**Boko Haram: The Brutal Insurgency**

Corruption and political tension delay responses as Nigeria heads for elections

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As Secretary of State John Kerry met with Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan on January 25th concerning the fight against Boko Haram, the Islamist insurgent group launched one of its boldest attacks to date against the capital of Borno State, Maiduguri. Maiduguri, an administrative hub for North-eastern Nigeria and home to nearly two million people, has been subject to a creeping assault by Boko Haram throughout its six year insurgency. The group has some semblance of control of hundreds of miles surrounding the city, yet this attack represents a marked increase in Boko Haram’s willingness to engage substantial military and civilian targets. Kashim Shettima, the governor of Borno State, said that the attack was “[T]he most serious yet. We faced a really existential threat.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although the Nigerian military did manage to drive off the militants after some hours of fighting, the siege of Maiduguri was yet another example of the tactical adeptness of Boko Haram. According to a New York Times report, militants overthrew one of the chief military checkpoints outside the city by posing as travellers on buses. Caught off guard, estimates suggest that hundreds of Nigerian soldiers may have been killed. Only when warplanes were called in to launch strikes against the insurgents was the attack finally broken.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Simultaneous attacks are believed to have been launched in surrounding towns akin to the attacks on the Baga, thought to be the deadliest in the history of Boko Haram, earlier this month. According to an Amnesty International report, up to 2,000 civilians were killed as insurgents rampaged through the town that was previously home to a multinational military base that existed to stop these very incursions. Having allegedly destroyed the base, Boko Haram then turned its eye towards the civilian population. While information has been slow to disseminate concerning these attacks, as Baga is located far within the rural bush, the majority of the casualties are thought to be women, children, and the elderly who were too slow to flee the onslaught.

However, even in the face of such horror and devastation, the political process in Nigeria must be tended to. The elections, scheduled for February 14th, are the largest that will take place on the continent. The international community’s eyes are upon Nigeria, and pressure has begun to mount urging President Goodluck Johnathan to allow voting to occur as scheduled. Systematic corruption within political institutions and the military have not only hamstrung any attempts to combat Boko Haram but also left the country ill prepared to be host to an inclusive voting process. Nevertheless, the most populous nation and largest economy in Africa has readily identifiable options to work towards.

1. **Political Failings**

The recent attacks emphasise the deficiencies of the Nigerian government and military in the face of Boko Haram. President Jonathan has faced mounting international criticism due to his administration’s failure to contain the insurgency. His recent claims that only 150 people were killed in the attacks upon Baga have further angered international groups, and the use of satellites to identify human rights violations was quickly used to disregard these claims. Photos taken by American satellite company DigitalGlobe, procured by Amnesty International, quickly and vividly identified up to 3,700 structures in and around Baga that have been destroyed.[[3]](#footnote-3) The destruction of civilian structures on a large scale stands in direct opposition to the claims of President Jonathan's administration.

In the wake of the upcoming elections, Jonathan has sought to downplay the atrocities being committed by Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, in recent weeks the administration has attempted to shift blame to the soldiers of the Nigerian military, deeming them cowardly and joining the military only for pay. Sambo Dasuki, Nigeria's National Security Advisor, spoke recently at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London, stating that "We had a lot of cowards, and it turned out there was a problem in the recruitment process."[[4]](#footnote-4) Soldiers who have fled in the wake of assaults by Boko Haram have repeatedly accused the government of failing to reinforce military positions after large-scale attacks by Boko Haram.

Pre-elections political tension in Nigeria has provided an opportune time for the Islamist insurgency to cause havoc throughout the poorly defended north east regions. Offers of assistance from regional neighbours have been met with hesitation, as the current administration fears looking weak as elections come closer. President Jonathan's security policy has continuously been criticized as weak, and his opponent and former military dictator Muhammadu Buhari has made security one of the main platforms of his campaign. Furthermore, the remoteness and disconnect between northern Nigeria and the rest of the country has provided Goodluck Johnathan with some relief from pressure within his own nation. In an interview with Foreign Policy, former US Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell said that Boko Haram "hardly dominates Nigerian national life." In the face of plummeting oil prices and a devalued currency, the majority of Nigerian's simply have other issues to worry about.[[5]](#footnote-5) It appears as though the current administration may very well be able to escape the upcoming election cycle without seriously addressing the Boko Haram insurgency.

1. **International Pressure**

As a chief political and economic partner in the region, the United States has stated its commitment to peaceful and successful democratic elections in Nigeria. While the attacks at Maiduguri were occurring, John Kerry met with both President Johnathan and his opponent Muhammadu Buhari, urging them to carry out a fair and timely election. Following reports claiming that the election may be delayed as a result of the Boko Haram offensive, Secretary of State Kerry insisted that the elections be carried out as planned. The democratic process was an integral part of defeating the insurgency, he said.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Furthermore, Kerry was in Lagos to dispel claims that relations between the two states have deteriorated. The Nigerian government has wavered between denying the existence of Boko Haram, and placing the blame for the insurgency's growth upon the United States and its refusal to provide direct military aid. Additionally, an American-administered training program for counterinsurgency was cancelled by Nigeria only a few weeks after the country criticized Washington’s reluctance to provide aid. While Washington as offered training programs and intelligence assistance in the fight against Boko Haram, it has hesitated to provide any advanced weaponry to the Nigerian military. Accusations of human rights violations have been brushed aside as hearsay by Johnathan's administration, but the Obama administration has feared equipping a military with a suspicious human rights record.

The United States has begun to use its offers of assistance as leverage in overseeing successful democratic elections in Nigeria. John Kerry said that the US "want[s] to do more, but our ability to do more will depend to some degree on the full measure of credibility, accountability, transparency, and peacefulness of this election."[[7]](#footnote-7) While a commendable approach to democracy in Nigeria, delay of the elections must be looked at as a legitimate prospect. The threat of the government delaying elections and corrupting the democratic process looms large, but in Nigeria’s current state any voting that takes place will be tainted. Voting lines serve as an obvious reflection of the current political situation in Nigeria with the Muslim North disconnected from the Christian South. Boko Haram’s recent activities take place predominantly in the North; accordingly, Buhari’s opposition party will largely be unable to garner votes due to the violent insurgency that mostly affects his Muslim base. Millions of voters have yet to be officially registered, and Boko Haram has promised to disrupt the elections. This is the perfect storm to further marginalize the North, and Nigeria needs more time to prepare itself for truly fair and free elections.

1. **Defeating Boko Haram**

The rise of Boko Haram has in party been predicated on the deficiencies of the Nigerian government and military. In many instances soldiers go unpaid, troops requesting reinforcements are ignored and later flee in the face of Boko Haram, and the Nigerian military is oftentimes outmanoeuvred in fights against the insurgents. To fix the military, however, the government must begin to function in a more efficient manner. The institutional weaknesses that plague Nigeria must be solved to create a force adequate for dealing with this insurgency, but the international community has been hamstrung in its attempts to provide assistance. As long as the Nigerian military commits human rights violations that have led them to be as vilified as Boko Haram in certain instances, direct military assistance is unlikely to be given.

Regardless of the outcome of elections, the victor must assure that political tensions within Nigeria reach a calmer state, more conducive to the defeat of Boko Haram. Whoever the victor may be, Nigeria must begin to accept the assistance of both its regional neighbours and international allies. Nations such as Chad, Cameroon, and Niger have all stated their willingness to assist in the fight, but have been rebuffed or ignored as President Johnathan has been unwilling to accept aid from neighbouring but weaker states. While the country is the dominant economy of the region, national pride must be put aside in the face of a grave threat.

Ultimately, however, large-scale changes within the Nigerian government are needed to defeat Boko Haram. As long as corruption is rampant and the government refuses to accept blame for the flourishing insurgency, problems will continue to arise. Weapons and equipment can assist the Nigerian military in its fight, but change must occur within the institutions of Nigeria to facilitate a situation that will both end the insurgency, and prevent the conditions that created it.

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2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Foreign Policy, Jan. 15, 2015 [[Link](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/15/counting-nigerias-dead-from-480-miles-up-boko-haram/?wp_login_redirect=0)] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chatham House, Jan. 22, 2015 [[Link](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/22/nigeria-boko-haram-blame-game/)] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Foreign Policy, Jan. 22, 2015 [[Link](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/22/nigeria-boko-haram-blame-game/)] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Foreign Policy, Jan. 25, 2015 [[Link](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/25/kerrys-visit-to-nigeria-coincides-with-major-boko-haram-offensive/?utm_content=buffer84c74&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Foreign Policy, Jan. 25, 2015 [[Link](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/25/kerrys-visit-to-nigeria-coincides-with-major-boko-haram-offensive/?utm_content=buffer84c74&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)