

**Congress, administration at odds over Nigeria's Boko Haram**  
**BY KAZ KOMOLAFE**  
**24 JULY 2012**

WASHINGTON — As attacks by the Nigerian militant group Boko Haram become increasingly violent, some members of Congress are criticizing the Obama administration's refusal to formally designate the group a terrorist organization.

Senior U.S. officials contend that they still don't know enough about Boko Haram and that the most serious attacks attributed to the group may not reflect its overall ideology. The designation would put the group on a watch list and would bar American individuals and entities from providing it with financial or other resources.

Johnnie Carson, the ranking U.S. diplomat for African affairs, has been quick to condemn the group's actions. He noted that some of its members have been slapped with U.S. sanctions, but he argued before Congress recently that Boko Haram isn't a homogenous organization.

"We believe it is an organization of several parts," Carson told the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights earlier this month. "We believe the individuals we have designated represent a core group which is desirous of attacking not only Nigerian targets of interest but also international targets of interest."

Boko Haram, which means "Western education is sinful," has targeted primarily Christians in an attempt to create an Islamist state governed by Shariah law in Africa's most populous nation. The group claimed responsibility for a series of attacks in December that targeted churches across the country and claimed the lives of dozens of Nigerians.

To some critics, Carson's explanation doesn't stand up against the group's increasingly militant efforts.

"The U.S. government has a lot to learn about Boko Haram and their intelligence should remain high, but that should not be an excuse for inaction," said Morgan Roach, a researcher at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative research center in Washington.

Rep. Patrick Meehan, R-Pa., introduced a resolution in the House in May urging the State Department either to designate Boko Haram a terrorist organization or explain its reasons for not doing so. He introduced the resolution in response to the group's increasing aggression, including the Christmas bombings and an attack on the United Nations offices in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, he said.

"We're seeing a growing body of work, not a diminishing body of work, and I think the more those activities carry on the greater the demand will be for the Department of State to explain the position that they're taking," Meehan said.

Given the advancement in Boko Haram's attacks, particularly its increased use of homemade bombs, some U.S. officials suspect that the group is receiving technical support and training from other extremist groups in the region. Gen. Carter Ham, the commander of the U.S. military's Africa Command, and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper have explicitly said that Boko Haram now is allied with two other major African militant groups, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Somalia's al-Shabab, both of which the State Department has designated as terrorist organizations.

"I think (given) the amount of training and the quickness with which Boko Haram has been able to improve their tactics, improve their attacks, we have to be looking a bit more closely at where this is coming from," Roach said.

However, much disagreement among experts remains about Boko Haram's ties to the other terrorist groups. Unlike the other groups, Boko Haram's rhetoric is focused on Nigeria, not the United States, said John Campbell, a senior fellow for Africa policy studies at the nonpartisan Council on Foreign Relations.

Slapping it with the designation might limit the ability of nongovernmental organizations and the State Department to work in Nigeria, Campbell said.

"Designation makes you feel good, but it's an extremely blunt instrument," he said.

The designation is exactly what groups such as Boko Haram want, argued William Minter, an activist on African and other international issues, adding that it could help the group raise its profile and aid in recruiting members.

But it also might prod the Nigerian government to improve its security efforts, Meehan and others say. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has followed a strategy of diplomacy toward the group but his attempts at engaging it in a dialogue have failed, Roach said. Jonathan last month fired his national security adviser, Patrick Owoeye Azazi, and replaced him with Sambo Dasuki, the cousin of Nigeria's most prominent Muslim leader, in an attempt to build bridges between the mostly Christian southern half of the country and the mostly Muslim north.

Designating Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization "would put pressure on the Nigerian government to say, 'We take this threat seriously,' " Roach said.

Meehan said the United States also needed to take this potential security threat seriously, to avoid domestic disaster down the line.

"We don't get to choose those who are making threats against the country, nor do we get the luxury of choosing how we might characterize them," Meehan said.

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