

# THE UNSPOKEN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS : NIGERIA

by David Ford Johnson



**OCCAH**

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## Editorial Column

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Given that the very subject matter of this chronicle is the unspoken crisis ravaging northeastern Nigeria, it logically follows to commence with a brief overview of the situation for those that are – understandably – unfamiliar with it.

*Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* is an Islamist group commonly known as Boko Haram. In the local language of Hausa, this literally means, “Western” or “deceptive” education is “forbidden/a sin”. Since 2009, Boko Haram, and the armed conflict carried out against it, have devastated northeastern Nigeria, leading to the death of thousands of innocent people and the abduction of several thousand more, as well as forcing millions of others to flee from their homes<sup>1</sup>.

## Current Humanitarian Situation

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There are currently 7.0M persons in need (PIN) in northeastern Nigeria, of which, 2.2M are internally displaced persons (IDP), 1.8M are members of the affected host community, and 3.0M people find themselves in areas currently inaccessible – for security reasons intrinsically tied to the presence and terrorist activities of Boko Haram – to the humanitarian community<sup>2</sup>. Although not well documented, assessed, or widely broadcast, the Boko Haram-induced crisis is anything but recent. In fact, with 61.5% of the IDP population displaced since 2014, the crisis is quickly entering a protracted phase; though, the bulk of the humanitarian response is – at least hopefully – yet to come<sup>3</sup>.

Maiduguri, birthplace and former fief of the insurgency group, is the capital of Borno, which is the Nigerian state most heavily impacted by the crisis. Borno is located in the far northeastern corner of the country and borders Cameroon, (Lake) Chad, and Niger. A state of emergency has been in place in Borno since 2012 and was extended to two of its neighboring northeastern states in 2013. Maiduguri alone is host to 1.6M IDP, 92% of whom are located in the host community - i.e. not in camps<sup>4</sup>. As a result – and also tied to the fact that the vast majority of humanitarian assistance has focused on the 8% of the IDP population in camp-like settings – host community resources are drying up, and inter-community tensions are on the rise.

The entire Lake Chad Basin has succumbed to the instability created by the Boko Haram insurgency, with violent spillover, and resulting displacement in neighboring countries starting in 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International (AI), 2015

<sup>2</sup> Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), 2015

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015

<sup>4</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015

In response, the humanitarian community in Nigeria has requested 248M USD for program funding for 2016<sup>2</sup>, though this figure is largely underestimated, as reported by several key informants during my recent humanitarian mission in country. However, only 4% (14M USD) of the already disproportionate 248M USD has been received as of late February 2016<sup>5</sup>.

As a result, a dire – and massive – humanitarian crisis is taking place in northeastern Nigeria; however, inversely proportional to its magnitude and impact, the crisis receives little international media or political attention, and the humanitarian response suffers from a corresponding general lack of resources. Organizations on ground are entirely consumed with delivering life-saving assistance to the affected populations. This leaves little time or capacity for the implementation of critical, correlated humanitarian actions, such as advocacy, communication campaigns, or comparative needs and vulnerability assessments, to name a few. This, in turn, further limits the international community's awareness of and capacity to respond to the crisis, thus leading to a vicious circle, whose principal and primary victims are the affected displaced and host populations

## **The Vicious Circle – Extraneous and Intrinsic Factors**

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In an attempt to explain the nature and impact of the vicious circle in northeastern Nigeria, it is imperative to note the existence of certain extraneous factors that aggravate but that do not directly result from it. The first of such factors concerns the strength of the state of Nigeria.

### **1) The Strength of the Nigerian State**

Nigeria boasts Africa's largest economy<sup>6</sup>, as well as a powerful, federal system of government. In terms of the Boko Haram insurgency and related crisis, the government of Nigeria (GoN) has its own response plan, including military, political, development (reconstruction, rehabilitation and resettlement in destructed areas in the Northeast) and humanitarian components. More importantly, the GoN has the corresponding capacity to implement that plan, regardless if it is in line with humanitarian principles.

When it comes to the humanitarian response (HCT, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), NGOs, etc.), the government has positioned itself as the central figure of the response mechanism. The GoN had a heavy hand in contributing to the decision not to activate the cluster system in country. In the current set-up, the GoN leads all sector-based working groups, and UN agencies have been relegated to fulfilling the role of co-lead.

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<sup>5</sup> UN OCHA, 2016

<sup>6</sup> CIA, World Factbook, 2016

This contributes to a resulting altered ratio of power between the humanitarian community and the GoN. The humanitarian community doesn't replace a deficient state – as it does in many countries in central Africa – but must rather interact with its plan, its decisions and its implementation. Moreover, dismal international financial support contributes to aggravating this ratio of power.

## **2) Political and Economic Pressure**

This leads to the second extraneous factor, which is that of political and economic pressure. While certainly tied to the strength of the state of Nigeria, this second factor concerns directly the geo-political and economic context in country. In 2015, recently elected President Muhammadu Buhari made an overt campaign promise to rid the region of Boko Haram by end 2015. Additionally, to protect the well being of Africa's largest economy, the GoN has historically downplayed (and continues to downplay) the gravity of the situation in the Northeast in an effort to mitigate scaring away economic partners/foreign investment.

This has resulted in a simplistic and unrealistic (because politically biased) reading of the security and humanitarian situation in the Northeast. Military successes tend to be overemphasized or even exaggerated, whereas attacks - as well as the menace of attacks - are understated. Moreover, given the political agenda to illustrate that Boko Haram has been “technically defeated”, as was declared by Buhari in December 2015, GoN encourages precocious IDP relocations and even returns to zones of origin.

With this brief – but not exhaustive – understanding of certain extraneous factors exacerbating the vicious circle, it is propitious to look at the related intrinsic factors, which both result from and contribute to, the circle. These factors deal principally with the humanitarian mechanism in place in Nigeria.

### **Intrinsic factors: Humanitarian analysis**

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In spite of considerable effort made by actors on ground, there exists nevertheless a limited understanding of the humanitarian situation of affected populations in northeastern Nigeria, which constitutes the first intrinsic factor. As mentioned, organizations are consumed with the implementation of life-saving assistance to affected populations. Key informants in country estimate current coverage of needs at 10-25%. It goes, therefore, without saying that few assessments have been performed and that little analysis has been carried forth that go beyond the scope of current targeted populations. This unfortunately results in a reduced evidence-based understanding of the overall humanitarian situation in current zones of operation.

In terms of the humanitarian understanding of the situation outside of current zones of operation (the second component of the first intrinsic factor), even less is known. In areas of potential return and currently inaccessible zones, little to no independent assessment or analysis of the security context and humanitarian situation has been performed.

### Lack of coordination

The second and last intrinsic factor to be mentioned is the lack of effective coordination, both in the Northeast and nationally.<sup>7</sup> This underlying and crosscutting difficulty precludes unified, efficient and coherent humanitarian understanding, analysis and response.

## Consequences

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The consequences of the vicious circle, when combined with both the extraneous and intrinsic factors mentioned above, are dire. First off, strong governmental positioning overshadows and overpowers the humanitarian community's principle- and evidence-based positioning. In other words, the humanitarian community finds itself with a limited capacity to advocate before GoN to ensure the respect of humanitarian principals<sup>8</sup>. The following indicator, which appears in the *Humanitarian Response Plan 2016*, precisely illustrates this point: "the number of baseline advocacy initiatives undertaken and advocacy products developed to promote respect of protection standards, prevent and mitigate protection risks, and support development of legal frameworks for 2016 is "N/A"" (page 33).

Secondly, if UN agencies or NGOs, relying on the governmentally biased reading of the security and humanitarian situation, move too rapidly to intervene in potential areas of return – and without independent analysis of IDP intentions to return and assessment in areas of return – they run the concomitant risk of being utilized by the GoN as an instrument to encourage people to return whereas they would perhaps not otherwise be ready to do so.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there are massive unmet humanitarian needs across the board in northeastern Nigeria. This chronicle is not lengthy enough to provide an exhaustive enumeration of those needs; suffice it, however, just to mention just a few:

- The **harrowing psychosocial situation of the affected communities** that have witnessed and/or experienced some of the cruelest acts of violence that are, after all, at the origin of their displacement would only be worsened by precocious

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<sup>7</sup> This difficulty is well-known and currently being addressed by OCHA and other key stakeholders

<sup>8</sup> For example, principles 27-30 in OCHA's *Guiding Principles of Internal Displacement*

relocations and/or returns. The potential psychological impact of a secondary or tertiary displacement are considerable, yet are not taken into account by GoN. Additionally, the widespread binary reading of the situation – i.e. Boko Haram bad/the Nigerian Armed Forces good – aggravates the psychological situation of victims of aggression from Nigerian Armed Forces.

- In terms of **protection needs**, of the estimated 7.0M PIN in northeastern Nigeria, 5.45M people face grave protection risks, which are “exacerbated by the lack of sufficient services and limited protection measures” (HCT, 2015). In stark juxtaposition with the binary and simplistic nature of discourse mentioned above, “Nigerian Armed Forces and the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) have been accused of atrocities such as killing people on suspicion of being Boko Haram sympathizers or operatives. There is a deep concern in civil society that the state-sponsored CJTF, which encourages the youth to take up arms against Boko Haram, is promoting a dangerous form of vigilantism that is already leading to violent criminality” (Humanitarian Communications Working Group (HCWG), 2015).
- Lastly, more than 54 000 people in currently inaccessible areas in northeastern Nigeria suffer from IPC level 5 **food insecurity** – i.e. famine<sup>9</sup>. In spite of this, there is no way of locating or identifying the concerned population, much less providing them life-saving assistance.

In light of this, the international community has a responsibility to put an end to the unspoken crisis that is ravaging the lives of millions in the Lake Chad Basin. To do so, it is necessary to put an end to the vicious circle in which the humanitarian response is currently caught. Humanitarian capacity and resources in northeastern Nigeria must be reinforced. Lastly, it is imperative to build awareness and call for immediate political attention and action.

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<sup>9</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2015

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