

As Nigerian election nears, Boko Haram looms large

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[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) The purported leader of Boko Haram claimed responsibility in a video Wednesday (January 21) for a massacre in the Nigerian town of Baga, the deadliest attack by the Islamist group since they started terrorizing northern Nigeria six years ago.

Abubakar Shekau threatened more violence in the unverified YouTube video.

"This is just the beginning of the killings," Shekau said in the local Hausa language. "What you've just witnessed is a tip of the iceberg. More deaths are coming."

The massacre in Baga, in northern Borno state, was reported to have a death toll as high as 2,000. The Nigerian government disputes the report, arguing the true number is 150, but few trust the government tally.

The video arrived two days after the United Nations Security Council released its first overall statement condemning the group and demanding that Boko Haram "immediately and unequivocally cease all hostilities and all abuses of human rights and violations." The statement, the first that went beyond condemning a specific attack, appeared to be in response to criticism in Nigeria that the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France, which killed 17, got far more attention from the international community than have ongoing Boko Haram attacks.

The UN also called for plans to step up a multinational force to fight the Nigerian jihadists.

Both the release of the video and the statement come less than a month before elections in February. President Goodluck Jonathan, who has been accused of neglecting Nigeria's northern region and criticized for his inability to control the spread of the Islamist group, faces a strong challenge by Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north and a former military leader.

What is Boko Haram?

Meaning "western education is forbidden" in the region's Hausa language, Boko Haram has caused havoc with bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings in the predominately muslim region of northeastern Nigeria since 2009.

Rep. Chris Smith (R., N.J.), chairman of the Africa subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has said the group is "as close to a carbon copy [of the Islamic State] as can be."

The Nigerian government has struggled to contain the group, which has become the bane of Jonathan's administration.

The UN added Boko Haram to its sanctions list last year, making the group subject to financial sanctions and an arms embargo due to their affiliation with al-Qaeda.

The group has escalated violence in recent years, bleeding into border francophone countries and using children as suicide bombers. A 10-year-old girl blew herself up at a market earlier this month.

Boko Haram first gained broad international attention after the kidnapping of about 300 girls from a boarding school in the northeastern town of Chibok. That event prompted the international "bring back our girls" campaign. A majority of the girls remain missing.

What happened in Baga?

The attack in Baga, in which an estimated 2,000 people were massacred on January 3 in a campaign in the northern fishing town, was the deadliest by the Nigerian jihadists to date.

Survivors described the violence as relentless and with one witness saying that people were slaughtered "like insects".

Human Rights Watch countered the Nigerian government's claims of a much lower death toll with satellite images confirming the attack, and said it "is consistent with a systematic campaign of arson directed against the civilian population in the area."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed his outrage soon after the massacre in Baga, calling it a "depraved act at the hands of Boko Haram terrorists."

What does the Baga massacre mean for the Nigerian election?

The UN's statement, aside from being an embarrassment for President Jonathan, puts pressure on the leader, whose ineffectiveness against Boko Haram has angered many. Boko Haram's growing clout has provided fodder for opposition candidates like Buhari.

"A campaign theme for the opposition has been that [President Jonathan] has been unable to provide security from Boko Haram for the country," said John Campbell of the Council of Foreign Relations.

In the video, Shekau threatened to cause havoc during the election. Already vast areas of Borno state will not hold elections, all strongholds for opposition candidate Buhari, raising questions of a fair election.

Why did the Security Council condemn Boko Haram now?

The scale of the attack likely forced the council to adopt its first statement on the threat of Boko Haram, and was aimed directly at the Nigerian government's sensitivity to foreign criticism, said Darren Kew, a Nigeria scholar at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

"The government is very sensitive to international embarrassment and this announcement will get its attention. With an upcoming election, it will push President Goodluck Jonathan to take more comprehensive action in Boko Haram," Kew said.

The attacks have also involved troops of neighboring countries and bled over the Nigerian border, making the problem a regional one. Most recent was the seizure of hostages in Cameroon on Sunday, with about 24 later released.

In the Wednesday video, the Boko Haram leader threatened to expand attacks into the region.

“You will see what we will do to you,” Shekau said. “African leaders you are too late if you start attacking me now.”

A meeting of regional leaders on Wednesday discussed the deployment of troops from Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria. The difficulty is logistical with little close cooperation between Nigerian and its surrounding francophone neighbors, Campbell of the Council of Foreign Relations said.

“The question is, how do you move beyond aspiration towards something concrete,” he said. As for Boko Haram, “the impact will be nothing.”