

**‘All Nigerians are Civilians, Americans are the Real Soldiers’
Beyond the American Intervention in Nigeria’s Corridor of Terror**



The Special Adviser on Media to President Jonathan Goodluck, Reuben Abati posted pictures of Nigerian soldiers combing the Sambisa forest for the missing Chibok girls. He shared these pictures via his twitter handle @abati1990

In the 1970s and 1980s, at the height of Nigeria’s post-independence and post-oil-discovery wealth and power, Nigerians could walk the streets of the major northern cities of Kaduna, Jos, Kano and Maiduguri without a concern, unhurried and unharmed. Today, public spaces, from churches to restaurants, to cafes in these cities send very real frissons of fear down the spines of everyday people, a fear unassuaged by the decidedly ineffective security apparatus. As Wanjohi Kabukuru, a veteran Kenyan journalist writing for *New African Magazine* puts it, ‘these cities have lost their innocence’¹. Thanks to Boko Haram, a militant group terrorising Nigeria’s north eastern region, those cities have lost their innocence forever.

Records show that since 2009, Boko Haram has been orchestrating a vicious circle of violence in the north-east; violence that has led to the death of over 3000 people, both civilians and security personnel, in addition to about 3.3 million Nigerians driven from their homes². The abduction of 276 female students from Chibok Government Girls Secondary School on April 14, 2014 has thrust the group and its reign of terror into the international zeitgeist and represents the height, thus far of its achievements. Thus, the night Chibok’s name entered world history, according to Cameron Duodu, ‘is not one that any of the abducted girls or any of their close relatives will ever want to remember’³. And yet how can they ever forget it? In addition to other alleged diplomatic manoeuvres, the speed of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign and the sheer audacity of Boko Haram propelled the American intervention intended for the rescue of the stolen girls. Apart from the rescue operation, what is the impact of this American intervention so far and what is the perception of this intervention amongst ordinary Nigerians?

According to Dr. Kathleen Hicks of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, American policy on foreign intervention is usually, but not always, directed by the perception that ‘America’s unwillingness to act assertively, whether justified or not, emboldens others. As such, deterrence works best when backed up by credible threat of force’⁴. In other words, America intervenes when there is a clear threat to its national interest. For example, when unconfirmed

¹ Wanjohi Kabukuru, 2014. How East Africa Lost its Innocence, *New African Magazine*, No. 540, 48th Year June 2014, p. 18.

² The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) 2014 Report. The IDCM is run by Norwegian Refugee Council. Cf. <http://www.news24.com/newfiguresofbokoharam.org> accessed June 8, 2014.

³ Cameron Duodu, 2014. Has Boko Haram Shot itself in the Foot? *New African Magazine*, No. 540, 48th Year June 2014, p. 14.

⁴ Dr. Kathleen Hicks, 2014. ‘When Is Selective Engagement too Selective’. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

reports hinted in the 1990s that the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of Somalia was giving shelter to al-Qaeda suspects, the Americans, in collaboration with the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), entered Somalia. In October 1993, the United States lost 18 soldiers while trying to capture General Mohammed Farah Aideed. The movie *Black Hawk Down* is a graphic representation of that defeat⁵.

Subsequently, the US has limited itself to proxy wars in Africa and elsewhere. For instance, Comrade Shehu Sani, a foremost Nigerian human rights activist based in Kaduna, claims that the US is not even prepared to enter Ukraine to drive away the Russians, aside from imposing sanctions. The US backed down in Syria and refused to allow *boots on ground*. Also in a bid to remove Gaddafi, America did not enter the country, but shot from the air and sea.⁶ To a large extent, this probably defines the American Intervention in Nigeria to help free the 'Stolen Chibok Girls.' Is Boko Haram a credible threat to America's national interest? This is a discussion for another day. Yet, despite the false sense of hope raised by the arrival of the American team, evidence seems to suggest that the US has sent two sets of people: intelligence experts and experts in hostage negotiations, as well as some aircraft to assist in surveillance around Yobe and Borno, northern states that have been in a state of emergency since 2011 due to terror activities.⁷ Reports also indicate that Washington has sent out 80 US troops to neighbouring Chad to help search for the missing schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram.⁸ There is no intent to place *boots on ground* in Nigeria.

Initially, the arrival of the American intervention team inspired a sense of hope and genuine expectation in an atmosphere already invaded by despair and desperation, particularly around Chibok. In fact, the loss of faith in the Federal Government pushed some parents of the abducted girls into organizing their own search. With a sense of humour, one of the parents declared, '*All Nigerians are civilians, Americans are the real Soldiers.*' Again, the physical presence of American soldiers on Nigeria's soil was a gadfly that stung ordinary Nigerians to the reality of the crisis. More importantly, the intervention brought to the fore the regional and international threat posed by Nigeria's homegrown terrorism, Boko Haram.

Certainly, the intervention has exposed the inadequacies of Nigeria's defense policy in managing the Boko Haram conflict, particularly to the international community. There were some attempts to negotiate with Boko Haram in 2009 and 2011, in addition to the Dialogue Committee set up by President Goodluck Jonathan in 2012. With the abduction of the girls, the foremost Nigerian activist, Comrade Shehu Sani surfaced to assist with negotiations, but the government approach to the conflict ended up with little progress. Beyond the obvious review of security measures, the office of the president has released not less than 20 statements, condemning the senseless killings by Boko Haram while expressing condolences to the victims. Security meetings have been shifted from weekly to bi-monthly in addition to the Expanded Security Council Meeting - a concept unknown to the Nigerian Constitution. President Jonathan's speech in the aftermath of the abduction was full of contradictions; on one hand he declared total war on Boko Haram and on the other, he said the door for amnesty is open for the insurgents. Yet the question remains: how can negotiations take place when the sect is proscribed through the terrorism bill; a bill that out-laws the group and criminalizes any form of communication with its members?

⁵ Wanjohi Kabukuru, 2014. Op. cit., p. 19.

⁶ Soni Daniel, 2014. Boko Haram: How the Presidency Bungled It – Shehu Sani, *Vanguard Newspaper*, June 3, 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jeremy Keenan, 2014. Neocolonialism and Terror in the Sahel, *New African Magazine*, 48th Year, No. 540, June 2014, p. 28.

The UN al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee in its report, updated April 2014, has listed 96 individuals and 14 organizations in Africa which it says are affiliated with al-Qaeda. One of these organizations is Boko Haram and Nigeria itself sponsored the resolution at the United Nations that blacklisted this group. Is it even possible for the insurgents to avail themselves of amnesty when Nigeria has now invited American, in addition to Israeli, French, British and Chinese intelligence services into the country while their drones hover over the northeast? In June, the President claimed to be less worried about insecurity because most of the violence is not in states controlled by his political party, the PDP⁹. Questions are circulating as to whether or not he is the president of Nigeria or that of the PDP. For the second day running now, the Nigerian military has unleashed terror on the media, confiscating and destroying most of Nigeria's leading national dailies meant for distribution¹⁰. In a way, the coming of the Americans is changing the dynamics of the conflict.

At the same time, the presence of the Americans has, by coincidence or by strategy, added to the number of daily attacks. For instance, the Government House in Gombe state was attacked in a massive explosion late June 5th. Sources said the explosion was targeted at a military armoured vehicle stationed in front of the government house¹¹. This bombing was preceded by attacks in Madagali and Kayamla the same day and bombs at a bar and brothel in Kabang on June 1 – all deadly¹². Security reports indicate that these attacks are expected to increase.

As a result many Nigerians have a slightly less rosy perception of the American intervention. Bunmi Olusona, a social commentator based in Lagos argues that the United States and most European countries do not have impressive records in terms of intervention, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo; on occasion, those interventions have ended up precipitating civil wars.¹³ Some suggest that this particular intervention could be a way of realizing the prediction in a report by America's National Intelligence Council – that Nigeria may disintegrate as a united country by 2015. The report surfaced in 2005 but was later denied by Washington. In addition, some Kaduna based clerics argue that the American intervention in the Chibok case will simply pull further at an already polarised society. They are already citing the American Intervention as an invasion of Islamic territory by Christian Crusaders from America. A Zaria based researcher asked why the Americans were not invited when the Niger Delta militants were plundering Nigeria's oil resources. For him, Boko Haram is an American creation meant to give Islam a bad name so as to eliminate Muslims. Recently, the governor of Jigawa state threatened to drag the Federal Government to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague to ensure that justice is done for the number of Muslim Fulani herdsmen allegedly killed by military personnel in the name of counter-terrorism¹⁴. So also Nyako, the governor of Adamawa state accused the Jonathan administration of orchestrating genocide against Muslim Fulanis in the north¹⁵.

More worrying is the fact that a sudden rise in secessionist agitations has re-emerged. For instance, Igbo Leaders of Thought; a group of prominent Igbo political leaders, left a meeting in Enugu on Wednesday with a warning that President Goodluck Jonathan may be the last president of a United Nigeria¹⁶. This rhetoric was followed by the invasion of Enugu State

⁹ Sahara Reporters, 2014. Security Less Challenging in PDP States, Jonathan Claims, June 5, 2014.

¹⁰ SaharaReporters, 2014. Day 2: Nigerian Soldiers Seize Newspaper Delivery Vehicles, Invade Newsstand in Abuja, June 7, 2014.

¹¹ SaharaReporters, 2014. Government House in Gombe Bombed, June 5, 2014.

¹² Nairayouth, 2014. Boko Haram bombs Bar and Brothel in Mubi, Adamawa State, 60 killed. June 1, 2014.

¹³ Rafiu Oriyomi, 2014. Nigerians Warn Against Foreign Intervention, *OnIslam*, May 16, 2014.

¹⁴ Peoples' Daily, 2014. Killing of Fulani: Lamido Threatens to Take the FG to ICC, June 5, 2014.

¹⁵ Andrew Agbese, 2014. Nigeria: PDP Blasts Nyako Over Letter to Northern Governors, *Daily Trust*, April 23, 2014

¹⁶ Vanguard News, 2014. Jonathan May be Nigeria's Last President – Kalu, June 5, 2014.

Broadcasting Service's office at dawn by a group known as Biafra Zionists Federation, BZF, in an attempt to seize the station for a broadcast by its leader, Benjamin Onwuka¹⁷. As far as the American intervention is concerned, what some ordinary Nigerians have been thinking loudly is best summarised by President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda when he inferred that 'it was not only humbling but a thing of shame for mere fundamentalists to reduce Nigeria to a nation of beggars for foreign assistance'¹⁸. In other words, if Nigeria's vast resources were properly managed, there was no need soliciting for outside help, perhaps, the conflict would not have emerged in the first place.

Thus, as a matter of policy, the Americans should pay attention to the fact that while concentrating on rescuing the girls, Boko Haram could grow stronger and bolder in attacking unprotected civilians and villages as part of their conflict strategy. The strategy here is meant to demonstrate that even with the presence of international forces, they cannot be easily cowed and must therefore dictate the pace of the conflict. Again, more than defeating the terrorists, it is fundamental to consider how foreign intervention will touch on ethno-religious and regional nerves in a country that is already deeply divided. This has huge impact for social and political co-existence when the Americans are long gone. Furthermore, as far as the propaganda war is concerned, Boko Haram seems to be 'harvesting the oxygen of publicity in cylinder-fuls'¹⁹. They want to impress upon national consciousness that despite the combined team of American and Nigerian soldiers, Jonathan's administration can no longer protect Nigerians. This will indeed play to the advantage of Boko Haram if the American team begins to suffer any casualty or finally withdraw from Nigeria as they did in Somalia in 1993. This publicity stunt needs to be countered with very strong TV channels, just like the proposed *AREWA24* channel being allegedly packaged by the US state department.

Sadly too, it took the American stakeholders long to decide if Boko Haram is a terrorist organization. Considering the porousness of African borders, in addition to the weak or absence of accountability institutions, it will also be foolhardy as a matter of foreign policy to consider any home grown terrorist organization as an 'incubated domestic threat' only. Boko Haram has always had the potential to grow and become a regional and international threat as it is today. At the moment, there are non-violent Islamic movements littered around northern Nigeria. No attention is paid to the indiscriminate ideological propaganda spread by these groups. Policies will begin to be constructed only when they turn violent. It seems clear that there is need to check them during this incubation period. Even if Americans are the real soldiers and all Nigerians are civilians, this intervention will have a lasting impact on the civil-military relationship in Nigeria, in addition to an already simmering regional and religious divide. This indeed is a point of consideration for America's policy makers.

¹⁷ Nyiter Fanen Andrew and Prince Ugo Agbugba, 2014. Three Killed As Biafra Secessionists Attack Nigerian Broadcast Station, *Premium Times*, June 5, 2014.

¹⁸ Ben Agande, 2014. How Terrorism is Shaping the Jonathan Presidency, *Vanguard Newspaper*, June 8, 2014.

¹⁹ Cameron Duodu, 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

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