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Nigeria: Military razes villages as Boko Haram attacks escalate

14 February 2020, 00:01 UTC

The Nigerian military has burned and forcibly displaced entire villages in response to a recent escalation in attacks by the armed group Boko Haram, Amnesty International said today, based on interviews with affected villagers in Borno State and satellite data analysis.

The military also arbitrarily detained six men from the displaced villages, continuing a pattern of violations Amnesty International has documented throughout the country's decade-long armed conflict in the northeast. The men were held incommunicado for almost a month and subjected to ill-treatment, before their release on 30 January 2020.

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“They repeat a longstanding pattern of the Nigerian military's brutal tactics against the civilian population. Forces allegedly responsible for such violations must be suspended immediately and brought to justice.”

Unlawful tactics

From December 2019, Boko Haram has increasingly carried out attacks in northeastern Nigeria, particularly along the important road between Maiduguri and Damaturu, the capitals of Borno and Yobe States. A recent Amnesty International research mission to Borno State shows that, in response to the attacks, the Nigerian military has resorted to unlawful tactics that have had a devastating effect on civilians and may amount to war crimes.

Amnesty International interviewed 12 women and men forced to flee their homes on 3 and 4 January 2020 from three villages near the Maiduguri-Damaturu road, between Jakana and Mainok in Borno State. The organization also reviewed fire data from remote satellite sensing, which indicates several large fires burning on and around 3 January in that area. Satellite imagery of Bukarti, Ngariri, and Matiri shows almost every structure was razed. The imagery also shows signs of burning in neighbouring villages.

Residents from Bukarti consistently described to Amnesty International scores of Nigerian soldiers arriving during the late morning of Friday 3 January. They said soldiers went house to house and to surrounding farmland, forcing everyone to gather under a tree and by a graveyard between Bukarti and the main road. Soldiers also rounded up people from neighbouring Matiri and brought them to the same area.

Villages torched

Around 3 pm on 3 January, soldiers demanded everyone walk to the main road, where the villagers were forced to board large trucks. Witnesses said that, as they were loaded into the trucks, some of the soldiers returned to Bukarti. The witnesses then saw their village burning.

“We saw our houses go into flames,” recalled a woman, around 70 years old, from Bukarti. “We all started crying.”

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A woman, around 70 years old, from Bukarti.

The trucks then took more than 400 women, men, and children from Bukarti and Matiri to an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp near Maiduguri.

The next day, on 4 January, soldiers went to Ngariri, a village across the main road from Bukarti, according to three residents of Ngariri. Soldiers assembled primarily older women and men, as younger adults had already fled to surrounding farmland, and forced them aboard a truck that took them to Maiduguri. Ngariri was then razed.

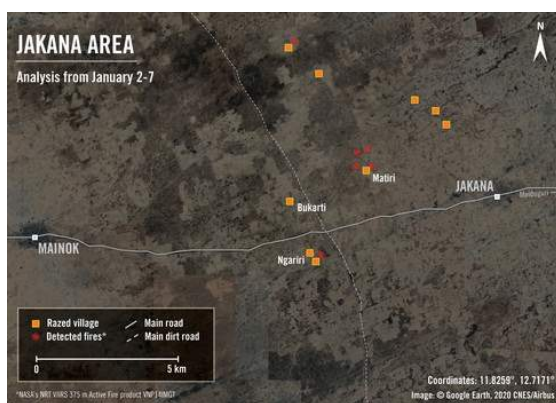
People who returned to check on Bukarti and Ngariri told Amnesty International that everything was torched. Satellite imagery corroborates both villages were burned in early January.

Witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International said they could not bring belongings with them, so lost everything – their homes, jewellery, clothes, and, most devastatingly, the crops they stored after the harvest.

“Everything we harvested was destroyed, and some of our animals died,” said a farmer in his 60s. “I had a year [of harvest] stored – it’s what I would’ve sold to buy clothes and other things for my family.”

“Everything was burned, even our food – it could feed [my family] for two years,” said another man, around 30, who snuck back weeks later to see the destruction. “Our clothes, our food, our crops, our kettles. Even the trolley we used for getting water. Only the metal dishes are there, but everything else is burned.”

Ordering the displacement of the inhabitants of these villages, where their security or imperative military reasons did not demand so, constitutes a war crime. The subsequent burning of their homes may amount to a war crime as well.



Satellite image chips show evidence of burnt villages in NE Nigeria's Borno State in early January 2020. Image: Google Earth, © 2020 CNES/Airbus

Arbitrary detention, torture or other ill-treatment

As the military emptied Bukarti and Matiri and brought people to the trucks on 3 January, they separated six younger men and blindfolded them, according to consistent accounts by relatives of two of the men and other witnesses. They said the soldiers did not seek the men out by name or otherwise appear to come looking for specific people. Four witnesses said they thought it was because those younger men had mobile phones.

The soldiers beat at least some of the men with large sticks and put them in military vehicles. The military held the men incommunicado for almost a month; relatives and village leaders were unable to determine where the men were held. All six men were released on 30 January. They have not been charged with any crime.

Two of the detained men told Amnesty International that, because they were blindfolded until reaching their cell, they did not know where they were being held until their release – when they saw it was Maimalari military barracks in Maiduguri. They said they were chained in pairs and, other than being questioned one day, never let out of the cell. They only received food once a day.

“We had no food,” one former detainee described. “People there are hungry. It was horrible.”

Throughout the conflict between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram, Amnesty International has documented prolonged arbitrary detention by the military. Soldiers have also subjected detained men, [women](#), and children to [torture](#) and other ill-treatment, in violation of both international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

‘They say they saved us from Boko Haram, but it’s a lie’

Nigerian army [statements](#), reported by the media, indicate soldiers from Brigades 5 and 29, along with Special Intervention Battalion 2, carried out the operations between Jakana and Mainok on 3 January. The army said it arrested six “suspects” and “rescued... 461 Boko Haram captives” from several villages, including Bukarti and Matiri.

Witnesses interviewed by Amnesty International said Boko Haram had not been in their village, and that they felt significantly safer in their village than in the IDP camp where the military took them. “They say they saved us from Boko Haram, but it’s a lie,” said one man, around 65. “Boko Haram isn’t coming to our village.”

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A man, around 65.

“If Boko Haram had been visiting our place, we have our own animals, our own harvest – do you think they wouldn’t have taken those?” said another older woman from Bukarti. “The [Boko Haram] boys aren’t close to us.”

Several Bukarti and Ngariri residents said their village was so close to the main road that it wasn’t credible to think Boko Haram could base itself there. They said Nigerian soldiers came through the area regularly and spoke frequently with village leaders.

Four witnesses told Amnesty International that Nigerian soldiers staged photographs of the villagers walking to

the trucks, to make it appear as if the military had 'saved' them.

"The Nigerian government must not brush these violations under the carpet. They must be investigated, and alleged perpetrators must be prosecuted. Necessary steps must also be taken to ensure that military operations do not further forcibly displace civilian populations," said Osai Ojigho.

Surge in Boko Haram attacks

The military's operations come amid a surge in Boko Haram activity in areas along the Maiduguri-Damaturu road. In its deadliest attack since the start of year, on 10 February Boko Haram allegedly killed 30 motorists near Auno village. It was the armed group's sixth assault on Auno in 10 months, demonstrating its disregard for the sanctity of human life as well as the increasing danger for civilians living along this vital route connecting Borno state to the rest of Nigeria.

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