By Jeff Moore
Journal Article | Jan 23 2015 - 4:11am

Boko Haram’s Resiliency Spells Trouble for West Africa

Jeff Moore

As the world mourned for the victims of an Islamist jihadist terror attack in France, a mass casualty attack in Baga, Nigeria by Boko Haram killed scores of men, women and children – low estimates say possibly 500 were killed; high estimates say 2,000. Regardless of the exact casualty count, the attack triggered no mass marches, no speeches by international heads of state, and no outward signs of solidarity from the White House or Congress. Why? Nigeria’s attack was done by Islamist jihadists, just like France. And if the high the body count is true, it’s about 1,000 less than the September 11th attacks, which is astounding. Regardless of the lack of international condemnation, the Baga attack signifies the genocidal nature of Boko Haram’s violence, and the group will undermine West Africa’s security unless Nigeria can quickly improve its counterinsurgency (COIN) operations.

So what happened in Baga? On 3 January, a large Boko Haram light infantry force attacked Baga town and 16 other villages in Borno State. As previously reported by Small Wars Journal,[i] one of Boko’s targets was the base of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in nearby Doro Gowon town. The MNJTF, made of soldiers from Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin, and Chad, has a both border security and counterterror missions.[ii] This was a military target. The rest of Boko’s objectives were apparently civilian.

Multiple accounts of the attack suggest Boko Haram fighters waded into the Baga area from multiple avenues of approach and applied grazing fire to fleeing civilians and peoples’ homes. They also reportedly rounded up scores of people and raked them with assault rifle and machine gun fire. Some of the dead were found tied up. Thousands of homes were set alight during the carnage.[iii] Tactically, it was calculated and methodical mass murder. Strategically, it facilitated Boko Haram’s control of vast tracts of Borno state.[iv]

While the scale of destruction in Baga was new, the target set and tactics used weren’t. Boko Haram has been carrying out attacks on civilians for more than a year now. On 10 November 2014, for example, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed 50 students and teachers at the Government Senior Science Secondary School in Potiskum.[v] It barely made international headlines, but a December 2013 Taliban killing of 132 schoolchildren in Pakistan caused a global outcry and garnered plenty of press.

Other dramatic moves by Boko Haram have rarely made major news outside West Africa despite it being one of the biggest insurgent wars in the world. The group established a caliphate in August 2014, claiming all of northern Nigeria as its own.[vi] Since April, Boko Haram has seized and occupied more than 24
towns through a series of light infantry offensives. Along the way, it has kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from Chibok – a rare episode that did make headlines – and murdered people house-to-house in Gwoza. On 21 November, Boko Haram assaulted Azaya Kura village, killing 45 people. Villagers report that the militants tied their captives’ hands behind their backs and slit their throats. On 20 December, Boko Haram released a video of its fighters massacring droves of what it called “infidels” – reportedly just elderly people – in a bloody frenzy at a school dormitory. Attacks like this have killed 13,000 people since 2009. 2014 was the bloodiest year of Boko’s war with approximately 9,000 killed and some 1.5 million displaced.

**Nigeria is in Bad Shape, to Say the Least**

What’s Boko Haram’s up to with all this? One of Nigeria’s popular retired military officers, Colonel Abubakar Umar, asserts that Boko Haram isn’t just aiming to take over parts of Nigeria. It’s setting its sights on Nigeria’s neighbors, too. “The insurgents intend to use a conquered Northeast as a launch pad on which to invade and conquer the rest of the country and possibly the whole of the West African sub-region,” he says.

Alarmed at Boko Haram’s progress, the government recently launched a new COIN campaign, “Operation No Mercy Against Terrorists,” which has experienced some success. The military retook four towns in Adamawa State and it claims to have retaken Chibok in Borno State – where the sensational kidnapping of 276 girls happened in April. Most of the girls remain captive, and some appear to have been married off to various jihadist fighters. So much for the flaccid, “Bring back our girls” twitter campaign meant to shame Boko into releasing them.

A side note to the American president – Islamist jihadist terrorists that kidnap and murder schoolchildren without hesitation won’t be intimidated by a shame campaign on twitter and Facebook.

At any rate, where the Nigerians have had real success comes from a combined military and civilian approach where the former works in close junction with the latter to apply continual pressure to the insurgents. The latter consists of two parts: the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), and local hunters.

The CJTF, or “Yan Gora,” is a government-supervised local youth force that provides intelligence to the military on Boko Haram’s field activities and its agents inside villages and towns. These youth have intimate knowledge of the goings on in their own areas, so they know who the outsiders are – specifically, the Boko Haram infiltration agent provocateurs. Aside from reporting, the CJTF sometimes eliminates the insurgents they find, so they are what’s politely referred to as an “intelligence-force application unit.” U.S. Special Operations Forces call it “targeting,” and it has been used to great effect against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and other areas. While Nigeria’s local force targeting appears to be cruder than that of U.S. Special Forces, it is, nevertheless, making progress.

Local hunters play a similar role. They have intimate knowledge of the countryside surrounding the villages, so their guide services are immeasurably helpful to the military for reconnaissance and sweep operations. Hunters also know how to move seamlessly through the woods, so they add an element of stealth to these operations.

The big picture here is that Nigeria is beginning to make more use of local forces, which are vital to success in COIN.

It’s not enough, however. Nigeria doesn’t seem to have a counter political warfare program to refute Boko Haram’s propaganda. Some soldiers are poorly trained and equipped, and others have fled while engaging Boko Haram in battle. Accusations of rampant government corruption don’t inspire the population’s
support, yet another vital ingredient for successful COIN.

Feeling the pressure, Nigeria is just now apparently trying to fix some of these issues, but are the remedies appropriate? Only time will tell. The military recently indicted a brigadier general and 14 other officers, apparently for negligence, and it sentenced 54 soldiers to death for refusing to fight Boko Haram. The accused, however, say the army hasn’t provided them with the right weapons and equipment to engage in combat and assertions of incompetence in the officer corps are not uncommon.

Another glaring problem is a failure to protect the population from Boko Haram, which seems to strike whatever civilian target it wants, whenever it wants. This would include open-air markets, cell phone vendors, buses, busy streets, and entire villages such as Baga. Additionally, some villagers that have reported on Boko Haram have been left unprotected, a death knell for informants. COIN won’t work unless the government has plenty of informants, and when they get murdered, it dissuades others from joining COIN efforts.

As an aside, the government’s local force program is likely one reason Boko Haram attacked Baga. An intimidated and bludgeoned population is less likely to provide its government with help. So Baga was not only force application on a soft target, it was a message to the people of Nigeria not to align with the government.

Aside from all this, the political impact of the insurgency is taking its toll. The ruling People’s Democratic Party and the challenging All Progressives Congress have turned the war into a political blame game ahead of the February 2015 general elections. More than 650,000 people have been driven from their homes and Boko Haram is threatening to attack the elections.

Nigeria Bar Association’s president, Mr. Austine Alegeh, accuses the government of abandoning its constitutional responsibilities of providing for the welfare and security of the population. “The question agitating our minds now is whether the government charged to protect lives and property of Nigerians no longer has the capacity to do so.”

The war is spilling over onto Nigeria’s neighbors, too. Over 100,000 Nigerians have fled to Niger, 44,000 have crossed into Cameroon, and 2,700 have escaped to Chad.

Boko Haram has been using Cameroon as a sanctuary where it secures weapons and food, and it has also staged attacks there. It kidnapped the wife of the deputy prime minister in July. It carried out raids against the Cameroon military in October and it slaughtered villagers in Mokolo in November. On 22 December, Cameroon announced it had discovered and dismantled a Boko Haram training camp on its territory. Then on 28 December, Boko Haram attacked and overran a Cameroon military base at Assighasia. Cameroon responded with ground forces backed by close air support, which drove out the attackers. For Cameroon, this raid represents the writing on the wall: Cameroon has become a definite Boko Haram target, and it has moreover become a combatant nation in Boko Haram’s war. To punctuate the point, Boko Haram fighters raided Maki and Mada villages (near Mokolo city) in Cameroon on 18 January 2015, taking 80 some hostages, many of them women and children. The Boko raiding parties set the Cameroon homes alight as they left. Cameroon troops pursued via a series of running battles, and about 24 hostages were released or escaped along the way. The situation there remains fluid.

Alarmed at the growing pandemonium, Chad is getting into the fight. It moved infantry forces, including 400 some odd vehicles backed by attack helicopters, into Cameroon just after the mass kidnapping. Colonel Djoum Ibrahim of the Chadian army made his aim clear, “Our mission is to hunt down Boko Haram, and we have all the means to do that.”
Niger is also troubled at Boko Haram’s progress and is no stranger to its advances. Niger security forces arrested 24 Boko Haram operatives in December 2013 bent on carrying out bombings and kidnappings there,[xxxv] and they have reached out to Niger’s criminal gangs. One gangster said, “If [Boko Haram] tell you to set off a bomb and it succeeds, if it kills a lot of people, they will pay you a lot of money.”[xxxvi] Niger has joined Cameroon and Chad in coalition military planning to deal with the threat.[xxxvii]

What’s it All Mean?

Virginia Comolli, a Research Fellow for Security and Development at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), weighs in. She is a renowned Boko Haram expert, and her book on the subject, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*, is due out in April.[xxxviii]

Regarding territory, Comolli says that it doesn’t appear that Boko Haram recently seized territory with a governing and services plan, “So it is not yet clear whether the group has the ability or desire to administer these territories.”

Additionally, Comolli says that Nigeria’s military improvements might keep Boko Haram geographically in check. “For all its shortcomings, the military is indeed capable of regaining territorial control, indicating that maintaining an Islamist state in north-eastern Nigeria is not sustainable in the long term.”

This doesn’t mean that things are looking up, however. Says Comolli, “Boko Haram does not need to control territory to pose a national security challenge.” It has proven that it can adapt and apply violence where needed, she says. “They can move their fight from rural to urban environments and vice versa, deploy female or disabled suicide bombers, and they have disguised fighters in female clothes.” Comolli says these type tactics are imaginative and indicate resilience.

Regarding the election, President Goodluck’s victory is not assured. True, his forces have recently pushed Boko Haram back, but the population needs to see more legitimacy from its government, and it needs some inspiring national security news, a big win against the insurgents, for example. At present, the people have none of this.

And Boko Haram will get to vote, too – with violence. Says Comolli, “Boko Haram rejects the concept of democracy. It’s a Western imposition and incompatible with Islamist law. Boko Haram carried out violence around the 2011 elections, and for 2015, attacks are likely to escalate. Targeting will likely include polling stations and political candidates in northern and central Nigeria in addition to the usual targets such as markets, schools, places of worship, and the military.”

Nigeria’s neighbors aren’t optimistic. Niger is watching for pending attacks, and Cameroon border patrol commander Leopold Nlate Ebale asserts, “We’re convinced that the establishment of a ‘caliphate’ [by Boko Haram] is aimed not only at Nigeria but also at Cameroon.”[xxxix]

Comolli sums it up by saying that Boko Haram’s “Adaptive traits, ideological drive, and the sub-optimal conditions in which military forces are often deployed suggests that violence is unlikely to abate regardless of a caliphate being in place or not.”

So Boko Haram can just keep killing and fighting, because that’s what it’s good at. Saying it has a caliphate and actually setting one up and managing it as ISIS is doing in Syria and Iraq is another proposition altogether. But this fighting and killing could turn Nigeria into a failed state. The only way forward is for Nigeria to improve its COIN abilities, not only for the sake of its own stability, but for West Africa’s as well.

End Notes


About the Author

Jeff Moore

Jeff Moore, Ph.D., is the chief executive officer of Muir Analytics, which assesses threats from insurgent and terror groups against corporations. He is the author of the recently published book, *The Thai Way of Counterinsurgency.*


Links: