

## Beating Boko Haram

**Military action alone cannot defeat the Islamist group.  
Northeast Nigeria needs a share of the South's wealth**

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Nigeria, the powerhouse of Africa, is in trouble. In the middle of last year, the Nigerian economy passed those of South Africa and Egypt. At almost the same time, attacks by the jihadist organization Boko Haram took on previously unseen dimensions. In recent years more than 10,000 people have been killed in northern Nigeria – Christians and Muslims, most of them civilians but also soldiers, policemen and politicians. More than 1.5 million people have been displaced.

Boko Haram controls vast tracts of the three Nigerian regions bordering Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Since December 2014 the group has also been attacking barracks and villages in the neighboring regions. The town of Baga on Lake Chad was attacked by Boko Haram militias on Jan. 3, and – as satellite images show – razed to the ground.

Boko Haram's declared aim is to establish a caliphate and to punish or annihilate unbelievers. In a video message, the movement's spokesman declared its dedication to global jihad and support for the "Islamic State." Boko Haram sees itself as the ruling power in the areas it controls, in which it aims to found a theocracy. Since the violent death of Mohamad Yussuf in 2009, the movement's leader has been Abubakar Shekau. Meanwhile, it has grown by up to 10,000 members.

There are several reasons for that increase. Northern Nigerians feel neglected by the southern-based government of Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan; they complain of political corruption, and collusion between criminal networks and the regional political elites. Pledges of modernization remain unfulfilled, and young people in particular see no prospects for the future. A narcissistic culture of violence makes heroes of those who fight for the one and only truth.

It is true that a region's affluence depends first and foremost on its personal links with the capital Abuja. While the country's leaders during the military dictatorships up into the 1990s mostly came from the Muslim north, today the political power and with it access to resources lies in the hands of Christians in the south. Widespread anger and powerlessness in the northeast – and above all, mistrust of the south – boosts the jihadist mobilization, which promises to overcome the failure of both politics and traditional social models in one fell swoop.

The supposed enemy is in plain view, and in the battle to create their Islamic state the jihadists will stop at nothing. They do not even shrink from the murder or kidnapping of children – such as the nearly 300 schoolgirls from Chibok – or the use of children as suicide bombers.

So far, the political elite in the capital has failed miserably to deal with Boko Haram terrorism. The government seems to be waiting in the hope the problem will simply go away.

The inability, the apparent disinterest of politicians in Abuja has made fear and panic in the northeast turn to fury. It took international campaigns such as #bringbackourgirls to get President Jonathan to call the crime by its name – months after the Chibok schoolgirls were abducted – and to recognize that the girls’ parents are not enemies but victims.

One of Boko Haram’s last major attacks was on the town of Baga, site of the headquarters of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), made up of troops from Nigeria, Chad and Niger. Founded in 1994, the force was meant to fight terrorism. In a video released after the attack, Abubakar Shekau and his supporters showed off a large arsenal of weapons and ammunition supposedly taken in the attack on the MNJTF barracks.

That highlights a fundamental problem. The military has not failed to protect the people in northeastern Nigeria due to a lack of weapons. The failure lies in the army’s lack of interest in pursuing its mission, when the humanitarian crisis of more than one million displaced people should be reason enough. Chad has sent troops to Nigeria and Cameroon – an indication that awareness of the urgent need for stabilization mission has risen in the region. Currently, several thousand Chadian troops are active in Nigeria, more than 1,000 in the area of Baga and Lake Chad, 2,500 in Cameroon. Some Chadian special forces are US-trained and experienced in fighting jihadist organizations in the Sahel.

Most recently, they were deployed in northern Mali. Regional leaders do not want to make the same mistakes that led to long-lasting instability there. Half the Nigerian army has now reportedly been deployed to the northeast. However, that did not deter Boko Haram from launching an assault on Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state on Jan. 24. Meanwhile the president of Ghana has called for intervention by African Union forces.

But while a coordinated deployment of regional forces is needed in response to the direct threat and expansion of Boko Haram, this must be just one part of a wider strategy to solve the problem. Politicians in the northeast will have to be better integrated into national politics.

Also needed are economic stimulus programs and a fairer redistribution of public assets. Just as important is a religious alternative to jihadist radicalism.

Nigeria goes to the polls in a few weeks. If a new government could be formed which would truly represent the interests of all Nigerians regardless of religious and ethnic background, this could reawaken some trust in the state – even in the northeast.

A few steps have been taken in the right direction. President Johnathan has chosen a Muslim from the north as his running mate, and his challenger Muhammadu Buhari has picked a Christian from the south to be his potential vice-president.

A more comprehensive approach will have to include a more just distribution of wealth, and improved opportunities for education, work, and development. Boko Haram makes money primarily by extorting ransom payments, but it also supports itself by armed robbery, slavery and through funding from al-Qaeda. Allegedly corruption in the military and political clientele structures in Nigeria are another source of funding for the group.

Development aid needs to find viable alternatives to nourishing organized crime; security initiatives have to be created to prevent kidnappings and smuggling. Religious education and reconciliation initiatives would also contribute to making social structures stronger.

Nigeria has recently headed military initiatives by the regional organization Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and is the foremost provider of troops to the United Nations' peace missions in Africa. It is not an option to allow Africa's most populous and economically strong nation to fail because of Boko Haram – it would be bad for Nigerians, for their African neighbors and for the international community.

The region is within the sphere of influence of jihadist groups in northern Mali, the Sahel and Libya, and it is not too far away from conflicts in Darfur and Central Africa. All this makes Boko Haram an enormous threat.

It would make sense to launch a regional or African Union mission. It could include equipment and expertise from the international community (including Germany). Yet a military victory over Boko Haram alone will not solve the problems. To get at the root of the problem, a comprehensive new approach is needed to tackle the long neglect of northern Nigeria. Inclusion at all levels - political, economical and social. This is the only way to keep the country together and to restore social order throughout.

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