

Nigerian Army Guilt?
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Sunday's New York Times carried an Agence France Presse piece reporting on the alleged Boko Haram killing of at least thirty people over a three day period in Potiskum, Yobe state. The piece also notes that it was "not clear whether soldiers were responsible for any of the destruction." The Nigerian army has been widely accused of indiscriminate killings in northern Nigeria as part of its campaign against Boko Haram. Some political leaders have urged the Jonathan government to withdraw the military, especially from Maiduguri, arguing that it feeds popular support for Boko Haram. I have blogged on a Human Rights Watch report that raises the question of whether the International Criminal Court has jurisdiction over crimes committed both by Boko Haram and the military.

But it is too easy to lay responsibility for alleged security service atrocities solely at the feet of the Nigerian military. As in many countries, the army in Nigeria is not responsible for maintaining domestic order. That is the function of the police, which, like the army, is a national—not local or state—institution. The army is not trained for domestic policing. Nonetheless the army has moved to the forefront in the struggle against Boko Haram because of the inadequacies of the police. The latter are so poorly paid they often support their families by shaking down travelers at the ubiquitous check points and indulge in other forms of petty corruption. The upper reaches of the police also appear riddled with corruption, sometimes of spectacular magnitude. And they are very badly trained. Anecdotes abound of indiscriminate police killings. A consequence of these shortcomings is that the police are widely (if not universally) despised. Popular regard for the military is marginally better, if seemingly in decline because of recent abuse allegations.

There is legal provision for the military to assist the police. But that is supposed to be governed by strict protocols. If the army sweeps an area, it is required to hand over its detainees to the police, as occurred when the army captured Boko Haram chief Mohammed Yusuf in 2009. As is well known, the police then murdered him.

There is another dimension. Individuals in the army can be just as affected by the religious and ethnic conflicts that have become widespread in northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the elections of 2011, as the population they are charged to protect. It is likely that many individual soldiers have a strong—even murderous—bias against the local people.

It goes without saying that individuals are responsible for their crimes. Soldiers, especially, must be held to the highest personal standards. Nevertheless, there is also an institutional mess, responsibility for which rests with successive governments in Abuja as well as with the individuals who commit the crimes. Over the past decade Abuja has not developed, trained, or supported the police adequately for it to do its job. And it is misusing the army to do what it is not trained to do. Alas, at this stage, it is too late to do much about it. Precipitous withdrawal of the army from Maiduguri could leave the city altogether open to Boko Haram.

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