

Amnesty International Press Release

Nigeria: Starving women raped by soldiers and militia who claim to be rescuing them

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Thousands of women and girls who survived the brutal rule of the Boko Haram armed group have since been further abused by the Nigerian security forces who claim to be rescuing them, said Amnesty International in a new report released today.

"They betrayed us" reveals how the Nigerian military and Civilian Joint Task Force (Civilian JTF) – a militia who work alongside them – have separated women from their husbands and confined them in remote “satellite camps” where they have been raped, sometimes in exchange for food. Amnesty International has collected evidence that thousands of people have starved to death in the camps in Borno state, north-east Nigeria, since 2015.

“It is absolutely shocking that people who had already suffered so much under Boko Haram have been condemned to further horrendous abuse by the Nigerian military,” said Osai Ojigbo, Director of Amnesty International Nigeria.

“Instead of receiving protection from the authorities, women and girls have been forced to succumb to rape in order to avoid starvation or hunger.”

In some cases, the abuse appears to be part of a pattern of persecution of anyone perceived to have a connection to Boko Haram. Women reported being beaten and called “Boko Haram wives” by the security officials when they complained about their treatment.

As Nigeria’s military recovered territory from the armed group in 2015, it ordered people living in rural villages to the satellite camps, in some cases indiscriminately killing those who remained in their homes. Hundreds of thousands of people have fled or were forced from these areas.

The military screened everyone arriving to the satellite camps, and in some locations detained most men and boys aged between 14 and 40 as well as women who travelled unaccompanied by their husbands. The detention of so many men has left women to care for their families alone.

Rape of starving women and sexual exploitation

Scores of women described how soldiers and Civilian JTF members have used force and threats to rape women in satellite camps, including by taking advantage of hunger to coerce women to become their “girlfriends”, which involved being available for sex on an ongoing basis.

Sex in these highly coercive circumstances is always rape, even when physical force is not used

Osai Ojigho

Five women told Amnesty International that they were raped in late 2015 and early 2016 in Bama Hospital camp as famine-like conditions prevailed.

Ama (not her real name), 20, said: “They will give you food but in the night they will come back around 5pm or 6pm and they will tell you to come with them... One [Civilian JTF] man came and brought food to me. The next day he said I should take water from his place [and I went]. He then closed the tent door behind me and raped me. He said I gave you these things, if you want them we have to be husband and wife”.

Ten others in the same camp said that they were also coerced into becoming “girlfriends” of security officials to save themselves from starvation. Most of these women had already lost children or other relatives due to lack of food, water and healthcare in the camp. The sexual exploitation continues at an alarming level as women remain desperate to access sufficient food and livelihood opportunities

Women said the sexual exploitation follows an organized system, with soldiers openly coming into the camp for sex and Civilian JTF members choosing the “very beautiful” women and girls to take to the soldiers outside. Women reported they were too afraid to refuse demands for sex.

“Sex in these highly coercive circumstances is always rape, even when physical force is not used, and Nigerian soldiers and Civilian JTF members have been getting away with it. They act like they don’t risk sanction, but the perpetrators and their superiors who have allowed this to go unchallenged have committed crimes under international law and must be held to account,” said Osai Ojigho.

Deaths as a result of hunger

People confined in the satellite camps faced an acute food shortage from early 2015 until mid-2016, when humanitarian assistance was increased.

At least hundreds, and possibly thousands, died in Bama Hospital camp alone during this time. Those interviewed consistently reported that 15 to 30 people died each day from hunger and sickness during these months. Satellite images, showing how the graveyard inside the camp expanded quickly during this time, confirm their testimonies. There were also daily deaths in other satellite camps such as those in Banki and Dikwa.

People are dying, [always there is a] burial, burial, burial. I was thinking maybe one day it will be my own.”

Yanna, Boko Haram survivor

From June 2016, the UN and other humanitarian agencies scaled up assistance in the satellite camps. Despite this, many women reported continued barriers to accessing adequate food, exacerbated by restrictions on their ability to leave the camps.

A number of women who arrived in satellite camps in Dikwa town in mid-2017 have not received any food assistance since they arrived and described ongoing hunger, sickness and deaths within their camps.

Yanna (not her real name), who arrived in Dikwa in late-2017 and lived in Fulatari camp, told Amnesty International: “People are dying, [always there is a] burial, burial, burial. I was thinking maybe one day it will be my own.”

Even where government and international NGOs distribute food, large-scale corruption has prevented many people from accessing it.

“Confining people to camps without enough food, despite the fact that those administering the camps knew the conditions were leading to deaths, violates human rights and international humanitarian law. Those who allowed this to happen may be guilty of murder,” said Osai Ojigho.

Women detained in Giwa barracks

Amnesty International’s research further reveals that hundreds of women along with their children have been held in the notorious Giwa Barracks detention centre since 2015. While most have been released, an unknown number remain in military detention.

Many of those detained since 2015 had been victims of abductions or forced marriages by Boko Haram and were detained by the military for being so-called “Boko Haram wives” instead of being rescued.

Amnesty International received five reports about sexual violence in Giwa barracks, while seven women said they gave birth inside their dirty, overcrowded cells without any medical assistance. At least 32 babies and children, and five women, have died in detention since 2016.

“The detention of women and girls on the basis that they were allegedly married to Boko Haram members is unlawful under international human rights law and Nigerian law, and is discriminatory,” said Osai Ojigho.

Boko Haram abuses

Women interviewed often spent months or years living under the repressive rule of Boko Haram. Some reported being forced into marriages with Boko Haram members or being flogged when caught breaking the armed group’s strict rules. Seven said they witnessed the executions of family members or neighbours after unsuccessful attempts to escape.

Time for action

Since 2015, various NGOs and humanitarian organizations have reported sexual violence and deaths in camps for internally displaced people in north-east Nigeria. While the authorities frequently promised to investigate such reports, there has been no tangible action to address the

problem and no one appears to have been brought to justice. It is not always clear if these investigations were carried out as no reports have been made public.

Now is the time for President Buhari to demonstrate his frequently expressed commitment to protect the human rights of displaced people in north-east Nigeria
Osai Ojigho

In August 2017, the Acting President of Nigeria Yemi Osinbajo established the Presidential Investigation Panel to review the military's compliance with its human rights obligations. Many women testified before the Panel, which submitted its report to President Muhammadu Buhari in February 2018.

“Now is the time for President Buhari to demonstrate his frequently expressed commitment to protect the human rights of displaced people in north-east Nigeria. The only way to end these horrific violations is by ending the climate of impunity in the region and ensuring that no one can get away with rape or murder,” said Osai Ojigho.

“The Nigerian authorities must investigate – or make public their previous investigations – on war crimes and crimes against humanity in the north-east. They must also urgently ensure, with the support of donor governments, that people living in the satellite camps receive adequate food, and that those arbitrarily detained in military detention facilities are released.”

Amnesty International's report is the result of an extensive investigation involving more than 250 interviews and covers satellite camps established by the military in seven towns in Borno state, including Bama, Banki, Rann and Dikwa. It also includes interviews with 48 women and girls released from detention and the review of video, photographic and satellite imagery.

Amnesty International shared its findings with the Nigerian authorities but, at time of publication, no response has been received.