

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	336
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Norwegian Refugee Council og IDMC
Titel:	Briefing paper. Boko Haram's terror ripples through the region
Udgivet:	16. april 2015
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	17. juni 2015



A Nigerian soldier inspects the damage to a mosque in Adamawa state that was destroyed during clashes between the government and Boko Haram militants. Nigeria's north-east is considered the epicentre of the conflict but cross-border attacks in neighboring countries have created a stronger regional dimension to the crisis. Photo: © Jerome Starkey, April 2015

BRIEFING PAPER

Boko Haram's terror ripples through the region

16 APRIL 2015

Despite a relative lull in attacks since the March 2015 presidential elections, the insurgency by militant group Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria is far from over and needs continue to rise. Violence perpetrated by the group is the primary driver of a reported [1.2 million people](#) fleeing to other parts of the country. Mass abductions of women and girls, such as the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, has become a trademark tactic. During the second half of 2014 and early 2015, internal displacement at the hands of Boko Haram was also reported within neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. These three countries now have roughly the same number of IDPs –nearly 200,000– as they do Nigerian [refugees](#).

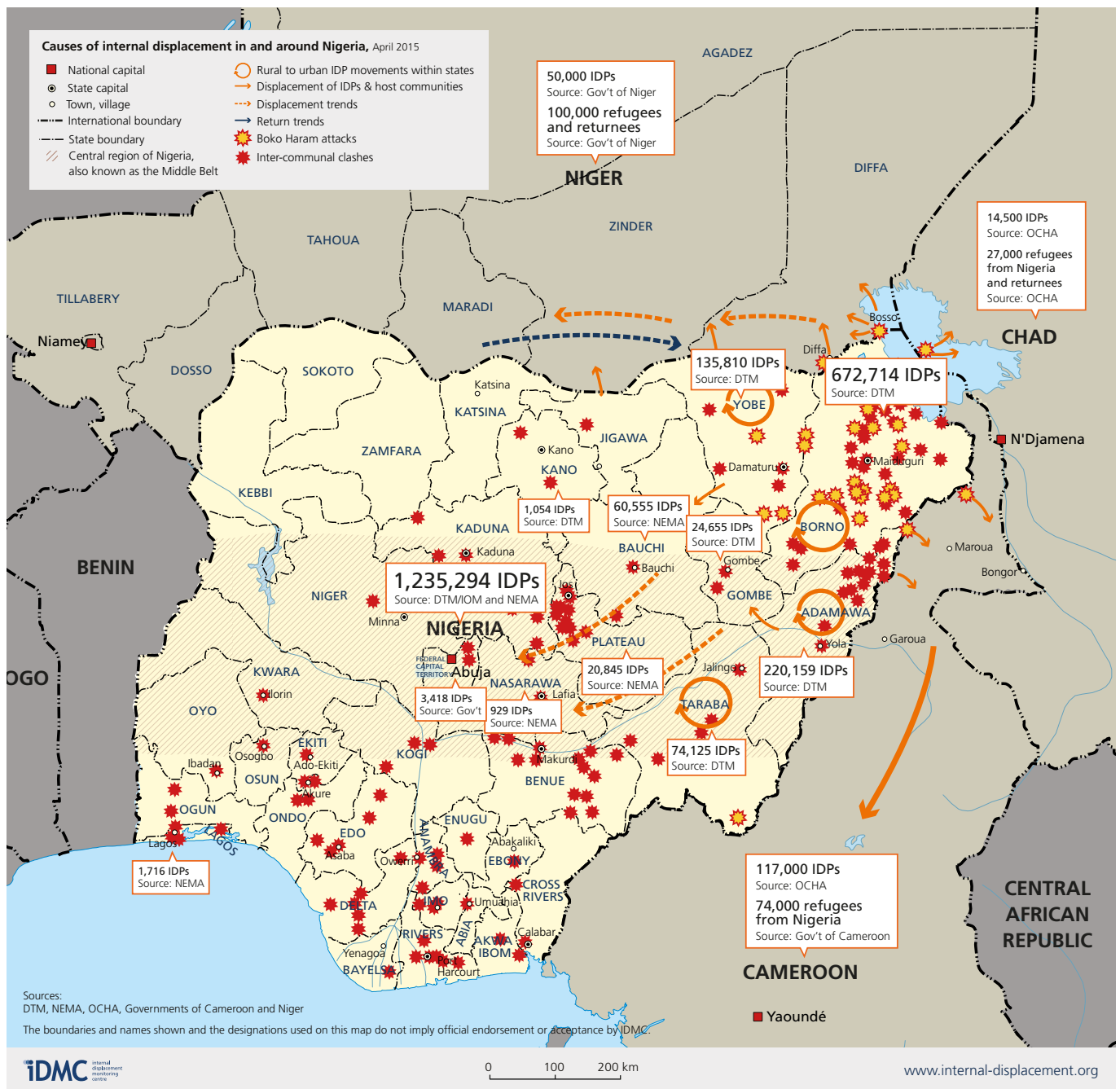
These trends, along with Boko Haram's declaration of a caliphate in 2014 and their recent pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State (also known as ISIL) in March 2015, send clear signals that their agenda goes well beyond Nigeria. While military interventions in recent months seem to have reversed some of the territorial gains made by the militant group, internal displacement triggered by Boko Haram is expected to continue across the region.

Ground zero in Nigeria's north-east

Formally known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, or People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad, Boko Haram's violent campaign since 2009 to create an Islamic state has wreaked havoc across the north-east of Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. Boko Haram gained its foothold here by taking advantage of an already unstable environment due to chronic poverty, corruption, abuses by security forces and longstanding impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations.

Today, the north-east is considered the epicentre of the crisis. There are [24.5 million people](#) living in states under recurrent attacks by Boko Haram, where the militant group is reported to have [killed more than a thousand civilians](#) in the first three months of 2015 alone. The group's brutal ambushes and heavy-handed government counter-insurgency operations have created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Nigeria's north-east. Their actions have triggered massive population movements towards the Middle Belt region, where violence between communities has likely [displaced hundreds of thousands](#) over the past 15 years, and religious and ethnic tensions still run high.

In February 2015, the displacement tracking matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) identified [nearly 1.2 million internally displaced people](#) (IDPs) living in the north-



east states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Taraba, Yobe, and Borno, though security constraints barred access to large parts of Borno state. In addition, Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency registered just over 47,000 IDPs in central parts of the country, including Abuja (Federal Capital Territory), Kano, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau, bringing the number of identified IDPs to more than 1.2 million in northern and central Nigeria.

Behind the statistics and incomplete assessments exist real and pressing needs. Displaced people, the majority of whom are women and children, face a range of threats to their lives, with [reports](#) of girls raped and forced into early marriage and thousands of boys forcibly recruited to fight. Many IDPs are [traumatised by the violence](#) that prompted them to flee and are afraid to return home. One of Boko Haram's characteristic tactics of burning villages to the ground, as was the case in the deadly [attacks on Baga and Doron Baga](#) in January 2015, means many people do not have a home to go back to.

A dismal regional forecast

In addition to the suffering and chaos caused by the militants within Nigeria, terrorist attacks and cross-border raids for supplies and new recruits in Cameroon, Chad and Niger in the last year have triggered internal displacement and forced refugees to uproot again in search of safety.

- In **Cameroon**, Boko Haram attacks since December 2014 have tripled the number of IDPs to roughly [117,000](#). The three districts most affected are Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Tsanaga and Logone-et-Chari in the Far North region. More than [half a million people](#) are now in urgent need of food aid since attacks by Boko Haram have forced farmers to abandon their fields and shut down local markets.
- In **Niger**, Boko Haram first launched attacks within the country in February 2015, with residents reporting a car bomb in Diffa town and [assaults by militants](#) on nearby Bosso. These attacks forced an estimated [50,000 people](#) to flee towards the city of Zinder and across the Diffa region. [The UN Refugee Agency reported](#) that

people were progressively returning to their homes in Diffa, while Bosso remained virtually empty.

- In **Chad**, Boko Haram attacks in the Lake region in February 2015 forced at least 14,500 people to flee their homes. These movements, combined with the thousands of Nigerians and returning Chadians who have fled Nigeria since 2012, have drained the already meagre resources of host communities.

The effects of the crisis in north-east Nigeria are reverberating across neighbouring countries and risk destabilising the wider Sahel. This region, spanning a narrow belt of land across several north and west African countries, has been ravaged by decades of rotating conflicts, inundated with the circulation of [small arms](#), and is suffering [chronic levels of food insecurity](#) and malnutrition. The Sahel region is dependent on Nigeria for [half of its cereals](#). As Nigeria's rainy season approaches and many farmers still displaced, the long-term consequences of the crisis are growing in severity.

Patterns of displacement

Unpredictable waves of IDPs and refugees across Nigeria and neighboring countries have complicated how displacement is monitored and evaluated. This is further exacerbated by the fact that many people on the run do not have, or have lost, their identification documents, which makes it problematic to discern whether a person is internally displaced, a returning national or a stranded migrant. Despite these complexities, three trends have emerged that shine some light on the patterns of movement of those fleeing the violence.

First, while available [data](#) indicates that IDPs tend to stay within their own state, anecdotal evidence suggests that as the conflict drags on, people are fleeing greater distances than before, and staying in these areas of refuge for longer periods of time. This should not only flag to humanitarian and development agencies the need to plan for alternatives to return, but could also signal a longer-term change in the region's demographics.

Secondly, Boko Haram conducts surprise attacks on unsuspecting villages. This means that family members are often in different places –working in the fields or at school– when they have to drop what they are doing and flee for their lives, often leaving with nothing but the shirts on their backs. This has dispersed families and left many children separated from their parents or caregivers. The government recently registered [760 unaccompanied children](#) in Adamawa alone, signaling the probability of significantly higher numbers across the region.

Thirdly, the presence of [Boko Haram along Nigeria's borders](#) with Cameroon and Niger has prevented people from fleeing across these frontiers to safety. Others have been trapped in towns the militants controlled as part of their caliphate. Ongoing military interventions may continue to [open up](#) escape routes for people currently blocked from seeking safety elsewhere, but will also likely increase the amount of displacement in the region.

Hidden in host communities

According to the latest [assessments](#), nearly one in ten IDPs live in host communities, many of whom are benefit-

Abductions, gender and Boko Haram tactics

Militants have kidnapped at least [2,000 women and girls](#) in north-eastern Nigeria since the start of 2014, and large-scale abductions, such as the hijacking of 276 schoolgirls in [Chibok](#) in April 2014, have [escalated](#) over the past year. Such tactics are not only a most literal form of forced displacement, they constitute a serious abuse of human rights. Displaced people cite “fear of abduction” as a [key factor](#) underscoring their decision to flee.

Abductions have reportedly been [motivated](#) by retaliation against the government for its alleged detention of militants' family members, in particular their wives, and by a strategy to forcefully convert Christian women and girls to Islam. Boko Haram has committed numerous [human rights violations](#) against women and girls in captivity, including physical and psychological abuse, forced labour, participation in military operations, marriage to captors and sexual abuse including rape. The group has also used women and girls for [tactical purposes](#), such as to procure payment of a ransom or for a prisoner exchange.

Some analysts suggest that the targeted abductions of women and girls and their use as suicide bombers should not be read as an act of desperation. Rather, these abductions can be seen as part of a strategic, [organised campaign](#) to attract media attention, allowing Boko Haram to raise visibility for their propaganda at the international level. Regardless of the motivation, gender is now an increasingly significant [component](#) of Boko Haram's tactics, messaging and violence.

ing from prior links with family or friends. There is very little information about these out-of-camp IDPs. Most either stay with people they know or pay to stay in someone's home or in lodging such as hotels.

Ethnic groups living in north-east Nigeria [share roots](#) with the residents of the Far North region of Cameroon, Chad's Lake region and the Diffa region in Niger, where most refugees have settled. However, as the conflict endures and people flee further afield, their chances diminish of having prior connections with host communities, which could decrease the willingness of the residents to accommodate them. In Niger, worrying [reports](#) reveal that IDPs and refugees are being stigmatised. Similarly, Nigerian Muslims who fled to Cameroon say they are [suspected](#) of being sympathisers of Boko Haram.

To make matters worse, the resources of many neighbourhoods that opened their doors to IDPs are [being exhausted](#). The worsening plight of host communities and people seeking refuge within them has only amplified the scope and complexity of the crisis.

Perilous life in camps

Roughly 13 per cent of IDPs do not have the option of staying in host communities, and find themselves living in “displacement sites”, either government-run camps in cities, official or informal camps or transit centres. Over [40 such sites](#) in Adamawa, Borno and Taraba states host more than 150,000 IDPs.

Women and children interviewed in over half of these sites say they do not feel safe. This fear has been corroborated

by [reports that unregistered girls are subject to rape and trafficking in displacement sites](#). In April 2015, an undercover journalist was offered to [buy two young girls](#) in a displacement site in Yola, Adamawa for \$500. IDPs are also often unable to meet their most basic needs, with sometimes [erratic food distributions](#) and only minimal access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Despite miserable conditions in displacement sites, IDPs still live in fear of having to evacuate them. Some have already been asked by host communities to leave; one group of IDPs living in Abuja for the past two years was recently given a [three-week ultimatum](#) to vacate the premises. In early April, the Nigerian government set up a [committee](#) tasked with creating a plan to relocate IDPs and close the camps.

A fresh start for President Buhari

In his acceptance speech, Nigeria's president-elect Muhammadu Buhari vowed to [tackle the crisis](#) in the north-east of the country. He has a daunting but distinct window of opportunity to do so after he takes office on 29 May. Boko Haram is on the run for the first time in six years. At the same time, the international community is increasing its support to Nigeria both militarily and in terms of humanitarian assistance, including the approval in March 2015 of [\\$28 million](#) from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund. Such support cannot be squandered, and should be allocated in three ways.

First, there is an urgent need to scale up the humanitarian response not only in north-east Nigeria but also in its neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Given the regional nature of the displacement crisis, the humanitarian response should be [harmonised and coordinated](#) across the four affected countries, by sharing expertise, lessons learned and standardising approaches.

Such a regional plan needs to be coordinated on the basis of reliable information about the number of those affected and their needs. IOM's displacement tracking matrix is an essential tool in providing a clearer overall picture of displacement. Plans are welcome to [enlarge the matrix coverage](#) in Nigeria, and set up the system in Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

Lastly, a [recent poll](#) indicates that the vast majority of Nigerians, irrespective of gender, age or geo-political zones, would support the introduction of a national law to protect the rights of IDPs. Nigeria ratified the [Kampala Convention](#) in May 2012 and drafted a national policy to adopt its provisions. More than two years later, the policy has yet to be adopted. To demonstrate leadership early in his new administration, President Buhari would do well to heed the call by the Nigerian people and prioritise the adoption of a national policy on internal displacement.

CONTACT

Elizabeth J. Rushing
Regional analyst for West Africa
Tel: +41 22 795 07 43
Email: elizabeth.rushing@nrc.ch
Skype: ejrushing_idmc

Sebastián Albuja
Head of Africa and Americas
Department
Tel: +41 22 799 07 08
Mobile: +41 78 806 83 08
Email: sebastian.albuja@nrc.ch

IDMC
Norwegian Refugee Council
Chemin de Balexert 7-9
1219 Geneva, Switzerland
www.internal-displacement.org
Tel: +41 (0)22 799 0700
Fax: +41 (0)22 799 0701

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) is the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement. For the millions of people worldwide displaced within their own country, IDMC plays a unique role as a global monitor and evidence-based advocate to influence policy and action by governments, UN agencies, donors, international organisations and NGOs.

IDMC was established in 1998 at the request of the Interagency Standing Committee on humanitarian assistance. Since then, IDMC's unique global function has been recognised and reiterated in annual UN General Assembly resolutions. IDMC is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent, non-governmental humanitarian organisation.

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