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Cameroon: Boko Haram Attacks Escalate in Far North

(Nairobi) – The Islamist armed group Boko Haram has stepped up attacks on civilians in towns and villages in the Far North region of [Cameroon](#) since December 2020, killing at least 80 civilians, Human Rights Watch said today. The group has also looted hundreds of homes in the region. The government should take concrete measures to both increase protection to vulnerable communities and ensure a rights-respecting security force response to the worsening violence.

“Boko Haram is waging a war on the people of Cameroon at a shocking human cost,” said [Ilaria Allegrozzi](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “As Cameroon’s Far North region increasingly becomes the epicenter of Boko Haram’s violence, Cameroon should urgently adopt and carry out a new, rights-respecting strategy to protect civilians at risk in the Far North.”

The area where a Boko Haram’s female suicide bomber detonated her explosive vest in the bush around Mozogo, Far North region, Cameroon, killing 11 civilians, February 2021© 2021 Private

Human Rights Watch documented how a Boko Haram suicide bomber blew up fleeing civilians, dozens of local fishermen were killed with machetes and knives, and an elderly village chief was assassinated in front of his family. Research suggests that the actual number of casualties is much higher, given the difficulty of confirming details remotely and that attacks often go unreported.

From January 25 to February 25, 2021, Human Rights Watch interviewed by telephone 20 victims and witnesses to 5 Boko Haram attacks since mid-December in the towns and villages of Blabline, Darak, Gouzoudou, and Mozogo in the Far North region, as well 4 family members of victims, 2 humanitarian workers, and 5 local activists. Human Rights Watch also interviewed 2 victims and a witness to human rights violations in the region by Cameroonian soldiers. Human Rights Watch reviewed reports from [humanitarian and other nongovernmental organizations](#) and local [media reports](#) on attacks in the region and consulted with academics, political analysts, and representatives of the African Union, the United Nations, and the European Union.

Human Rights Watch shared the research by email with Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, the Cameroonian army spokesperson, on February 1 and again on March 19, requesting information about the Boko Haram attacks, the ongoing military operations, and the specific allegations Human Rights Watch documented. The army spokesperson did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

Cameroon’s territorial administration minister [said](#) on February 12 that the security situation in the Far North region is “under control” and that Boko Haram is “living its last days.”

One of the deadliest recent attacks was in Mozogo on January 8, when Boko Haram fighters killed at least 14 civilians, including 8 children, and wounded 3 others, including 2 children. As fighters shot at residents and looted homes, a female suicide bomber infiltrated a group of fleeing civilians and then detonated her explosive vest, witnesses said.

“As the shooting started, I ran away toward the forest,” a 41-year-old resident said. “I heard a powerful explosion and lay on the ground. I saw a 7-year-old child covered in blood running toward me. He took me to the place where the kamikaze detonated her explosive vest. It was a bloodbath.”

The Boko Haram insurgency began in Nigeria in 2009 and then spread across the Lake Chad basin countries, including Cameroon. Boko Haram’s attacks are often indiscriminate, including [suicide bombings](#) in [crowded areas that appear](#) designed to maximize civilian deaths and injuries. Cameroon has had a [sharp spike](#) in attacks over the past year. According to a [November 2020 report of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#), a United States Department of Defense think tank, the number of Boko Haram attacks against civilians in Cameroon in 2020 was higher than in Nigeria, Niger, and Chad combined.

In 2015, the African Union established the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), made up of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, to respond to Boko Haram attacks across the Lake Chad basin. Comprising over 8,000 troops, [the MNJTF receives technical, financial, and strategic support](#) from international partners, including the [European Union](#), the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. The multinational force has conducted joint military operations across the Lake Chad basin.

It is essential for Cameroon and the multinational force to improve the conduct of forces deployed to counter Boko Haram attacks and to ensure that allegations of human rights violations by its forces are investigated and prosecuted, Human Rights Watch said.

Since 2014, rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, have documented widespread human rights violations and crimes under international humanitarian law by Cameroonian security forces deployed on operations in the Far North, including [extrajudicial executions](#), [arbitrary arrests](#), [enforced disappearances](#), [incommunicado detention](#), [systematic torture](#), and [forced return of refugees](#).

On December 9, soldiers from the [Rapid Intervention Battalion \(BIR\)](#), an elite unit of the Cameroonian army, arrested four fishermen in Dabanga, in the Far North region, beat them, and took them to the Dabanga military base, where one of them died, said two of the fishermen and a family member. The fishermen said that the soldiers accused them of being Boko Haram members and that they saw one of the fishermen who was arrested with them taken from the cell soon after they arrived.

A family member of the fisherman who died said that BIR soldiers brought his body to their home hours after he was arrested, claiming he had died of a heart attack. The two fishermen and the family member said they believe the security forces killed him.

Cameroon's international partners should push for accountability for human rights violations and work to strengthen the civilian component of the multinational force and its human rights compliance office, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch also urges the Cameroonian parliament to hold a hearing to explore the government's response to the increasing attacks on civilians in the Far North, to provide recommendations on how to enhance civilian protection, and to seek input from international actors as needed.

International humanitarian law, applicable to the armed conflict with Boko Haram, prohibits deliberate disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects. Those who order or commit such attacks with criminal intent are responsible for war crimes.

"With Boko Haram attacks on the rise in Cameroon, more needs to be done to effectively protect civilians, including by boosting the military presence and patrols across the Far North region and ensuring that the soldiers respect people's rights," Allegrozzi said. "Cameroon's regional and international partners, including those supporting the multinational force, should bolster these efforts and ensure that their assistance does not contribute to human rights violations."

Humanitarian Crisis

The Cameroonian military has deployed thousands of soldiers to the Far North region to prevent and repel attacks by Boko Haram, but residents and humanitarian workers said the soldiers' presence is far too thin to effectively protect civilians. Cameroon's overstretched army is also confronting a [separatist insurgency](#) in the country's Anglophone regions and the threat of cross-border raids by rebels in neighboring [Central African Republic](#). It has relied on over [14,000](#) so-called "vigilantes," community self-defense groups, and in some cases forced [untrained civilians to carry out security tasks without adequate training or protection, putting them at great risk](#).

The Boko Haram violence in Cameroon has led to a major humanitarian crisis, forcing over [322,000](#) people from their homes since 2014, including 12,500 since December. Given the heightened insecurity, access to many areas is only possible with military escorts, [making it difficult for humanitarian organizations](#) to deliver aid while respecting their neutrality, depriving those in need of life-saving assistance. Aid workers and residents said that increasing the military presence and military patrols in violence-prone areas, including on market days, would both improve civilian protection and expand humanitarian access by enabling aid workers to safely travel without escorts.

Mozogo

Raid and Suicide Attack

Witnesses said that about 100 fighters, whom they recognized as being Boko Haram members from

the way they dressed and spoke, entered the town of Mozogo on foot at about 1:30 a.m. on January 8, breaking into homes, looting property, and shooting at residents, killing two men, one of whom was 80 years old. As they fled towards the nearby bush, witnesses reported hearing a loud explosion. A female suicide bomber had infiltrated a group of fleeing civilians and detonated her explosive vest, killing 11 people on the spot, including 8 children, and wounding 3 others, including 2 children. A 43-year-old man later died three days later at the Koza Adventist hospital from wounds caused by the explosion.

Human Rights Watch spoke to five witnesses to the attack, including three family members of victims. Human Rights Watch also obtained lists of the 14 people killed from four sources and spoke to relatives and residents who carried out the burials. These details correspond with the information published by [local media](#).

A 43-year-old woman who lost two of her children, a 17-year-old boy and a 4-year-old girl, in the suicide attack said:

Boko Haram [fighters] fired shots and screamed “Allahu Akbar” [God is Great]. We ran toward the forest. Minutes later, we heard a loud explosion. I found myself on the ground. When I stood up, I looked for my children. My girl was dead, while the boy was badly injured. They were both covered in blood with wounds all over their bodies. Residents helped me carry the boy to our home, where he died.

A relative of the 80-year-old man said that four Boko Haram fighters armed with Kalashnikovs and machetes broke into their home and fired twice at the elderly man, who was too weak to run away:

Gunshots woke us up and suddenly they [Boko Haram fighters] were at our door. They destroyed the door and broke in. They shot twice at the husband of my grandmother, an 80-year-old man who could not walk very well because of his age. He was not quick enough to escape. I did. He was shot in the stomach and stabbed with a machete on his head. When the attack ended, I came back home and found him in a pool of blood. I took him to the hospital, where he died the same day.

Response of the Security Forces and Displacement

Witnesses said that soldiers from the 42nd Motorized Infantry Battalion (BIM) based in Mozogo intervened after the female fighter detonated her explosive vest. They fired in the air to chase away the Boko Haram fighters.

In a January 8 statement, Cameroon’s communication minister said that local authorities and security forces had opened an investigation into the attack.

On January 9, Midjiyawa Bakari, governor of Cameroon’s Far North region, [said](#) that military reinforcements had been deployed to Mozogo to secure the area, which was confirmed by witnesses, who said that up to five additional military vehicles patrolled the town for a few days. But residents said these military reinforcements appear to have left.

Residents said they are worried about their security especially since the departure of the military reinforcements. “We live in fear,” a 50-year-old man said. “We are tired of this situation; we have been economically and psychologically drained.”

Following the January 8 attack, hundreds of people fled Mozogo to nearby villages and towns, including Koza, Mokolo, and Touboro. At least 300 who remained in Mozogo did not spend the night at home, sleeping for over a month instead outside, in a secondary school compound near the gendarmerie brigade, or at the public stand used for national celebrations near the army base.

A 38-year-old man who survived the suicide attack said on January 28 that he had not slept at home since January 8 and spent his nights, from about 5 p.m. to 5 a.m., in the veranda of a secondary technical school, along with his two wives and six children: “I sleep with all my family on one single mat on the veranda of the school, which is 20 meters from the gendarmerie brigade. There are about 100 people sleeping there, outside.”

Night Guard Duty

Human Rights Watch previously [documented](#) how soldiers in Mozogo forced civilians to perform local night guard duty to protect the town against attacks by Boko Haram, using beatings and threats against those who refused. While the beatings appear to have stopped, Human Rights Watch spoke to residents who continue to perform night duty out of fear of renewed beatings and threats. Some expressed concerns for their safety and said they feel they are being put in harm’s way, lacking the

necessary experience and equipment to perform the dangerous security tasks demanded of them.

“I usually do my night guard duty twice a week,” a 39-year-old mechanic said. “I only have a flashlight. I have no whistle, no weapon, no phone. This type of work is not remunerated and is dangerous. It is not the type of work civilians should do. It is up to the military to protect us from Boko Haram attacks. We are being unnecessarily exposed to great risks.”

A 50-year-old man from Mozogo said he stopped performing the night guard duty following a Boko Haram raid in November during which civilians who were on duty were attacked and fired upon: “We were alone. There was no member of the vigilante committee or soldier with us that night. We were just 10 civilians at the security post called Municipal Stadium. Up to 30 Boko Haram fighters shot at us. It was a miracle none got injured.”

Darak

On December 24, Boko Haram fighters attacked Darak, an island on Lake Chad. Human Rights Watch spoke to two survivors, three people who carried out burials, and a relative of a survivor. Those who carried out burials said that Boko Haram killed up to 80 civilians, the majority of them fishermen. Human Rights Watch was not able to independently verify the number of civilian deaths.

[Local authorities](#) told international and [national](#) media outlets that “scores” were killed in the attack. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [reported](#) that Boko Haram attacked four islands on the lake, on the border between Chad and Cameroon, on December 24, killing 27 people and kidnapping 12 others.

According to information collected by Human Rights Watch, about 100 Boko Haram fighters on wooden pirogues stormed an area of Darak known as Tonganamie, where night fishermen cast their nets, at about midnight. They rounded up the fishermen and killed them, mostly using knives and machetes.

“I heard people talking in Kanuri [a language commonly spoken in the Far North of Cameroon] and saying: ‘Come on! Come quickly! Go ahead.’ They were Boko Haram fighters and they were rounding up the fishermen to kill them,” a 24-year-old fisherman who witnessed the attack said. “I hid. Later, I went back to Darak town. I know eight among those who were killed that night; they were all fishermen from Darak.”

A 32-year-old fisherman who was seriously injured said:

Over 100 Boko Haram fighters came with their wooden rowboats. Some remained in the boats; some got out and rounded us up. They gathered all the fishermen who were there and killed them with their knives and machetes as they tried to escape. I was caught and they hit me with a machete on the head. I was also hit in the right hand with a spear. I thought I was dead. I jumped into the water to save my life. I swam and reached the grass side [of a nearby marsh]. Some fishermen later found me. I was taken to the hospital, where I stayed for 15 days. My wounds are yet to heal.

“I was among those who helped recovered the bodies from the water,” a 25-year-old Darak resident said. “It took us three days to collect them all. Bodies were floating in the water. The first day, after the attack, we collected over 40 bodies, including with the help of nets. The following two days, we collected 40 more, for a total of over 80 bodies. Most of them had visible stab wounds.”

Witnesses said the overnight attack in Darak took the security forces based there, including soldiers from both the marine and land forces, by surprise. They said Boko Haram fighters arrived on pirogues without engines and only fired a few gunshots to limit any noise that could have prompted soldiers to intervene.

In a previous Boko Haram attack on Darak in [June 2019](#), insurgents killed 21 soldiers and 16 civilians.

Gouzoudou

On December 16, at about 1:45 a.m., a group of five Boko Haram fighters attacked the home of Gouzoudou’s traditional authority, known as the *lawane*, firing several gunshots and wounding two men. The *lawane* escaped and ran to the military camp in town to sound the alarm. The soldiers came shortly after, but the insurgents had already fled. Soldiers evacuated the wounded to the Maroua regional hospital. One of them, a 60-year-old man, is still receiving medical treatment, including amputating his right hand.

Human Rights Watch spoke to the *lawane*, as well as seven witnesses to the attack. “I was outside with my 30-year-old brother when we heard some noise,” the *lawane* said. “My brother used his flashlight to light the surroundings. I saw five Boko Haram fighters armed with Kalashnikovs. They

shot my brother in his heel as I jumped off a little wall to save my life. When I returned home, I found that my food shop and my motorbike had been looted.”

Residents said Boko Haram has repeatedly targeted Gouzoudou, with at least eight raids recorded between December 14 and January 21. They said that until the end of 2020, there was a military camp in Gouzoudou, but that the camp has been dismantled.

Blabline

On December 2, at about 6 p.m., at least five Boko Haram fighters attacked a group of four civilians in the outskirts of Blabline village, killing one – a *lawane* from a neighboring village – and injuring three others, including a 16-year-old child. Human Rights Watch spoke to two witnesses of the attack and three Blabline residents who buried the body of the *lawane* and helped rescue the wounded.

One of the witnesses said:

I was a few meters away from the scene. I saw the Boko Haram fighters and hid. I watched as they captured the *lawane*, two of his sons and another man. They forced them on the ground and stole their phones. They spoke Kanuri and Arabic. Then, they fired a series of gunshots at them. The *lawane* was hit in the head and died on the spot. The fighters stole his motorbike and ran away with it. I rushed to rescue the wounded, including a 28-year-old man who was shot in the right shoulder, a 16-year-old child who was shot in the heel, and a 45-year-old man who was shot in the ribs.

Boko Haram fighters attacked Blabline again at about 11 p.m. on December 4. They fired at people as they fled, shooting a 38-year-old man in the stomach. They also broke into scores of homes, looting bicycles, motorbikes, food, telephones, clothes, and other items.

Human Rights Watch spoke to five witnesses to the attack, including the village chief who said that the attackers had looted 80 of the village’s 142 households.

Witnesses said soldiers intervened and chased the assailants away, but only after widespread looting. They also said that Boko Haram fighters attempted to attack the village four more times – on December 14, 27, and 31 – but that the military expelled them. In another attack on January 11, insurgents looted four homes.

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