

Nigeria's president revamps military forces fighting Boko Haram

by [Paula Rogo](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) In his inauguration speech, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari said that Boko Haram is the country's most immediate threat and pledged to Nigeria and its neighbors that he would prioritize the fight against the Islamist militants.

“Our neighbors in the sub-region and our African brethren should rest assured that Nigeria under our administration will be ready to play any leadership role that Africa expects of it,” he told a crowd at Abuja’s Eagle Square last Friday.

During his first week in office, Buhari has pursued that goal. He announced that the command base of a counterinsurgency force would move from the capital to Maiduguri, a northern city known as the birthplace of Boko Haram. Nigeria is talking to U.S. diplomats and military chiefs about rebuilding a relationship after butting heads with the previous administration. And Buhari has made his first state visits to Niger and Chad, which are part of a regional joint military force fighting Boko Haram.

For Nigeria and its allies, Buhari is key to Nigeria's ability to turn the corner on a range of issues, especially its oft-criticized efforts against Boko Haram.

But despite the goodwill, Buhari has quickly run into a challenge over human rights and the conduct of the Nigerian forces tasked with combatting the insurgency. On Wednesday, Amnesty International released a detailed report that accused the Nigerian army of killing about 8,000 civilians during its campaign against Boko Haram, and named several senior officers it accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Amnesty said the new administration should urgently investigate the abuses.

And with a suicide bomb killing 20 people on Wednesday in Maiduguri—the northern city where more Nigerian forces will be based—Buhari’s first week in office has been a stern reminder of how many fires he has to put out as president of Africa’s most

populous country and largest economy.

Mass torture of detainees alleged

The Amnesty report accused the military of detaining more than 20,000 people in brutal conditions that led to numerous deaths. "Former detainees and senior military sources described how detainees were regularly tortured to death—hung on poles over fires, tossed into deep pits or interrogated using electric batons," it said.

The Ministry of Defense denounced the Amnesty report and claimed the organization was trying to "blackmail" the military elite.

Buhari's spokesman Garbu Shehu said the president had received the report and would review Amnesty's allegations, according to Nigerian media.

"Respect for human rights and adherence to the rule of law are the life and soul of the democratic system," Buhari said, according to Shehu. "We will not tolerate or condone impunity and reckless disregard for human rights."

The U.S. has yet to respond to the report. A point of contention between the two countries in the past was America's refusal to supply weapons to Nigeria's Army due to its poor human rights record. The *New York Times* [reported in December](#):

United States security assistance to Nigeria has been sharply limited by American legal prohibitions against close dealings with foreign militaries that have engaged in human rights abuses.

Last summer, the United States blocked the sale of American-made Cobra attack helicopters to Nigeria from Israel, amid concerns in Washington about Nigeria's ability to use and maintain that type of helicopter in its effort against Boko Haram, and continuing worries about Nigeria's protection of civilians when conducting military operations.

Buhari announced on Wednesday that Nigeria's military would be tasked with securing towns liberated from Boko Haram by troops from Chad and Niger. The Nigerian military has been criticized for its weakness and inability to take control of territory captured from militants.

The Defense Ministry said Thursday that Major General Tukur Yusuf Buratai, a senior military officer, has been appointed to lead a regional joint force of troops from Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The command had previously been held by Chad.

Earlier this year, Chad's president complained of Nigeria's absence of leadership in the Boko Haram fight. Buhari is meeting with him on Thursday.