

Boko Haram Cross-Border Insurgency and Humanitarian Situation in South-eastern Niger Republic

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Abstract: - *Boko Haram* started as a local group operating within the boundaries of Borno State in Nigeria. Not quite long, the group transformed into a regional insurgent organisation with global linkages and funding. The phenomenon became a trans-national disaster within the region of the Lake Chad Basin, especially across Nigeria-Niger border. The north-eastern Nigerians (Borno and Yobe States) and south-eastern Nigeriens (Diffa and Zinder Regions) were seriously affected by the activities of the group across borderlines. Hundred thousands of people were displaced; and consequently, the problems of refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees in Diffa and Zinder became humongous. Through content analysis of the existing literature and oral data, this paper examined humanitarian crisis in Diffa and Zinder consequent on cross-border insurgency. It is observed that, there are linkages between *Boko Haram* insurgency and humanitarian crisis in Diffa on one hand, and humanitarian problems in Zinder, on the other. The paper discovered that between 2015 and 2017, more than 252,305 Nigerians and Nigeriens have been in Diffa and Zinder suffering from the stigmatization of refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees. It is equally observed that, little of the needed humanitarian interventions have been achieved; because, the interventions by the Governments of Nigeria and Niger are not commensurate with the sufferings of the *Boko Haram* victims in Diffa and Zinder. Therefore, the paper calls for a Nigeria-Niger Inter-governmental Humanitarian Agency to cater for the needs of the victims.

Keywords: Cross-border Insurgency, Humanitarian Crisis, Diffa and Zinder Regions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing *Boko Haram* (BH) insurgent activities across the border of Nigeria and Niger began in Nigeria before it became a regional phenomenon affecting the countries of the Lake Chad Basin. The region witnessed increasing waves of violent activities by the group resulting into massive displacement of people. BH expanded its insurgency from north-eastern Nigeria with recorded massive humanitarian crisis to the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger Republic. Thus, the region of the Lake Chad Basin became a military no-go zone, especially when the affected countries reacted militarily (NRRRP, 2016: ii). The

indiscriminate attacks on civilians continue to affect humanity; and the affected people fled to the neighbouring countries for safe haven. The spill-over of the situation compounded humanitarian situations in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. For instance, the indiscriminate attacks on civilians across the region including looting, extractions and abductions fuelled the fear, mistrust and suspicion among the affected populations and forced quite a number of them to suffer the stigmatization of refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees. The attacks led to the tightening of security measures and the humanitarian evacuations in the Lake Chad Region. In turn, the measures resulted in further forced displacement and the emergence of returnees in individual countries like Niger Republic (NRRRP, 2016: 6). Niger was seriously affected by the attacks and their attendant humanitarian disasters in the administrative regions of Diffa and Zinder; where the country borders with the BH stricken-states of Borno and Yobe in Nigeria.

II. OBJECTIVE

The objective of the paper is to present the humanitarian situations of refugees (Nigerians); IDPs, and returnees (Nigeriens) and the host people arising from the cross-border insurgency in Diffa and Zinder; as well as the humanitarian assistance by donor agencies and African institutions.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, qualitative content analysis was utilized to analyse both primary and secondary sources on humanitarian crisis consequent on the cross-border insurgency in south-eastern Niger. The sources include a number of documents and publications by non-governmental agencies like UNOCHA; UNICEF; IOM; WFP as well as textbooks, journal articles, seminar and conference papers, and dissertations that raise some issues on the subject matter. The data contained in the materials was read and analysed. In addition, specific oral data was collected through interviews with relevant people. The data was scrutinized, corroborated,

evaluated and carefully interpreted in order to arrive at an informed and balanced judgement.

IV. BOKO HARAM IN NORTH-EASTERN NIGERIA AND SOUTH-EASTERN NIGER

The BH insurgency has increased rapidly from a protest movement anchored on local grievances in north-eastern Nigeria to a highly sophisticated terrorist group inflicting destruction and displacement of people across Nigeria-Niger border and beyond. For instance, by 2017, estimation showed that, there were about 2.2 million internally displaced persons and a looming humanitarian emergency arising from BH insurgency (Kyari, 2017: 271). As a local group, BH began when Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of the group started preaching in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in Nigeria without any hindrance. His messages of anti-corruption crusade got resonance among the youths, especially taxi drivers who often played tape cassettes of his preaching while carrying passengers. However, his real ideology did not become clear until 2007 when his group broke ties with his former group (*Izala*) and some of his followers dropped out of school and graduates among them tore their certificates (Kyari, 2017: 273-4).

As a cross-border group, Diffa Region is perhaps, the first centre of the BH outsider Nigerian borders. This was probably so, because, apart from sharing border; the region has ethno-cultural ties with Borno State, the cradle of the group (Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 8). The influence of the BH in Diffa began to be noticed in 2000 when the teachings of Mohammed Yusuf appeared to have audience in the region. Thousands of Nigeriens, who went to study or work in Maiduguri, heard Yusuf's message and some even attended his Islamiyya School, called *Markazus Salafiyya*. Returning to Niger, they disseminated Yusuf's thoughts in electronic format on tape cassettes, CDs and DVDs (Aliyu, *Interview* and Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 11-12). In addition, in 2003, some of Yusuf's Nigerian supporters formed an isolated sectarian community in Kanamma village on the Nigeria-Niger border. In October of the same year, they were dispersed by Nigerian forces; and some of them found refuge either in Diffa or Zinder (Kyari, 2017: 271).

Two years after the dispersion of Yusuf supporters from Kanamma village, a number of mosques began to propagate Yusufiyya ideology in the Diffa Region. Following the tightening of security measures against propagating the ideology in mosques and public places, the group's ideology was still spreading via the use of modern technologies. The teachings of the group continued to be digitized and made accessible in the form of DVDs and CDs. Youths used to download them from YouTube and share the teachings with one another via cell-phone (Ibrahim, 2014: 24-25). Moreover, between 2007 and 2008, a movement of young people was formed around Diffa's Central Mosque with a view to sharing

Yusufiyya ideology. The movers opened their own place of worship in November 2008, in the district of Diffa Koura, Diffa Region (Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 11-12).

With regard to the Zinder Region, Yusufiyya messages from Nigeria passed across the Region in the 2000s but later than Diffa. Similar to the case of Diffa Region, also, ethno-cultural and social links with Kanuri people of Maiduguri and the prevailing socio-economic situation in Zinder, made the youths of the region vulnerable to the ideology. A number of Nigeriens from Zinder used to travel to Borno State for livelihoods and or scholarship; some of whom attended Yusuf's Islamiyya School (Aliyu, *Interview*). Internally, a favourable ground for the acceptance of Yusufiyya was made by the prevailing socio-cultural and economic situations of the youths in Zinder. Violent groups to fight the state in Zinder were created among the youth; and the groups are identified as the main actors responsible for urban violence. Their violent demonstrations in the city of Zinder led to the destruction of buildings, places of worship and there were some attacks on Christians. BH members have utilized the violent situation and recruited some members from Zinder (DICKO *et al*, 2016: VII).

After the BH became a cross-border group with Nigerian and Nigerien memberships, its violent activities began in Maiduguri in 2009 when the group clashed with the Nigerian security forces and the confrontation led to the murder of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Consequently, some of Yusuf's Nigerian and Nigerien supporters found refuge in Diffa, either to distance themselves from BH or, to sustain the violent strategy of its new leader, Abubakar Shekau. For example, about twenty of them returned to Mainé Soroa and formed the basis of a cell that has counted up to a hundred members. Diffa Region became a place for them to sell their looted goods, raise funds and stock up on petrol, weapons and food supplies. These activities created a network of people to interact with BH members as suppliers, dealers and transporters. In the course of their interactions, BH employed strategies including threats and funds to recruit more members, combining its call to jihad with practical material benefits: credits to open businesses or buy vehicles, money when combatants enlist, promises of wages and motorcycles (Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 812-13).

Advancing from 2009, and increasingly in mid 2013, BH insurgents have carried out several hundreds of attacks against civilian and structures in schools, market places and places of worship across north-eastern Nigeria and south-eastern Niger (Nuhu, 2017: 485). The destructive attacks by the group had generated an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in which an estimated 3,750 civilians were killed in 2014 alone. In the same year the group abducted hundreds of women and girls and hid them across Nigeria-Niger border (Nuhu, 2017: 485). Likewise, the group intensified its territorial expansion towards

the Niger border and recruitment of Nigeriens. Diffa continued to be their safe haven to build up the group by seeking funds, supplies and recruits. Nigeriens were persuaded and escorted to the BH controlled areas on the other side of the border in Nigeria. On their return, the ostentatious prosperity of combatants gathered from looting attracted new recruits. Thus, it is reported that a few thousand of Nigeriens have joined the group, some out of conviction but a growing number of them was out of greed (Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 12-13).

BH cross-border attacks continued unabated and the first set of attacks on the Niger territories were made in February, 2015. Summarily, between 2015 and March 2018, according to United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs UNOCHA (2017) and UNOCHA (2018), there were about 243 BH attacks in Diffa (82 in 2015, 76 in 2016, 37 in 2017 and 48 between January and March, 2018) (UNOCHA, 2017). The displacements of persons and causing unquantifiable psychological trauma kept on humongously (Nuhu, 2017: 485). Niger continued to face humanitarian crisis deriving from the insurgency since before the February attacks as the influx of refugees (Nigerians) and returnees (Nigeriens) into Diffa and Zinder had already began especially in 2013. Thus, the attacks reveal a web of an originally Nigeria-based insurgency that became a vector of insecurity in south-eastern Niger; creating dire humanitarian situation (Taiwo, 2016: 64-65).

V. THE SITUATIONS OF IDPS, REFUGEES AND RETURNNEES IN DIFFA AND ZINDER (SOUTH-EASTERN NIGER)

Generally, the Lake Chad Region to which the Diffa and Zinder belong is characterized by extreme poverty, weak and inadequate public services and food insecurity, due to among other factors: limited crop production and water shortage. Intensified BH insurgency and insecurity, military operations and displacements across the region have disrupted trade, fishing, farming and other income generating activities, laying the ground for humanitarian crisis in the Diffa and Zinder Regions. Furthermore, the high density of refugees in camps and poverty-stricken IDPs and returnees as well as poor sanitation resulting from make-shift settlements made the two regions susceptible to epidemic outbreaks (NRRRP, 2016: 6).

As the BH insurgency escalated in 2015, the humanitarian challenges in the south-eastern Niger spiralled into an unprecedented level. People were forced to live in crowded Internally Displaced Persons' Camps and amongst host families in the cities of Diffa and Zinder under a precarious condition devoid of privacy, basic hygiene and convenience. Diffa Region has suffered from both BH attacks and counter-insurgency measures taken by the Nigerien authorities. Recourse to local vigilante committees and reprisals by BH

against anyone who collaborated with the army had created a difficult atmosphere in which collective fear and informants became ingredients of a threatening situation (Crisis Group Africa Report No 245, 2017: 3).

With regard to IDPs and refugees, Diffa Region had experienced the biggest influx of IDPs and refugees before the shift in the displacement patterns to affect the neighbouring Zinder Region (IOM-Nigeria (b), 2015: 4). The region has been hosting populations displaced by BH related violence in the north-eastern Nigeria since 2013. It has been reported that by May, 2013, there were about 40,000 Nigerian refugees in Diffa and Zinder, majority of whom came from bordering communities (Taiwo, 2016: 65). The situation deteriorated dramatically in February 2015, with the first attacks on the territory of Diffa Region itself. Displacements became a mixed situation, including not only Nigerian refugees and Nigerien returnees but also IDPs (Nigeriens), who surpassed the numbers of those arriving from Nigeria (IOM-Niger, 2017: 4). The most affected areas by the insurgency and displacements in Diffa are Bosso Yebi and Toumour, (OCHA, 2016); where according to UNOCHA (2016) 1 out of 2 inhabitants is displaced. Consequently, two refugee camps (Kablewa and Sayam Forage) were erected (Taiwo, 2016: 76); and IDPs sites emerged in Toumour, Yebi, Bosso, Diffa, Dewa, El-Mainari, Garin Wanzam, Kidjendi and N'guigmi (UNOCHA, 2017).

Responding to the attacks of February 2015, Nigerien Government declared a state of emergency in which Nigeria-Niger border access points were closed, people were relocated from areas along the border, and people's movements were restricted. Thus, the measures have denied people access to markets and key agricultural lands (USAID, 2017: 3). Consequently, pepper growing and fishing activities which are central to Diffa local economy were seriously affected. The situation made the livelihoods of IDPs, refugees and returnees as well as the host population of 233,000 people in Diffa all the more unbearable (USAID, 2017: 3).

Constant and persistent attacks by the BH on both sides of Nigeria-Niger border continued to cause a displacement crisis that forced several thousand persons, from Niger and Nigeria, to flee the affected areas and settle in safer areas of Diffa and Zinder (IOM-Niger, 2017: 4). Regarding the displaced persons and returnees in Zinder, accurate figures could not be obtained. This is perhaps, because of the fact that, unlike in Diffa where the displaced people are fixed to the established camps; in Zinder, they are attached to households of the host community. Likewise, the returnees are attached to their respective families making life all the more difficult for the entire population. However, the following table shows statistical data of displaced people in Diffa Region from 2015 and 2017:

Table 1.1: Figures of Displaced People in Diffa between 2015 and 2018

S/No	Year	IDPs	Refugees	Returnees	Total
1	2015	70,000*	30,000	70,000	170,000
2	2016	121,320	105,386	14,359	241,065
3	2017	129,015	108,470	14,820	252,305

Sources: Compiled by the author from IOM-Nigeria (b), 2015: 1; IOM, 2017: 2-5; USAID, 2017: 1 and IOM-Niger, 2017: 4

*This figure of displaced persons was recorded following the attack on the town of Bosso in February, 2015. This was the first attack by Boko Haram insurgents on the territory of Niger Republic.

From the above table, it is clear that the numbers of the displaced people are enormous and likewise, the humanitarian disasters consequent on the cross-border insurgency should be humongous. Many of the displaced persons were in the first instance traumatized, worrying about their safety. They used to sleep in the open and they were urgently in need of shelter and other humanitarian assistance. The refugees from Nigeria fled without any food or water, beddings and any means of livelihoods. According to Niger Government authorities, the number of displaced population in Diffa Region as at 2016 was nearly 20 per cent of the total population of the region (NRRRP, 2016: 73).

The burden of IDPs and refugees was initially borne nearly exclusively by host communities before official interventions. The already scarce resources of the region were further stretched by this influx of migrants from Nigeria, exacerbating food insecurity, epidemic diseases and shelter issues. The priority needs in the region include food security, access to basic services and shelter (IOM, 2017: 5). The attitudes of host communities towards IDPs were welcoming, but there are challenges to the communities' supports. As the scarce resources were being exhausted; IDPs began to be harassed, stigmatized and sometimes regarded as infiltrators; and the large number of the returnees compounded the situation (IOM-Nigeria (b), 2015: 4). Diffa Region continued to face a multifaceted humanitarian crisis including conflict and displacement, floods, and disease outbreaks. Both IDPs and vulnerable host communities continue to experience lack of access to basic social services, and are in need of emergency food assistance, safe drinking water, and relief commodities, shelter, and other interventions (USAID, 2017: 4 and Taiwo, 2016: 65-66).

People with specific needs, children at risk and people with disabilities, are particularly affected by the insurgency and became refugees in the established camps in Diffa. The camps used to be over-crowded beyond their capacities; and this situation made the inmates all the more prone to a number of diseases. For example, the Kablewa Camp with capacity of 10,000 people had 16,000 people by July, 2017 (WFP, 2017: 1). Some children in the camps are orphans separated from their families; and the incessant attacks kept the number of refugees in need of emergency shelters increasing by day. Both the children and adults are living in very difficult conditions with poor access to basic services; especially

drinking water. It has been reported that, 60 percent of the refugees in Diffa do not have access to potable water and the worst is that, poor access to clean water among the host communities reached about 76 percent (NRRRP, 2016: 11).

VI. CHILD TRAFFICKING IN ZINDER REGION: A SPILL-OVER OF INSURGENT ACTIVITIES

Zinder is the poorest region with fastest population growth rate in Niger Republic; and this left quite a number of families without arable land for cultivation. Zinder dense population offers little economic prospect and most of the inhabitants of the area relied on agriculture. Consequently, people in Zinder used to migrate to northern Nigeria for livelihoods and scholarship. Apart from the inflow of the refugees and IDPs from Diffa and north-eastern Nigeria, Zinder was indirectly affected by the attacks in Borno, Yobe, Jigawa and Kano States of Nigeria. The attacks made quite a number of people of Diffa origins living in the affected states flee to safer areas in Zinder since Diffa itself was affected by the insurgency (IOM-Nigeria (b), 2015: 4). Not just that, but the insurgency disrupted economic activities in the affected States in Nigeria; and thus, a significant number of Nigeriens of the Zinder Region who migrated to Nigeria for livelihoods and scholarship returned home as returnees. The arrivals of the returnees in Zinder created tensions with the host people over the limited arable land and social services especially, access to water (IOM, 2017: 2-3). This situation compounded humanitarian problems in Zinder and re-directed the flow of people from Zinder to Nigeria to their influx from Zinder to the Maghreb, particularly Algeria (IOM-Nigeria (a), 2015: 21).

The re-direction of human migration and the involvement of mainly children and women is a serious humanitarian problem in Zinder. The most affected area is the poverty-stricken Kantché District, where young boys and girls were taken to the Maghreb to work as guides for old women begging on the streets. Most children involved in the mobility are under 12 years old, and can be as young as 5 years old. Young children are highly sought after for this kind work, as people feel pity for them, seeing them as young and vulnerable and this result in higher gains. Thus, the phenomenon is said to be considered trafficking as children are often recruited after the payment of an agreed sum of money to the family (Carrion *et al*, 2018: 18). The children are taken out of school and

travel a dangerous route to work as guides for beggars. Women begging in the Maghreb were reported to have been sending significant amounts of money home and this convinced many to undertake the journey. However, it is reported that, their living conditions are very poor and many of them end up in prostitution (IOM-Nigeria (a), 2015: 21).

VII. HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND THE RESPONSE OF GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITIES

The Governments of Nigeria and Niger as well as international donor agencies responded to the humanitarian needs consequent on the insurgency across Nigeria-Niger border by rendering valuable supports to the victims. Humanitarian assistance package encompasses among other things: food items, health and nutritional supplements, shelter and protection, education, sanitation and hygienic facilities, water supply, psychological supports and support for livelihoods. Beginning with Nigerian Government, Nigerian victims in Niger were provided with humanitarian supports through National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) to alleviate sufferings of the refugees (Nuhu, 2017: 497). In the case of Niger, the Governor of Diffa Region created a Regional Committee for the Coordination and Management of Refugees and Returnees in July, 2014. In 2015, a Management Unit working with the Governor was established for humanitarian supports to the refugees, IDPs and returnees (NRRRP, 2016: 15). The key achievement in the year was the establishment of Kablewa and Sayam Forage Camps for refugees and IDPs in Diffa Region (NRRRP, 2016: 73-74). With regard to child trafficking in Zinder, Niger Government also intervened. It is reported that between December 2014 and August 2016, 5,362 Nigerien children and 11,233 adults were repatriated from Algeria under Niger-Algerian agreement (UNICEF, 2016: 4).

Meanwhile, the humanitarian donor communities have agreed to provide assistance to the displaced and host communities according to vulnerability, not status, in order to decrease the risk of internal tensions in Diffa and by extension Zinder (IOM-Nigeria (b), 2015: 4). The communities included UN agencies: UNICEF, WFP, UN High Commission for Refugees and other local and international non-governmental organizations. Some of the critical humanitarian supports by UNICEF are: during the 2015/2016 school year, 9,837 children (4,623 girls) benefitted from the UNICEF Niger's education-in-emergencies response in Diffa. In 2016/2017 also, UNICEF Niger provided continued access to quality education for 27,354 children through the construction of 184 temporary learning spaces and distribution of learning materials (IOM, 2017: 2-3). Likewise, in 2016, UNICEF-Niger coordinated Government and partner efforts to provide BH victims with safe drinking water; and 570,243 people gained access to safe water following the joint response, including the displaced population in the Diffa and Zinder Regions (UNICEF, 2016: 25).

Another critical humanitarian supports were given by the World Food Programme (WFP), WFP's Regional Emergency Operation (REO) provided flexible assistance through unconditional and conditional food and cash distribution, and nutritional supplementation for children aged 6-23 months as well as emergency school meals in Diffa. The REO was launched in 2015, humanitarian support to refugees from Nigeria, displaced populations (IDPs and returnees) and host population in Diffa (WFP, 2017: 1). Significant numbers of BH victims were covered by WFP assistance. In July, 2017, WFP and partners distributed a total of 3,600 tons of food and nutritional supplements to 220,000 IDPs, refugees and returnees as well as vulnerable host population. Likewise, there was WFP blanket supplementary feeding targeting 35,000 children 6-23 months of age; and by the same July, 97.33% of the targeted children benefitted (WFP, 2017: 1-2). In terms of cash assistance, each household of the beneficiaries in Maine Soroa and Diffa Departments in Diffa Region received a monthly amount of 35,000 CFA Francs. The beneficiaries reached 11,000 in July, 2017 in Maine Soroa (WFP, 2017: 2).

The efforts of Nigerian and Nigerien Governments as well as donor agencies cushioned human sufferings in the affected areas of Diffa and Zinder. However, the achievements recorded are far below the desired humanitarian supports to the BH victims in the regions. Consequently, the victims continue to suffer from abject poverty, poor social services and food insecurity among other humanitarian challenges. The reason for the limited achievements was the little commitment of the affected countries especially, Nigeria whose nationals are the majority of the refugees in south-eastern Niger. For instance, the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, a Nigerian institution saddled with the responsibility for IDPs and refugees has for long been underfunded; and thus, unable to do its jobs even in Nigeria's north-east, let alone Diffa and Zinder (Bagu, 2017: 502).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The paper discussed BH insurgency across Nigeria-Niger border; the emergence of refugees, IDPs and returnees; as well as humanitarian crises and interventions in the Diffa and Zinder Regions of Niger Republic. The humanitarian outlook in the regions was undoubtedly a complex emergency phenomenon resulting from the activities of the BH insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria and Diffa Region of Niger. The situation was exacerbated by the environmental and socio-economic factors especially in the Zinder leading to the unprecedented humanitarian crisis: arrivals of refugees (Nigerians) and returnees (Nigeriens) from Nigeria and the displacement of quite a number of Nigeriens in the affected areas. The situation further pushed quite a number of IDPs from Diffa to Zinder and compounded the crisis of returnees at hand with limited resources. The situation in Zinder took a new dimension of sending children of poverty stricken-parents who hitherto used to migrate to Nigeria for livelihoods to

instead, Maghreb to work as guides for beggars. The gains accrued out of the venture are being sent back to the parents for survival. In spite of the humanitarian assistance by inter-donor agencies and the governments of Nigeria and Niger, the sufferings of the victims continued unabated. This is because of the over-dependence on non-African donor agencies and little commitments of the ill-resourced and weak Nigerian and Nigerien institutions. Finally, the position of the paper is that, the affected countries ought to come up with an Inter-governmental Humanitarian Agency for refugees, IDPs and returnees. The agency will cushion the over-dependence on non-African donor institutions and the pressure on the limited humanitarian supports provided by the institutions, as well; thereby providing enormous humanitarian relief for BH victims in the regions of Diffa and Zinder.

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