

## Massacre in Nigeria Spurs Outcry Over Military Tactics

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Women and children in front of burned houses in Baga, Nigeria, after as many as 200 civilians were killed in an assault that survivors blamed on soldiers. Though civilian casualties have been viewed as routine, the size of the death toll has created an uproar.

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria — Days later, the survivors' faces tensed at the memory of the grim evening: soldiers dousing thatched-roof homes with gasoline, setting them on fire and shooting residents when they tried to flee. As the village went up in smoke, one said, a soldier threw a child back into the flames. Even by the scorched-earth standards of the Nigerian military's campaign against Islamist insurgents stalking the nation's north, what happened on the muddy shores of Lake Chad this month appears exceptional.

The village, Baga, found itself in the cross hairs of Nigerian soldiers enraged by the killing of one of their own, said survivors who fled here to the capital of Borno State, 100 miles south. Their home had paid a heavy price: as many as 200 civilians, maybe more, were killed during the military's rampage, according to refugees, senior relief workers, civilian officials and human rights organizations.

The apparent size of the civilian death toll — staunchly denied by Nigerian military officials, some of whom blame the insurgent group, Boko Haram, for the carnage — has prompted an unusual uproar.

Though heavy civilian casualties are routine in the military's confrontation with Boko Haram, with dozens dying in poor neighborhoods since 2010 as the army searches for "suspects," Nigeria's politicians usually have little to say about them. Past massacres of civilians in retaliation for soldier deaths have passed largely with impunity.

This time, there have been calls in Nigeria's national assembly for an investigation, and the government has come under harsh criticism at home and abroad, including the United States. The military has said it has begun its own inquiry, and some longstanding observers

of the country's heavy-handed fight against Islamist militants say a tipping point may have been reached.

"This is coming at a time when we have had similar situations" elsewhere, said Kole Shettima, chairman of the Center for Democracy and Development in the capital, Abuja. "People are tired of the excuses the military is giving, and that's why they are demanding an investigation. This time it's different. There is a crisis of legitimacy in the military."

But in a country where corruption abounds and accountability is rare, others wondered whether it would truly become a watershed moment — or get brushed aside as an unfortunate side effect of fighting a dangerous insurgency.

"This Baga is just on a bigger scale, but they have been doing this for ages," the governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, one of the first officials to reach Baga afterward, said of the military. "They've not adhered to the rules of engagement," said Mr. Shettima, who is not related to the democracy advocate. "When you burn down shops and massacre civilians, you are pushing them to join the camp of Boko Haram."

Yet, he continued, "we are in a Catch-22 situation." Boko Haram is a deadly insurgent force that needs to be confronted, the governor said, but not by a military that terrorizes its own people. "We need them to carry out their duties in a civilized manner."

Some Baga residents who did not perish in the flames drowned while attempting to escape into Lake Chad, refugees here in the state capital said. Others were attacked by hippopotamuses in the shallow waters, officials said. Soldiers shot people as they ran from the burning houses, refugees said.

"Many dead, many dead," said Mohammed Muhammed, 40, a taxi driver from Baga. "People running into the flames, I saw that. If they didn't run into the flames, the army will shoot them." As flames enveloped the houses — "they used petroleum," he said of the soldiers — he fled into the surrounding desert scrub.

"If you come out" from the flaming houses "they will shoot you," he said. "Please, sir, charge them in the international court!" he shouted.

Isa Kukulala, 26, a lanky bus driver who had left Baga that morning, gave a similar account: "They poured petrol on the properties. At the same time, they are shooting sporadically, inside the fire. They took a small child from his mother and threw him inside the fire. This is what I have witnessed." Hundreds of residents fled into the bush, where they lived for days in harsh conditions, and are only now trickling back into the town. "The aged people, the people that couldn't run, most of those people were burned," said Antony Emmanuel, a fish buyer. "Small children, their parents left them, they were burned." Borno State officials have said hundreds of houses were destroyed in the blaze.

The army has effectively blocked many journalists from getting to Baga — it is in a zone where Boko Haram exercises partial control — and it kept out relief agencies until the middle of last week. Cellphone service has been cut off. In a brief statement a week after the episode, Brig. Gen. Austin Edokpaye, the commander of the multinational joint task force — Nigeria shares intelligence with neighboring countries, though its soldiers generally do the shooting — said one soldier was killed "while 30 Boko Haram terrorists lost their lives" and "unfortunately six civilians" were killed. Ten "other civilians were injured in the cross-fire," he said.

Nigeria's director of defense information, Brig. Gen. Chris Olukolade, angrily rejected the accounts of residents and others. He said that "the burning, the killing is done by Boko Haram, not by the soldiers. Anybody blaming the soldiers must be a sympathizer with Boko Haram." He said that "Boko Haram was using the houses to shoot out at soldiers."

But the picture given by civilian officials in relief agencies and state government, along with the one presented by refugees, was very different, with the vast majority of deaths attributed to the military.

"More than 200 dead, this is what people in the town confirmed," said a senior relief official who asked not to be identified out of fear of retribution by the military. "Actually, my boys told me the number is far higher than the 200 reported," the relief official said.

A senior official under the governor, Mr. Shettima, who is not affiliated with the governing party, said: "The soldiers went on a rampage. Because, you know, that's what soldiers do in Nigeria. It's really crazy here."

General Olukolade responded angrily to such assertions, saying, "The politicians intend to create a haven for Boko Haram around our state."

In the accounts of refugees and officials, the killings started after a few gunmen, most likely Boko Haram members, engaged a detachment from Baga's military post in a firefight on the evening of April 16.

"Two people came, they said they were Jama'atu," said Mohammed Bella Sani, a fisherman from Baga, using Boko Haram's name for itself. Boko Haram has a heavy presence in that area of fluid national borders, officials say, and has even chased away all government presence, including officials and police officers, from many rural districts.

In Baga, the soldiers went for reinforcements after one among them was killed, residents said. "A team of soldiers came back shouting, and they started firing indiscriminately," Mr. Sani said.

"They set my neighbor's house on fire, and people started running back to save the neighbor," said Mallam Ali, a bus driver. And the soldiers began shooting into the crowd, he said.

"They were firing from the armored vehicles," said Alhadji Adamua, a clothing seller at Baga's market. "I saw them putting fire on people's houses. They are the security of the state. They have no right to kill anybody. They are supposed to protect the people."