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Nigerians forced out by Boko Haram return to ruins and continuing risk

Thousands of people who fled insurgency have been persuaded to return despite ongoing attacks and a lack of reconstruction

Ruth Maclean in Bama and Ismail Alfa in Maiduguri

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When **Boko Haram** realised that they were about to be routed from Bama, a town in north-east Nigeria that they had occupied for six months, they set about destroying it.

They torched the houses they had been staying in, the cars left on the street and belongings treasured by their owners, who had suddenly had to flee three years before. They even set fire to the beautiful neem tree that had cast a deep shade over Goni Ibrahim's compound, protecting its 85 inhabitants from the brain-scrambling heat.

It's nothing like what it was before

Many Bama residents were killed. Those who could run ran, and have lived in exile, mostly in the state capital Maiduguri, for over three years. But now they are being made or **persuaded** to go back.

Thousands of people who fled Boko Haram have been sent to unsafe areas by a government trying to create the impression that it has returned security to Nigeria's north-east, ahead of next year's presidential election.

The garrison towns people are being sent to are islands in a sea of uncontrolled countryside, surrounded by trenches and occupied by the military. **Told it is safe to go back, returnees often have no idea of these conditions until they have made the journey – and by then it is too late. Because Boko Haram still roams the north-east, they are not allowed out to fish or farm so, unable to support themselves, they live on aid coming from outside.**

I have lost hope. I don't have faith in the government. Goni Ibrahim

The government claimed to have rebuilt Bama before moving around 20,000 people back in – a fifth of the total it plans to relocate there. A few schools are open, but

teachers are reluctant to move back; they were the first to die when Boko Haram attacked in 2014. With no electricity and no ambulances, the hospital barely functions: when Boko Haram bombed the town two weeks after the first returnees arrived, killing seven, ambulances took hours to come from Maiduguri. The Shehu, Bama's traditional leader, is in exile, too concerned for his own safety to move back.

Driving down Bama's main street, prettily plastered walls on both sides give the impression that the town really has been rebuilt. But on the other side of many of these neat new gates lie blackened ruins and twisted metal – the detritus of once-prosperous lives. And further back from the main road the buildings lie in ruins, just as Boko Haram left them.

POTEMKHIN VILLAGES, Nigerian style (my words).

“It's like this so that government people passing on the road will think they've done a lot of work,” said Ibrahim, in what used to be his comfortable home, and what the state ministry of reconstruction, rehabilitation and resettlement (RRR), having nailed a few metal sheets on top of the soot-stained bricks and given it a lick of paint, counts as completed reconstruction. Most of the buildings have not been touched.

“We were told the work was finished, by the RRR commission,” Ibrahim said while the children played hopscotch in the sun, missing the shade of their neem tree. “When we came, we saw it wasn't true. It's nothing like what it was before. I have lost hope. I don't have faith in the government; I don't trust them.”

But conditions are far better in Bama than elsewhere in Borno state. Almost 3,500 people have just been sent to Gudumbali, where almost all the houses were destroyed, with no shelter and no tools to begin farming. There has been no reconstruction, there are no services, and no food in Gudumbali, say sources familiar with the situation.

On 2 August, 500 people will be sent to unreconstructed Marte, which is very close to Boko Haram's Lake Chad strongholds, and thus an easy target. In many cases, returnees are villagers who have no property or farmland in the garrison towns.

Aishatu Mohammed came back to Bama thinking she was going home to her suburb, Shuwari.

“I thought Shuwari was safe before I came here, so I'm not happy,” she said, cradling her three-week-old baby, Modu, in a crowded camp assembled between the blackened buildings of an old, destroyed school, which she cannot leave. “Nobody is in Shuwari now, because of the insurgency. The area is not safe.”

Under their unkempt long-time leader Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram became internationally infamous, especially after its militants [kidnapped the Chibok schoolgirls](#), whose cause celebrities [including Michelle Obama](#) took up.

The extremist group that has held north-east Nigeria and its neighbours in a deadly grip for close to a decade is weaker now; [studies say](#) casualties have dropped drastically in recent years. But the suicide bombings and child abductions continue, and in recent weeks the attacks have escalated: [eight people were killed](#) in a mosque attack on Monday, and [many soldiers disappeared](#) in an ambush in mid-July. [Yet the Nigerian authorities are pressing ahead with plans to send people “home”.](#)

Men and women sit in groups along Bama’s main road, but further back, the streets are empty, and the houses are mostly in ruins. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian Advertisement

Neither the military nor the RRR responded to requests for comment, but according to Hajiya Yabawa Kolo, the head of Borno state’s emergency management agency, sending civilians to these garrison towns is part of the government’s strategy to keep Boko Haram from controlling territory. “When you have human habitation, things will be safer. There will be better security,” she said. “If it’s just empty, Boko Haram will get a lot of breathing space. That’s why we’re encouraging them. At least it’s a step forwards, not backwards.”

[The stated approach, then, is to send thousands of civilians back into areas they fled in order to provide a bulwark against a group that kills, kidnaps and enslaves thousands, and that straps bombs to children.](#) But according to analysts and aid workers on the ground, the real reason for the relocations is political.

Nigeria’s president, Muhammadu Buhari, came to power on two major promises: to fight corruption and deal with insecurity. Despite [protracted illness](#), he has [declared his intention to run for election again](#) in 2019.

[During his tenure the military has not defeated Boko Haram but it has made inroads. But the methods they use have driven hundreds of thousands of villagers from their homes. Along with a local militia, they have tried to empty the countryside, corralling people into the garrison towns. Anyone who does not leave is presumed to support Boko Haram.](#)

[More than 100,000 civilians are expected to be displaced by Operation Last Hold, their latest effort to uproot militants from the Lake Chad area.](#)

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Children play in Goni Ibrahim’s compound in Bama. Photograph: Ruth Maclean for the Guardian

[Despite being able to spend nearly \\$500m \(£380m\) on fighter jets from the US, the government has made it clear that it expects to offload this burden onto the already-](#)

struggling aid community, doling out the responsibility for managing health, shelter, water and sanitation.

At the same time the military will not allow aid agencies access to any key areas outside government control, and restricts the amount of goods going in – an apparent attempt to starve Boko Haram out.

More than 820,000 people are thought to be stuck in these “hard-to-reach” areas; those who make it out say many are starving.

Aid agencies rarely criticise the government publicly, for fear of being thrown out of Nigeria, leaving an even more dire humanitarian situation; but in effect, analysts say, working only in the garrison towns amounts to supporting the government’s strategy.