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Nigeria: Boko Haram brutality against women and girls needs urgent response – new research

- Recent attacks in Borno State marked by war crimes, including rape and other sexual violence, as well as murder and mass pillage
- Nigerian authorities and partners must provide food and services to affected communities

Boko Haram fighters targeted women and girls with rape and other sexual violence, amounting to war crimes, during recent raids in northeast Nigeria, new research by Amnesty International has revealed.

In February and March 2021, Amnesty International interviewed 22 people in a cluster of villages in northern Borno State that Boko Haram has repeatedly attacked since late 2019.

During violent raids, Boko Haram fighters killed people trying to flee and looted livestock, money, and other valuables.

As Boko Haram continue their relentless cycle of killings, abductions and looting, they are also subjecting women and girls to rape and other sexual violence during their attacks. These atrocities are war crimes.

The targeted communities have been abandoned by the forces that are supposed to protect them, and are struggling to gain any recognition or response to the horrors they've suffered. The Nigerian authorities must urgently address this issue.

"The International Criminal Court must immediately open a full investigation into the atrocities committed by all sides, and ensure those responsible are held accountable, including for crimes against women and girls."

After repeated displacement, the affected communities have mostly moved to military-controlled areas, but many have yet to receive any humanitarian assistance.

Rape and other sexual violence

Survivors and witnesses described attacks involving sexual violence in at least five villages in the Magumeri local government area of Borno State. During raids, usually at night, Boko Haram fighters raped women and girls who were caught at home or trying to flee.

One woman was physically assaulted by Boko Haram fighters as she fled from an attack in late 2020. She crawled to a home and hid there with her children, and saw fighters return and enter a nearby home.

She said: "In the next house, I started hearing some women were shouting and screaming and crying. I was very afraid. After some minutes, maybe 30 minutes, I saw the men come out of the house. There were five or six of them with their guns. Then afterwards, the women were confused. Their dresses were not normal."

Amnesty International interviewed three other witnesses who similarly described the same attack, including hearing women's screams and seeing them extremely distressed after Boko Haram left. A traditional healer said she cared for several women following the attack who had been raped.

The same healer had previously treated two other survivors, including one who was under 18 years old, after a Boko Haram attack on another village. She said: "I could see the pain on their faces. [The first survivor] told me what happened. I saw her private parts. They were very swollen. So I understood it was more than one or two people who had raped her. She was suffering."

Another woman told Amnesty International that during the same attack fighters shot people who were running away, then came to her house and sexually assaulted her. She said: “The men entered my room. I asked what they wanted. They took my jewellery and belongings. Then they fell on me.”

Some witnesses also described Boko Haram abducting women during several attacks, taking them away on motorbikes. The women were returned to their village days later, showing clear signs of trauma.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence constitute war crimes in the context of the conflict, as defined under the Rome Statute.

No survivors Amnesty International interviewed appear to have accessed formal health services. Stigma and fear of repercussions mean such incidents are significantly underreported, even within affected communities. At least one of the survivors continues to suffer health complications some months later.

Access to abortion is illegal in Nigeria, except when life is at risk, which means survivors of rape do not have access to safe and legal abortion.

Killings and looting

During raids, Boko Haram fighters stole almost everything they could find. Witnesses consistently described fighters arriving on motorbikes and on foot, before firing into the air. In several attacks, Boko Haram targeted and murdered civilians as they fled; in one attack, [several older people who were unable to flee](#) were killed inside their homes.

Fighters often went house-to-house, rounding up livestock and stealing valuables including money, mobile phones, jewellery, and clothes. Witnesses described fighters loading the looted property onto their motorbikes, or on donkeys from the village. To steal livestock, fighters often forced young men to herd the animals into the forest.

A 40-year-old man whose village was raided told Amnesty International: “Before, if you came to our house, you’d see we had cows and goats. I didn’t have many, just a few, but with that I was content. Now, we have nothing... They took everything from us.”

Some fighters wore Nigerian military uniforms, while others wore traditional dress of the region. Witnesses said they knew the perpetrators belonged to Boko Haram, and not the Nigerian military, for several reasons. They could hear the fighters speaking languages common among Boko Haram members; the fighters came on motorbikes, not military vehicles; and the fighters dressed in a combination of attire. Even those fighters wearing stolen Nigerian military uniforms often wore sandals or had bare feet, instead of military boots.

Many witnesses also reported that some children, aged between 15 and 17, were among the attackers, along with men in their 20s.

Urgent response needed

After repeated attacks in recent months, communities from this cluster of villages fled to areas within the Nigerian military’s established perimeters. Many people settled less than a kilometre from an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp outside Maiduguri. Some tried to move into the camp, but were told it was full.

Officials from the nearby IDP camp visited and took people’s names, reportedly around two months ago, but no-one had returned since, according to everyone displaced to that location whom Amnesty International interviewed. Many women remain frustrated that no-one from the government or the humanitarian community has spoken with them to understand the targeting of women during attacks, and what support is needed now. Many added they wished the government would acknowledge and apologize for what happened, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Months after settling near the IDP camp, the communities have still not received any assistance, including food, shelter, or health care. In early March, a young child died, and her family told Amnesty International she was malnourished and that they believed that factor contributed to her death. Everyone displaced near the camp described widespread hunger.

One woman told Amnesty International: “We need food assistance. All around us are malnourished children. Some of the women go to the camp, [but they’re] told to go away. Some are begging. Some [of us] are selling our things.”

This is a humanitarian crisis that is getting worse day-by-day. The Nigerian authorities and partners must act now to support those most in need, and ensure this horrendous situation doesn’t continue to deteriorate"

Background

The conflict in northeast Nigeria has created a humanitarian crisis, with more than 2,000,000 people now displaced. Boko Haram has also frequently targeted aid workers trying to respond to the crisis.

Amnesty International has [repeatedly documented crimes under international law](#) and other serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in northeast Nigeria.

The Nigerian authorities [have not taken](#) any genuine steps towards investigating and prosecuting crimes by Boko Haram or the Nigerian security forces, including crimes of sexual violence. Last December, the chief prosecutor of the ICC [announced that her office had concluded](#) a decade-long preliminary examination into the situation in Nigeria, saying that it had found sufficient evidence of crimes to open a full investigation. No formal investigation has yet been opened.

The conflict continues to have a dire impact on civilians, as documented in Amnesty International reports on the experience of [women](#), [children](#) and [older people](#).

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ecoi.net summary:



Borno state: According to interviews conducted in villages repeatedly attacked by Boko Haram since late 2019, there have been war crimes, including sexual violence, killings and mass pillage

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