

Boko Haram emerges as brutal Islamic State of Africa

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January 26, 2015

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(RNS) Boko Haram, with its chilling brutality, radical ideology and unstoppable seizure of Nigerian territory is quickly emerging as the Islamic State of Africa.

While much of the world has focused on the terror attacks in Paris and the Islamic militants' capture of swaths of Syria and Iraq, Boko Haram has gone on a bloody rampage through northeastern Nigeria.

Human rights groups have sounded alarms about the al-Qaeda-linked organization's recent brutality: the slaughter of up to 2,000 people in the Nigerian towns of Baga and Doron Baga on January 3 and the subsequent strapping of explosives on girls as young as 10 to detonate in public places. The unchecked rampage is affecting the looming presidential elections now weeks away and propelling a 72-year-old iron-fisted general, Muhammadu Buhari, back into the race.

Boko Haram first gained international notoriety for its savagery in April 2014, when it abducted 276 girls from a boarding school in Chibok and threatened to sell them as wives and sex slaves. The "bring back our girls" movement began with Nigerian village women demanding government action and grew into a worldwide rallying cry, with participants that included first lady Michelle Obama. Some of the girls later escaped but the fate of remaining captives is unknown.

In addition to its ruthless tactics, Boko Haram, echoes the Islamic State in its aspiration to create a "caliphate" across national borders by crossing into neighboring Chad, Niger and Cameroon. On January 12, its fighters seized the Cameroonian border town of Kolofata. Cameroon's government said its forces killed 143 militants.

And like Iraq's military setbacks against the self-described Islamic State, Nigerian government troops seem weak and incapable of stopping Boko Haram from

becoming a growing danger to Africa's most populous country and the world's 10th largest oil exporter.

"The United States needs to recognize we have a problem that's second only to the problem we have with ISIS (Islamic State)," said J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa program at the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank. "We have a group holding territory and shooting down jet fighters. . . . If Nigeria collapses—it is the strong state in the region—there are no strong states to contain what would happen if Boko Haram succeeds in carving out an Islamic state in that area."

Rep. Chris Smith (R., N.J.), chairman of the Africa subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, says Boko Haram is "as close to a carbon copy (of the Islamic State) as can be," and the U.S. response to combat the two groups has also been similarly slow.

What's needed, now, Smith said, is for President Obama to call Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan and insist on the need for the U.S. military to train Nigerian troops to stop the movement.

State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf told CNN that the U.S. is "actively working with the Nigerians," but added that "they need to step up," move forward with elections slated for February 14, and not let terrorists "use elections as a wedge between the government and its people."

A week after the massacre occurred in Baga, groups that included Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported it. On January 3, the town was razed and its inhabitants killed as they hid in the surrounding scrubland. More than 3,700 structures were damaged or destroyed, according to satellite imagery before and after the attack, according to Amnesty International.

A week later, Boko Haram strapped explosives to three girls about 10 years old and detonated them in a market in Maiduguri and in a mobile phone store in Potiskum, killing about 22 people in total, the groups reported.

President Jonathan, who previously sent 20,000 troops armed with tanks and aircraft to the country's northeast, has said little about the Baga attack. One of his aides, Doyin Okupe, questioned the reported death toll.

Gbara Awanen, the head political minister at the Nigerian Embassy in Washington, told *USA Today* only the ambassador is authorized to speak to the media. And Ambassador Adebawale Ibidapo Adefuye was traveling and unavailable, Awanen said.

Boko Haram, whose name means “Western education is forbidden,” seeks to replace the Nigerian state with its own radical interpretation of Islam and now controls up to 20 percent of Nigerian territory.

Nigeria’s government has yet to accept large-scale international assistance to deal with the problem, said John Campbell, a former U.S. ambassador to the country.

The parallel to the Islamic State is limited by the fact that Boko Haram has not expressed a desire to become a global caliphate, Campbell noted.

Adotei Akwei, managing director of government relations at the rights group Amnesty International USA, said Boko Haram also lacks the governing skills demonstrated by the Islamic State in some of the territory it holds, although residents under its domination in parts of Iraq and Syria have complained about poor services and disorganized government.

Despite the international clamor over the kidnapped girls, the Nigerian government has had no success rescuing the 219 still missing, and local media have exposed weaknesses in the nation’s military that include soldiers refusing to fight and mutinies.

On January 3, Nigeria canceled a U.S. counterinsurgency training mission, according to a statement by the U.S. Embassy in Abuja.

Nigeria has generally rejected offers of assistance from Britain and the United States “because of the conditions that come with such assistance,” said Akwei.

U.S. law prohibits U.S. military assistance to countries that commit human rights abuses. The Nigerian military’s operations against Boko Haram have resulted in multiple allegations of illegal killings and detentions of suspected Boko Haram members reported by rights groups such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, according to the State Department. Nigerian officials have rejected those claims as “fabrications,” Akwei said.

National pride also seems to be a factor, he said.

“The Nigerians have always felt themselves more capable and big enough and strong enough to take care of their own crises,” Akwei said.

Yet the country still has no cohesive military strategy to turn the tide and protect the population, he said. “It’s not the way a state functions if it hopes to survive, unless it’s unaware of the gravity of the threat.”