

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	284
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)
Titel:	Detainee abuses “monumental” in northern Nigeria
Udgivet:	15. november 2013
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. december 2013



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Publisher [Integrated Regional Information Networks \(IRIN\)](#)

Publication Date 15 November 2013

Cite as Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), *Detainee abuses "monumental" in northern Nigeria*, 15 November 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/528b3c644.html> [accessed 9 December 2013]

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As attacks by militant group Boko Haram (BH) continue to spread terror across northeastern Nigeria, the government's response is also causing widespread fear among civilians. Mass sweep-ups of BH suspects, led by the military's Joint Task Force (JTF), have led to mounting reports of detainees dying or disappearing in custody.

According to rights group Amnesty International (AI), in the first six months of 2013, at least 950 people in the northeastern cities of Maiduguri, in Borno State, and Damaturu, in Yobe State, died in military custody. Most of the alleged victims were suspected members of BH, but they were largely held without being charged or tried.

Released detainees, families of the missing and a member of the JTF, who asked to remain anonymous, told IRIN that AI's 950 figure was just a fraction of the real death toll. They claimed the deaths reached into the thousands.

The AI report "is only a scratch on the surface," said the JTF member in Maiduguri. "The situation is deeper and more horrendous than that. What happens is carnage of monumental proportions. The deaths run into several thousands in the period AI is talking about," he told IRIN.

According to doctors in Maiduguri, detainees' families and the AI report, detainees died from gunshot wounds, torture, dehydration, malnutrition or suffocation (many were held in overcrowded cells with no windows). Some detainees were shot in the leg and left to bleed to death, according to AI. Others were killed outright.

AI called on human rights monitors and lawyers to be allowed access to JTF detention facilities, but this has not yet been granted. It also asked for an impartial, transparent investigation into the killings. Senior defence officials in the capital, Abuja, told AI in July that the Chief of Defence had set up a committee to investigate the allegations of detainee ill-treatment, but no further details were shared.

The Nigerian Human Rights Commission continues to monitor human rights abuses in the northeast from its bases in Maiduguri and Yola, the capital of Adamawa state. It is also undertaking an audit of all of Nigeria's detention centres, but it is unaware of any independent investigations into the alleged abuses, said Chidi Odinkalu, head of the commission. The NHRC is

"in regular contact with various levels of Nigeria's security and defense architecture, and will continue to do so in order to encourage Nigeria's security agencies to improve its operational dispositions ," he told IRIN, diplomatically.

"The abattoir"

Three of the worst-offending detention centres, according to AI, are: Giwa, a former military barracks in Maiduguri; Sector Alpha in Damaturu, which is often called "Guantanamo"; and Presidential Lodge, also in Damaturu, which is commonly called "Guardroom".

One ex-detainee, a fish-trader from Maiduguri's Muna Garage neighbourhood, was rounded up in a military sweep in November 2012, following a BH attack on a nearby military target. He was held in Giwa until June 2013, he told IRIN.

"People are kept like animals, in filthy and overcrowded rooms with neither ventilation nor light. Suspects are given very little food or water. Many become sick from hunger, torture or infection," he said.

"The sick are just taken out of the cell to a place soldiers refer to as the 'abattoir', where they are shot dead. We would just hear gunshots every time sick suspects were taken out, and they never returned."

He continued: "Once a cell is congested, the inmates will be given a poisoned meal to clear it. When the bodies begin to decompose, they call in BOSEPA [Borno State Environmental Protection Agency] sanitation trucks to pack them out of the barracks."

He was released following pressure from a federal legislator from his area, who made a case that the fish trader and his colleagues had nothing to do with BH.

Amnesty International did not document cases of poisoning at detention centres, but a medical source at Sani Abacha Specialist Hospital in Damaturu said that in August of this year, 27 bodies were brought to the hospital from the Guantanamo detention centre, and "all had white foam in their mouths which was a clear case of oral poisoning. But the issue was hushed out of fear for the safety of medical staff."

At Guantanamo, some suspects are thrown into large holes dug into the ground, "where there is no protection from the scorching heat, rain or cold, and with their hands bound behind their back. Between 30 and 50 men are put in each hole, and allowed to die," the military source told IRIN.

Mass graves

Soldiers use euphemisms such as "delete him" and "take him to the abattoir", said the military source. The dead are usually buried in the camps, but sometimes they are packed into open trucks and dumped at the state-run Sani Abacha specialist hospital in Damaturu, sources said.

A doctor at the hospital told IRIN, "The JTF regularly brings in dead bodies from Guantanamo and the Guardroom. They dump them outside the morgue, and relations of detainees come to identify them, and those who are identified are taken away for burial while the remaining are given a mass burial."

He said, "Sometimes they bring in as many as 40 bodies, with bullet wounds in most cases. We have received no less than 2,500 bodies in the past six months."

Decomposing bodies are also routinely dumped outside the cemetery in Gwange area of Maiduguri City by BOSEPA trucks, said an elderly Gwange resident. "We have become used to the mass burial of dead bodies dumped by soldiers here. They bring them in BOSEPA trucks and

residents [gather] to identify their relatives or friends from among them. And those that cannot be identified, we bury them in mass graves," he told IRIN.

A police source, who also asked to remain unnamed, told IRIN: "The truth is that no one can say with any degree of accuracy the number of those killed or died in military custody because there is no record to refer to."

He continued: "The Amnesty [International] report only reflects the situation in detention camps, but the reality of deaths and abuses is far more than that. It is unimaginable."

The JTF has remained silent on the AI report. But on 16 October, Nigeria army spokesman Brig-Gen Ibrahim Attahiru told some Nigerian media outlets that the allegations were baseless. He accused AI of not confirming the allegations with the military.

Civilian detainees

The JTF launched an emergency operation in May 2013 in northeastern Nigeria to crack down on BH, which has killed at least 3,600 civilians over four years, according to rights groups. Their attacks have included a series of assaults on schools. The violence and military crackdown have affected 5.9 million Nigerians and displaced tens of thousands according to the United Nations.

After an attack on a military target, JTF soldiers conduct sweeping operations, including mass arrests, killing civilians and burning homes in the affected area, according to Human Rights Watch and accounts from residents.

Maiduguri City is divided into sectors for operational reasons, so the arrested suspects are first taken to the nearest sector detention facility, and some are then transferred to Giwa barracks. But the military rarely investigates whether detainees are really BH militants, said the JTF source. "Boko Haram members, criminals and innocent civilians are all lumped together and given the same treatment, without any attempt to establish their identity," he said.

Of the eight sectors, Sector 1 is the most notorious for extrajudicial killings of suspects, the military source said. In November 2012, in Baga fish market, soldiers arrested 400 suspects; only 70 of them survived, he said.

When the Sector 1 commander was asked to deliver 3,000 detainees to JTF headquarters in Maiduguri, he brought only 300. The others had been killed, he said. The Nigeria Defence forces spokesperson, Brigadier Chris Olukolade, told IRIN the JTF did not have any further comments to make on the issue.

"Once someone is labelled BH by his adversary over, say, a girlfriend he is competing for, he gets arrested by the military and treated as BH."

According to AI, no suspected perpetrator is known to have been arrested or brought to justice for the deaths of detainees in JTF custody.

Pay to escape

Families that can raise, on average, 200,000 naira (US\$1,250) can pay the sector commander to get their relatives released, but only before they are transferred to Giwa, said one ex-detainee. Once a suspect is at Giwa, it is more difficult to secure their release.

Soldiers also extort money from detainees' families, who approach them for help contacting their relatives, said family members of missing detainees. The brother of Grema Babagana, a fish trader from the Muna Garage neighbourhood of Maiduguri, was among dozens of people rounded up by the military in November 2012 following a BH attack. The brother was taken to Giwa barracks.

"We approached a soldier who appeared sympathetic, and he promised to establish contact with our brother, which he did," said Babagana. "He kept taking money from us for the feeding and medical treatment of our bother for wounds he sustained during interrogation." But it later turned out his brother had been dead for four months; a business partner broke the news after he was released from Giwa. "That was when we realized we had been duped."

While not excusing the behaviour, the military source said the indiscriminate killings were linked to a sense of hopelessness and mounting frustration on the part of JTF forces. Other military operations against BH have been similarly dogged by allegations of abuse.

"Soldiers deployed to the northeast to fight BH are poorly treated by the military authorities, and they vent their frustration and anger on the civilian population, especially those in detention, whom they see as the reason for their travails," he told IRIN. "It is a case of transferred aggression."

JTF soldiers fighting BH earn \$3 a day, which is not enough to cover their upkeep. Their physical and emotional state is "severely strained", said the source, as many have been working far longer than the stipulated three-month operational limit.

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