

Boko Haram Is Back. With Better Drones.

After a decade of devastating war with Boko Haram extremists, they are now better armed than ever and have more sophisticated drones than the demoralized Nigerian military.

By **Dionne Searcey**

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KONDUGA, Nigeria — Ten-year-old Abdul stood on a dirt road in a village tucked between millet fields and pulled up his shirt. A fresh scar stretched lengthwise down his stomach — the result of a suicide bombing by Boko Haram in June that sent shrapnel tearing through his belly.

A half dozen other boys crowded around him and pulled up their shirts. All bore similar scars from the attack.

Nigeria's war against the Islamist extremist group Boko Haram was supposed to be over by now. President Muhammadu Buhari, a former military ruler, was re-elected earlier this year after boasting about his progress battling Boko Harm. He has repeatedly declared that the group has been "technically defeated." On Tuesday, the president conceded that "its members are still a nuisance."

A full decade into the war, however, Boko Haram militants are still roaming the countryside with impunity. Their fighters now have more sophisticated drones than the military and are well-armed after successful raids on military brigades, according to local politicians and security analysts.

Militants control four of the 10 zones in northern Borno State, near Lake Chad, according to security analysts and a federal official. They are pulling off almost-daily attacks, including opening fire last week on the convoy of the governor of Borno State. To people in villages like Konduga, Boko Haram's defeat seems distant. The attack on June 17 that wounded Abdul and his friends (his last name is being withheld to protect him from reprisals) also killed 30 people — eight of them children.

By many accounts, the Nigerian military is demoralized and on the defensive. Some soldiers have complained they haven't had a home leave in three years. Their weapons and vehicles have fallen into disrepair. In August, the new commander of Operation Lafiya Dole, which means "Peace by Force," publicly reminded his field officers to give food and water to troops. He is the eighth commander in 10 years.

The military announced in August that it is pulling back its troops from far-flung outposts in the countryside and gathering them into fortified settlements it calls "super camps." The super camps are inside of garrison towns where the Nigerian military in recent years settled tens of thousands of civilians — either after Boko Haram chased them away, or soldiers burned their villages and rounded them up, saying it would secure the countryside. The garrison towns are ringed by trenches to slow militant invasions, but the pullback has allowed Boko Haram fighters free rein in the barren countryside.



The fortified community of Bama is surrounded by a trench and hosts thousands of people who have fled their homes, as well as a military installation called a “super camp.” Laura Boushnak for The New York Times



The Monday Market in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in northeastern Nigeria. Customers are more scarce since the market became a frequent target of suicide bombings. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Inside the super camp in Bama on a recent afternoon, a camouflaged tank lurched down the street, blue smoke pouring from its underside, its tracks looking like loose teeth about to fall out. It was piloted by helmetless soldiers with open shirts and a gunner wearing a crown of leaves, who plowed into a parked minivan partially blocking the road, smashing the vehicle.

Major Ak Karma, sitting behind his desk nearby at the Bama super camp headquarters, said that a Boko Haram attack there had been thwarted days earlier, but downplayed the threat.

“We have one or two problem attacks by Boko Haram, but that doesn’t mean they have a grand offensive,” said Major Kama. “Bama is a fortress.”

The camp was attacked again the following day.

The war with Boko Haram has devastated the population in rural northeast Nigeria, one of the poorest regions on earth. More than two million people have fled their homes, tens of thousands have been killed and many more injured, abducted and conscripted to join the fight. The International Committee of the Red Cross said this week that nearly 22,000 Nigerians have been reported missing during the crisis.



Girls in a camp in Bama, an entrenched city regularly attacked by Boko Haram, play games and learn about the dangers of land mines. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times



Ten-year-old Abdul showed a scar caused by shrapnel from a suicide bombing in Konduga in June. Other children there bear similar scars from injuries suffered that day. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Only a few years ago, the situation looked more hopeful. In 2015, after President Buhari was first elected, the Nigerian military made huge headway beating back Boko Haram. They ousted fighters from Maiduguri, the state capital, and from small cities that Boko Haram had taken over, tracking them to their forest hide-outs.

But in recent years, as the war has dragged on, Nigeria's attention has been diverted by security problems elsewhere: gang wars and extremists in Zamfara, a northwestern region; gruesome battles over land rights in the center of the country; extrajudicial murders by police; kidnappings for ransom across the nation. President Buhari announced plans to airlift Nigerian citizens out of South Africa, where Nigerians were attacked in a spate of xenophobic violence.

Military commanders, faced with complaints that their strategy is old and ineffectual, say that the super camps are a new, more effective way of dealing with an insurgency that is now able to pull off more complicated attacks against the military.

But some officials call the super camps an outright retreat. One federal official, who asked not to be identified out of fear that criticizing the military would jeopardize his safety, said that soldiers were merely barricading themselves inside super camps. The official said that Boko Haram fighters are raiding the gear the soldiers are leaving behind as they abandon their posts for the super camps.

Corruption may also be prolonging the war, according to some government officials, security analysts and aid workers. In northeast Nigeria, Boko Haram has long been accused of profiting from illegal fishing along Lake Chad, where all fishing is outlawed, and from taxing passing vehicles. Now, the military is being accused of doing the same.

The government allocates the equivalent of nearly \$80 million dollars each quarter to the war effort, and yet Nigerian soldiers lack ample ammunition and medical care — leaving many residents to ask where all the money is going. Earlier this year in Rann, where there is no lighting after sundown, disgruntled soldiers without night vision gear abandoned their posts, according to several aid workers.



Young men play billiards in the streets of Maiduguri, a major trading hub in northern Nigeria, which hasn't been attacked in months. But aid workers and other officials say the city is surrounded by militants. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times



A soldier taking a keke in Maiduguri. Some soldiers have complained they haven't had a home leave in three years. Laura Boushnaq for The New York Times

Some soldiers have fled in the face of attacks rather than staying to fight, according to accounts from residents.

Abubakar, 13, said he was coming home from school in the town of Gubio in late August when he saw several soldiers racing through the village. "Run for your lives," they were screaming as they fled, he said. "Boko Haram is coming!"

The boy, whom The Times is not identifying for security reasons, said he watched as soldiers stripped off their uniforms and changed into everyday clothes. They parked their army truck under a tree, piled into a civilian car and sped away.

Another woman from Gubio, whom The Times is also not identifying, said that four terrified soldiers joined her family in hiding, and five more hid in her neighbor's house. She said they kept silent inside for two days as militants ransacked the town and loudly bragged about how easy it was to seize.

Most of the residents and soldiers fled during the attack, which killed at least three people, officials said. Several days later, Boko Haram returned, looting a hospital of its medicine and setting fire to government buildings and military tents. They sped off in vehicles that the military had left behind.

That attacks were thought by officials to be carried out by the Islamic State West African Province, a splinter group of about 3,000 fighters that has been endorsed by leaders of the Islamic State. The faction split in 2016 from forces commanded by Boko Haram's longtime leader Abubakar Shekau, over disapproval of his attacks on Muslim civilians.

Since 2018, the Islamic State faction, which has received propaganda guidance from the Islamic State in Syria, has attacked a brigade headquarters and the hub for a multinational military effort to fight terrorism, swiping large amounts of machinery and weapons, according to officials and analysts.



At the end of the rainy season in August, parts of the Gubio camp had turned to lakes and rain was pooling inside residents' homes. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times



A tailor shop near the site of a suicide bombing in June in the community of Konduga. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

That group is believed to have split into further factions, some of which control areas near Lake Chad and elsewhere, operating courts, health services and markets, according to Vincent Foucher, a consultant for the International Crisis Group.

In some areas outside the military's reach, people say they are now just tolerating the presence of militants. Locals have returned to their farms to earn a living, preferring that to being herded into crowded camps prone to cholera and other diseases.

Some aid groups are scaling back, deeming the conflict so protracted that it is no longer an acute emergency. This comes amid reports of near-daily militant activity: grenades tossed into a United Nations hub in Banki; an attack several weeks ago on an aid convoy in which militants killed a driver and abducted five workers near Damboa; a suicide bombing that injured four people in Dikwa.

Maiduguri, a major trading hub for northern Nigeria, hasn't been attacked in months, but aid workers and other officials say that the city is surrounded by militants. Boko Haram raided a community for food and clothing at Maiduguri's edge in late August, according to members of a vigilante fighting force that assists the military.

From an outpost with a view of the green, rolling landscape, the vigilante members pointed in the distance, toward two known Boko Haram camps less than five miles away.

A vigilante nicknamed Madman grabbed his double-barrel shotgun and climbed atop a metal gate to serve as lookout, the last line of defense for the southeastern flank of the city against Boko Haram.



A civilian vigilante nicknamed Madman serves as a lookout along the last line of defense for the southeastern flank of Maiduguri, the biggest city in northeastern Nigeria. Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington.

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