess crude account by the federal government to fight insurgency to its conclusion.

“The money will cover the whole array of needs which include purchase of equipment, training for military personnel and logistics,” Governor of Edo State, Godwin Obaseki, told reporters after a meeting of national economic council.

Meanwhile, a group, Society for Good Governance (SGG), at the weekend accused the federal and state governments of playing politics with such important matter which has led to the death of soldiers and innocent civilians.

A statement issued in Abuja and signed by the National Coordinator and Secretary of the group, Mohammed Bunu and Chuks Ebube respectively, said the mystery surrounding the \$1billion fund for the military had become an embarrassment to the country.

“The non-release of the \$1billion approved by the NGF through the Excess Crude Account (ECA) and approved by the Federal Executive Council (FEC) is a serious national embarrassment.

“Have we lost all conscience in this country? Those keeping this money, can’t they see the carnage in the Northeast, the killing of our soldiers and innocent civilians?

"We are asking the federal government or any tier of government still holding onto the fund to as a matter of urgent national importance release this fund and stop this deception and disdain for human lives.

"Our position is that if this fund is not released immediately to our military to tackle this this insurgency challenge, we will assume that the money has been diverted for the purposes of prosecuting the 2019 elections.

"We will, therefore, be left with no other option than to seek legal redress to compel government to release it," the group said.

Earlier findings by THISDAY at the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Ministry of Finance on the location of the fund did not elicit any positive response.