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A REUTERS INVESTIGATION

SMOTHERED, POISONED AND SHOT

**Nigerian Army massacred children in its war
against Islamist insurgents, witnesses say**

Falmata holds photos of three grandsons - ages 9, 16 and 18 - who she said were slain in a Nigerian military attack. REUTERS/Libby George

More than 40 soldiers and civilians told Reuters they witnessed the Nigerian military kill children or saw children's corpses after a military operation. Estimates totaled in the thousands. Reuters investigated six incidents in which at least 60 died. One mother described the deaths of her twin babies: "The soldiers said they killed those children because they are children of Boko Haram."

FIRST

he heard voices, then the sputter of gunfire.

Kaka crept behind an acacia tree and froze in terror. The teen was returning home after gathering firewood late one July afternoon in 2020. Peering ahead, he saw a group of men at a waterhole, most in Nigerian Army camouflage.

They stood over a line of children face down in the dirt, wailing for their mothers, Kaka recalled. Nearby, several adults lay prone – including mothers with infants tied to their backs. He heard some voices cry out to God.

Two or three men already lay dead; the soldiers shot three more. They killed the women next, and then the children, cutting short their cries with a hail of bullets, Kaka said. The troops dragged the bodies into a pre-dug grave, shoveled sandy earth over them and drove off.

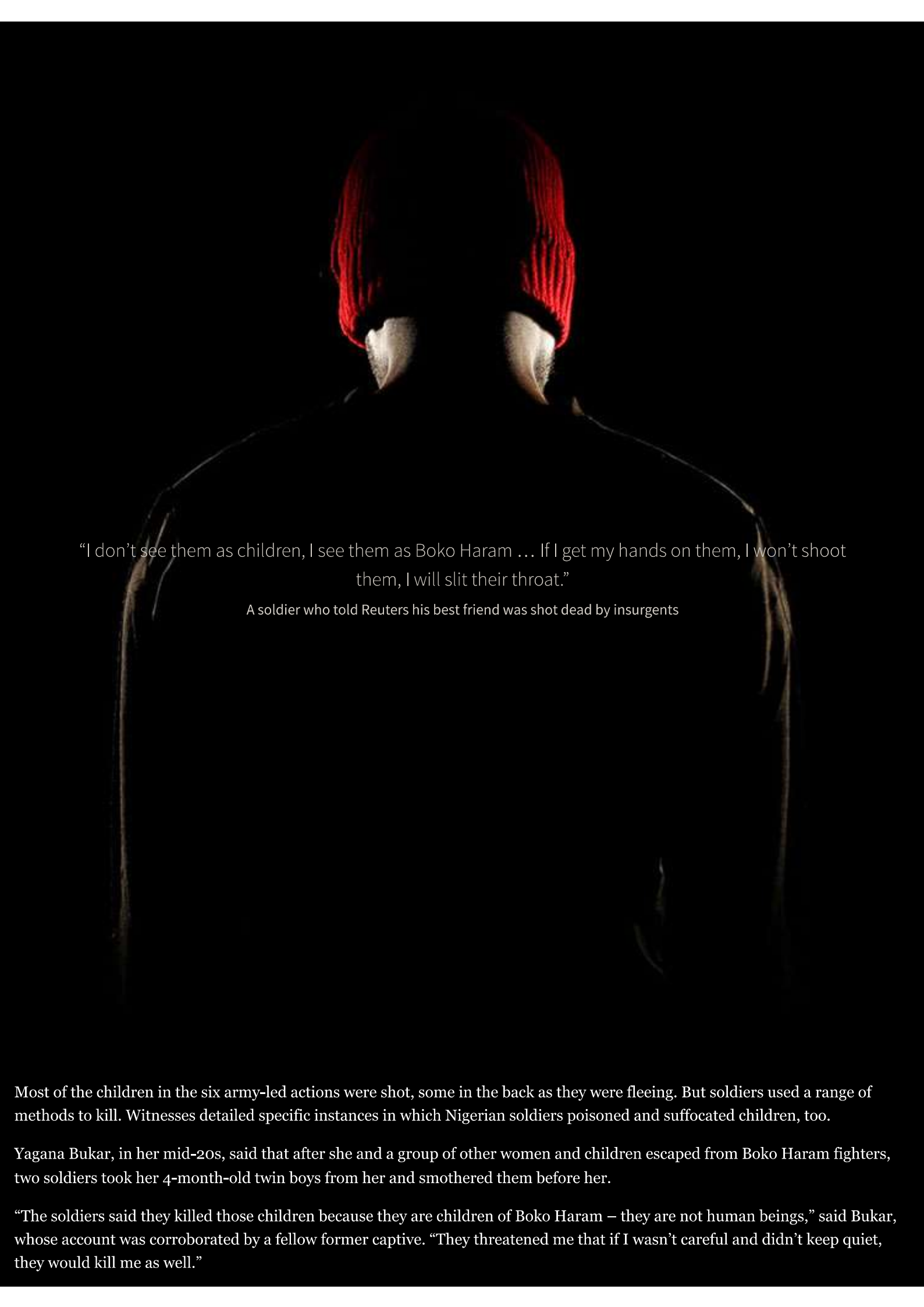
Panic-stricken, Kaka tore off toward Kukawa, the nearby town in Nigeria’s northeast where he lived. The young man, now in his early 20s, was one of five people who recounted to Reuters details of the army-led roundup and mass shooting of at least 10 children and several adults at the waterhole that day.

The massacre, previously unreported, is just one instance in which the Nigerian Army and allied security forces have slaughtered children during their gruelling 13-year war against Islamist extremists in the country’s northeast, a Reuters investigation found. Soldiers and armed guards employed by the government told Reuters army commanders repeatedly ordered them to “delete” children, because the children were assumed to be collaborating with militants in Boko Haram or its Islamic State offshoot, or to have inherited the tainted blood of insurgent fathers.

Intentional killings of children have occurred with a blurring frequency across the region during the war, according to witnesses interviewed by Reuters. More than 40 sources said they saw the Nigerian military target and kill children or saw the dead bodies of children after a military operation. These sources included both parents and other civilian witnesses, as well as soldiers who said they participated in dozens of military operations in which children were slaughtered.

Together, their estimates added up to thousands of children killed.

Reuters was unable to independently verify each of those estimates. But reporters investigated six specific incidents and found, based on eyewitness accounts, that a total of at least 60 children were killed in those episodes, the most recent in February 2021. Each of those incidents, including the waterhole massacre, was confirmed by at least two sources who saw the killings or the aftermath.



“I don’t see them as children, I see them as Boko Haram ... If I get my hands on them, I won’t shoot them, I will slit their throat.”

A soldier who told Reuters his best friend was shot dead by insurgents

Most of the children in the six army-led actions were shot, some in the back as they were fleeing. But soldiers used a range of methods to kill. Witnesses detailed specific instances in which Nigerian soldiers poisoned and suffocated children, too.

Yagana Bukar, in her mid-20s, said that after she and a group of other women and children escaped from Boko Haram fighters, two soldiers took her 4-month-old twin boys from her and smothered them before her.

“The soldiers said they killed those children because they are children of Boko Haram – they are not human beings,” said Bukar, whose account was corroborated by a fellow former captive. “They threatened me that if I wasn’t careful and didn’t keep quiet, they would kill me as well.”

Some parents told Reuters they had been left in agony because their children were taken by the military and never returned. They could not be sure, they said, whether their long-missing kids were dead or alive.

“Please, do what you can do,” one father begged a reporter, explaining that his 14-year-old son was among eight boys taken by soldiers in another incident in Kukawa, in 2019, and never seen again. “So the story can go viral, so that if my son is alive, he can come back to me.”

This report is based on interviews with 44 civilian witnesses with knowledge of killings and disappearances of children. Reuters also interviewed 15 security force members - soldiers, local militia members and armed guards - who said they took part in or observed targeted killings of children.



Above, portraits of some of the sources for this report. Some faces have been digitally masked to protect source identities. Reuters interviewed **44 civilian witnesses** with knowledge of child killings and disappearances. Reporters also spoke with **15 soldiers, militia members and armed guards** who said they took part in or observed targeted killings of children.

All but a few sources, like Yagana Bukar, who now lives outside the country, spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, saying they feared retaliation from Nigerian authorities. Some agreed to be identified by a single given name or a family nickname.

Nigerian military leaders told Reuters the army has never targeted children for killing. They said that the reporting in this article is an insult to Nigerians and part of a foreign effort to undermine the country's fight against the insurgents.

"It has never happened, it is not happening, it will not happen," said Major General Christopher Musa, who heads the counterinsurgency campaign in the northeast, of such killings. "It is not in our character. We are highly professional. We are human beings, and these are Nigerians that you have been talking about."

General Lucky Irabor, Nigeria's chief of defence staff, did not respond to requests for comment. On Dec. 2, after Reuters shared detailed findings and questions with his office, the military's director of defence information released [a statement to reporters](#). Major General Jimmy Akpor called the Reuters accounts of child killings in this report "concocted allegations," according to the statement. Nigerian military personnel, he said, are "raised, bred and further trained to protect lives, even at their own risk, especially when it concerns the lives of children, women and the elderly."

In the northeast, children often have been swept up in wartime violence and suffered disproportionately from the fallout, including displacement, unlawful detention, malnutrition and disease, according to [the United Nations](#) and other humanitarian groups.

Amnesty International [reported in 2015](#) that the Nigerian military and allied forces had summarily killed more than 1,200 men and boys captured in the conflict. The Nigerian government ultimately dropped an investigation into Amnesty's accusations of extrajudicial killings and other war crimes, finding insufficient evidence to support any abuses by its officers.

The International Criminal Court prosecutor concluded in 2020 that grounds existed to open an investigation into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity by both Nigerian security forces and insurgents, but the court has not opened one.

The ICC's Office of the Prosecutor declined to comment on Reuters' findings.

The Reuters investigation found that Nigerian soldiers took aim at children of all ages in battlezones around the northeast because the army presumed the children were, or would become, terrorists. Soldiers selected babies and toddlers for killing after rescuing them and their mothers from Islamist militants; rounded youths up for interrogation and killing in raids of homes and marketplaces; or slaughtered children along with adult civilians in counterterrorism operations that were intended to leave no survivors. When commanders ordered towns to be cleared of presumed insurgents, soldiers said they understood, and sometimes were explicitly told, that children's lives were not to be spared.



Bintu said soldiers and militia members took her 15-year-old son during a house raid in New Marte. She followed them and watched as the soldiers shot him dead, she said.

Bintu, witness to an army operation in early 2021

Soldiers often cited as a reason for killing children the belief that if their fathers were insurgents, then they would grow up to be the same. The killing was also a way for some officers to avenge heavy losses in fighting with Islamist insurgents, or for soldiers to vent their anger over the deaths of their comrades.

“I don’t see them as children, I see them as Boko Haram,” said one soldier, who told Reuters his best friend was shot dead by insurgents. The soldier said he had killed children himself. “If I get my hands on them, I won’t shoot them, I will slit their throat ... I enjoy it.”

Other soldiers said they had adopted a kill-or-be-killed attitude toward children because insurgents used them as fighters, informants and suicide bombers. The United Nations children’s agency UNICEF has alleged that “non-state armed groups” in Nigeria have [recruited thousands of children](#), some as [“human bombs.”](#) It said Boko Haram had claimed responsibility for some of those attacks, in which children were made to carry explosives.

The targeted killings of children were often kept under the radar and covered up by the military, Reuters found. The killings frequently took place in and around small, remote villages, where there is little communication with other towns. Witnesses and relatives were scared into silence, and bodies were buried or burned, according to multiple sources, including soldiers and residents.

Many witnesses, traumatised and unused to Gregorian calendars, had difficulty pinpointing times and dates. In those cases, reporters used growing seasons or religious holidays as reference points. Unable to visit reported massacre sites, Reuters used satellite imagery, when available, to corroborate sources’ descriptions.



Sources: Natural Earth; Regional Centre for Mapping of Resources for Development

Intentionally killing civilians in an armed conflict is a war crime. If the killing is done in the context of widespread or systematic attacks on civilians, it is a crime against humanity, two international law experts told Reuters. Children do not have separate protections under the law, but their young age and vulnerability may be factored into sentencing, said Melanie O’Brien, an associate professor of international law at the University of Western Australia.

Nigeria, as a party to the 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, falls within the jurisdiction of the ICC. The preference is for domestic courts to hold participants accountable under the law, but the ICC can also step in if a country is unwilling or unable to do so, said Kip Hale, a U.S. attorney specialising in international criminal justice.

The ICC declined to comment on Reuters’ findings.

The killing of noncombatant children may also violate the Nigerian military’s code of conduct. The most recent version publicly available, issued in 1967, prohibits killing children and states they “must not be attacked unless they are engaged in open hostility against Federal Government Forces. They should be given all protection and care.”

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Reaction to Reuters investigation on Nigerian military abortion programme

In his statement, Akpor said Nigerian military training institutions “focus extensively” on laws of armed combat and international humanitarian law. Musa said protection of noncombatants is a priority. “At times we even refuse to attack a location because we’ve noticed that there are children and there are women,” Musa said. “So because we cannot safeguard them, we refuse to strike

... We have lost a number of battles because we didn't want collateral damage.”

Reuters reported on Dec. 7 that the army also has [run an abortion programme](#) in the northeast that terminated the pregnancies of thousands of women and girls, many of whom had been captured and raped by insurgents. The Reuters investigation, based on military documents, civilian hospital records and dozens of witness accounts, found that the abortions were routinely done without consent, sometimes violently. Forced abortions, too, may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, said O'Brien, Hale and two other legal experts.

On Dec. 9, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [called on Nigerian authorities](#) to investigate the findings in the Reuters abortion report.

Nigerian military leaders told Reuters the abortion programme did not exist. Irabor, the defence chief, said on Dec. 8 the military would not investigate the report, saying it is untrue.

The child killings appear to lack the detailed organisation and elaborate infrastructure of the abortion programme. But as described by the sources, the killings and the abortions complement one another – aiming not just to wipe out extremists but to end the perceived insurgent bloodline.



Women and children rescued from Boko Haram by the Nigerian military arrive in Adamawa State in 2015. Children have suffered disproportionately in the war, the United Nations says. REUTERS/File photo

‘Operation No Living Things’

Boko Haram began as an Islamist fundamentalist movement in Nigeria’s northeast, transforming into an armed insurgency in 2009. As the coalition of security forces conducting the counterinsurgency lost ground, then-President Goodluck Jonathan in 2013 put the Nigerian Army in charge, and it established a new unit, 7 Division, to lead the troubled war effort. The division has remained the core counterinsurgency force under current President Muhammadu Buhari, a retired general.

The army began working with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a loose alliance of local militias whose stated mission is to support the counterinsurgency. CJTF members provide the army with intelligence on suspected insurgents, serve as interpreters and help soldiers navigate sometimes unfamiliar terrain. Though militia members officially report to their own leaders, army officers call the shots when the CJTF and soldiers deploy side-by-side in the field, Musa and three militia members said.

Bello Danbatta, a spokesman for the CJTF, told Reuters that the military and CJTF forces did not target civilians. “They are not fighting the women,” he said in an interview. “They are not fighting the children.”

By late 2014, the militants had pushed government forces out of many major towns across the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. As of 2016, the Nigerian military had taken back control of many of these towns, but fighting continued in the countryside.



■ Soldier: ‘At times ... we shoot them all.’ (Reuters used voice-over for on-camera interviews to protect sources.)

That same year, Boko Haram split into two main factions. The splinter group, Islamic State West Africa Province, has become the region’s dominant insurgent force. Still, many Nigerian soldiers and civilians, including those in this story, refer to both groups as Boko Haram.

Children became pawns for both sides. The U.N. Office of the Secretary-General has in the past accused both the CJTF and militant groups of recruiting children into the war effort, a violation of international law. However, it commended the CJTF and the Nigerian government in a report in August for their efforts since 2017 to protect children from recruitment.



She described seeing Nigerian troops standing by a pile of corpses. “We can’t even imagine how they put those bodies together that way.”

Falta, witness in Gasarwa

Meanwhile, the conflict has dragged on. Nigerian President Buhari and other leaders have repeatedly declared victory, even as the insurgents’ inroads in remote areas have undermined their claims. The failure to rout the enemy has drawn public criticism and put pressure on the national government ahead of elections set for February.

Tukur Buratai, a decorated general who presided over the army as its chief for nearly six years until January 2021, publicly blamed the drawn-out nature of the conflict on insurgents’ sustained indoctrination of locals. Buratai didn’t respond to a request for comment.

On the ground, soldiers and other counterinsurgency fighters told Reuters, the military has adopted an uncompromising approach toward communities it sees as infiltrated by militants.

During combat operations, soldiers told Reuters, it was common to take aim at anyone they came across in areas the army did not fully control. They were generally considered a member or supporter of the militants and therefore a legitimate target, troops said.

Army officers often branded particularly ruthless offensives “Operation No Living Things,” said four soldiers.

Musa said the army’s standard procedure is to separate out innocent women and children, and turn them over to state authorities for protection. Thousands of children have been taken to camps where they are cared for, he said.

“If we had wanted this war to end in good time, that will have been the solution: Kill everybody,” he said. “But because we take time to select and ensure that it’s only the combatants that we’re after, that’s why you see that it’s been prolonged.”

A decade of war has taken a heavy toll on men of fighting age in the region. And in contested areas, males who have survived often flee at signs of trouble, some soldiers and residents said. Among the remaining civilians, children fall under greatest suspicion, they said, because they are seen as easily schooled in extremist ways.

“Boko Haram is taking them and putting something in their heart,” said the soldier who participated in the waterhole massacre. “Child fighters, they have no fear, they don’t realise the value of their own life.”



“It has never happened, it is not happening.” Major General Christopher Musa. REUTERS/Video screenshot

Many of the troops interviewed for this story said they were acting on orders from their commanders when they attacked children, and some expressed remorse.

Often uneducated with few job prospects, many soldiers joined the army in hopes of improving their lot, only to face paltry pay, a shortage of equipment as basic as bullets and boots, and a seemingly unending conflict. Stuck in the region for years, often without rotation, some described falling into a traumatised mindset that left them willing and even eager to kill children, especially as more and more of their comrades were wounded or died in combat.

Cultural differences deepened troops’ alienation. Though many share the region’s main faith of Islam, most hail from elsewhere in Nigeria and don’t speak the local languages. And in a war in which insurgents have forced minors to fight, soldiers said they couldn’t even trust in the innocence of children.

In the first attack he witnessed on an army location, the soldier who told Reuters he wanted to avenge his friend’s death said he saw 8- or 9-year-olds carrying guns and loading ammunition into magazines. “I saw it with my own eyes,” he said. “There was one, the gun was too heavy for him, they tied it around him with a string, and he went with it.”

Smothering babies

Some of the children the army targeted, however, were infants and toddlers – too young to load a gun. Soldiers killed them just as their mothers thought they had landed in safe hands.

Yagana Bukar said she was hiding in a stand of gum trees, with seven other women and nine children, after escaping from insurgents about four years ago. When soldiers approached the group, she at first feared they were Boko Haram.

But they reassured her, she said: They were from the Nigerian Army and had come to reunite the group with the families from whom they'd been kidnapped. Bukar had been held by the insurgents for over a year and was anxious to go back to Baga, her hometown on the shores of Lake Chad. She climbed into the soldiers' trucks with the other women and children.

After driving some distance, the troops stopped. A soldier asked Bukar to hand him Sani, one of her 4-month-old twins, saying he wanted to check whether the boy was healthy, she said. With one hand, she said, the soldier then blocked the infant's mouth and nose. The baby's legs began to kick.

A second soldier took her other twin, Musa, asking to play with him. He turned his back to Bukar, and she couldn't see what he was doing.

Both babies were returned to her limp.

The men "said they were sleeping," Bukar said. "The children were not sleeping, and I started crying, because I saw what the soldiers had done."

She angrily accused the troops of deceiving her.

"I cursed them, I told them that they betrayed us, they lied to us," she said. "And now they brought us here to the bush and killed our children. I told them that I will never forgive them."

In response, she said, one of the soldiers slapped her.

The soldiers took the seven remaining, older children into the bush, she said. Gunshots rang out. When the troops returned, the other women asked where their children were.

"Forget about the children," Bukar recalled the soldiers saying. "They are no more."

Bintu Ibrahim, who was in the group of former captives with Bukar, said she saw the soldiers take both of Bukar's children. She watched as each boy's mouth and nose were covered, and said both were returned dead. She said she too heard the gunshots in the bush. After the soldiers returned, she said, the women desperately questioned them about what had happened, and finally, the troops admitted they had killed the rest of the children.

In a separate event a few years ago, Felerin, a mother of two toddlers, said she and other mothers who had escaped insurgents were detained at the army's Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, the Borno state capital. Soldiers told the women that their children needed injections for malaria and other afflictions, she said.

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NIGHTMARE IN NIGERIA

[Part 1. The Abortion Assault](#)

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■ Felerin: 'He died in their hands.'

The soldiers gave several of the children shots and took them into another room, shutting the door behind them. After some time, Felerin, then 28, became worried. "Where are my two children?" she recalled asking the soldiers.

The soldiers – part of an army that only five days before had offered her protection – tried to block her path, she said.

Felerin could hear her 2-year-old son Sadiq shouting through the door: "Mama, Mama!"

Felerin said she was finally able to force her way into the room. There, she found Sadiq, writhing in pain. His 3-year-old brother Ibrahim lay beside him, already dead, she said.

Sadiq "was still calling out for me," she said. She tried to cradle Sadiq's dying body, but soldiers would not allow it. "They're Boko Haram children anyway," she recalled a soldier saying. "What use are they?"

At least 10 children were in the room, either dead or dying, Felerin said. A friend who said she was rescued along with Felerin told Reuters that soldiers took away children – including her own young son – for what the women believed were injections to improve the children's health. Her son died after they returned him to her. The woman, Acayu, was in another room when Felerin returned, sobbing, and told her what had happened to her own children.

After her release from army custody, Felerin recounted the killings to her sister and another woman she met at a displaced persons' camp, according to both women.

Felerin endured other losses as well. She said she'd been forced to leave behind her eldest son, then 5, during her escape from an insurgent camp that was under attack by the military. And at Giwa Barracks, days before her other sons were killed, soldiers gave her an injection and pills, ending her six-month pregnancy. She was still bleeding from the abortion when she forced her way into the room where her sons died.

When she was finally released by the soldiers, she felt she had nothing left. "No children, no family," she said.



The cattle market in Maiduguri in 2016. The northeastern city is the command centre of the army's counterinsurgency campaign. REUTERS/File photo

Snatching teens

In some remote communities where territory remained hotly contested, the army's approach to killing children was brazen and routine: It launched raids door-to-door or in markets to nab children and teens for suspected complicity with insurgents.

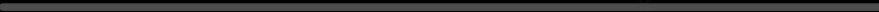
In Kukawa, where the waterhole massacre took place, the army regularly rounded up children to search them for weapons, interrogate them, or even kill them to ensure they wouldn't pose a future threat, said 12 civilians and four soldiers and guards.

Before the war, Kukawa, a poky frontier town about 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Lake Chad, was a poor but stable place to live. Men farmed or sold firewood and clothes, while women traded spices, groundnut cakes and oil in the market.

Since then, the town, crossable by foot in an hour or less, has become a fierce battleground and one of the most chaotic places in the northeast. More than 500 people were killed in 60 violent events recorded in the broader Kukawa area between 2019 and 2021, according to data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, a U.S.-based nonprofit organisation that tracks political violence.



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 Soldier on Kukawa massacre: 'We buried them there.'

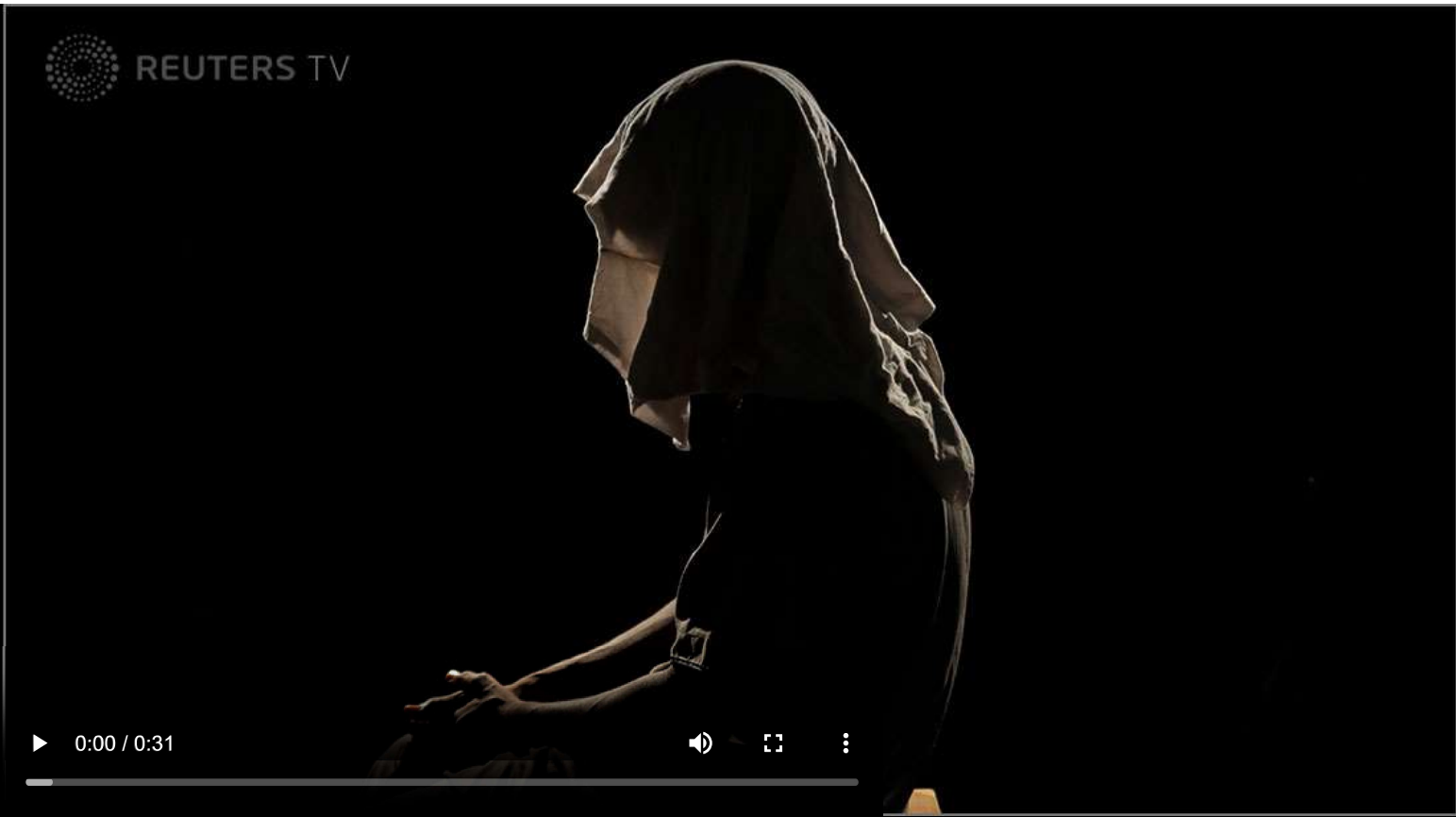
A soldier who was involved in the July 2020 waterhole massacre in Kukawa told Reuters that it was one example among more than two dozen he had witnessed in the area in recent years in which children were rounded up and killed. Reuters reconstructed the massacre and the events that led up to it based on five separate accounts – by the soldier and four civilians.

The soldier and two fathers said a group of insurgents had been to the town in the days before the killings. Insurgents often came to buy goods at the local markets and preach their extreme interpretation of Islam, according to several Kukawa residents. The visits riled the army, which frequently responded with crackdowns on the residents, especially on men and boys seen as possible combatants or collaborators.

The day of the massacre, the soldier said, his commander ordered troops to round up “Boko Haram children” from the town.

In the afternoon, one father said he was at the central market selling medicines when he learned that dozens of soldiers and local militia members were seizing and beating children, including his 15-year-old son. He said he was unable to get close to where his son was – he was blocked by soldiers – and could only watch from afar as a group of boys was whipped with crops and interrogated by soldiers. He was able to see, however, that 10 or more children and teenagers were packed into a pickup and driven west, out of Kukawa, down the road to the waterhole.

Another father who was meeting with friends east of the market said his daughter ran to him that afternoon, crying, saying that soldiers were gathering up children, including his 13-year-old son. The soldiers were beating some and forcing others to do frog-jumps, the daughter told him. The father arrived at the market after the soldiers had left. He and the other father joined residents in an unsuccessful search for the boys that lasted hours, until nightfall.



■ Father on Kukawa massacre: 'There would be no running away.'

At the waterhole that day, in the hour before sundown, two other Kukawa residents witnessed the scene from different vantage points. One was Kaka, the youth who had been collecting firewood. He described hearing the soldiers speaking pidgin English as their captives pleaded, in Hausa, that they couldn't understand. As he secretly watched from behind the acacia tree, he saw the adults get shot and then saw at least 10 children killed.

The second person, a local trader, told Reuters he was walking back from a nearby village just before sundown when he saw military vehicles and Nigerian Army soldiers standing by a large pit in the ground a few paces from the waterhole. He also hid behind a tree and heard the troops speaking pidgin English.

While the trader didn't see the shooting, he watched as the troops used shovels to bury about 20 bodies. Even from a distance, he said, he could tell most of the bodies were those of children. The other bodies belonged to women, he said, obvious from the flowing wraps they were wearing.

The soldier gave Reuters a slightly different account of the sequence of events and a higher death toll. Discrepancies are not uncommon among witnesses to multiple traumatic events, say experts in atrocity investigations.

The soldier said that after taking the abducted children to the waterhole, he helped dig the pit that would become their grave.

There, he said, he saw several comrades shoot at least 20 children dead. He was then ordered to pick up more ammunition in a neighbouring town, he said. When he returned, he said, he saw at least 10 more corpses, including women with infants tied to their backs.



Satellite image: 2022 Maxar Technologies

He was ordered to deepen the grave, he said. After that, the soldiers dragged the bodies over to the pit, stacked them inside and covered them with dirt.

He watched from his gun truck. "I was asked to come down to drag them, but I told them I was on the gun so I couldn't," he said. "The smell of blood was too much ... I didn't want to smell the blood, it was getting to my head."

The following day, the two fathers and other residents discovered a large square of newly overturned ground near the waterhole, surrounded by tire tracks and boot prints. They could immediately see it was a fresh grave, said the father of the 15-year-old.

The group did not try to dig up the bodies because they were afraid the soldiers would kill them, according to the 13-year-old's father.

"There is nothing we can do except leave the case to God," he told Reuters.

The four civilian sources all described the grave as being at nearly the same spot by the waterhole. Reuters was unable to independently confirm a mass grave in that location. The soldier described a location slightly to the north.

Kaka said he returned to the waterhole the day after the shooting to retrieve a wheelbarrow of firewood he had abandoned in his fright. Blood stained the soil covering the fresh grave, he said.

Deeply disturbed by what he'd witnessed, Kaka left town shortly after the massacre.

"I am trying to forget it," he said.



The clothes of a 13-year-old boy whose father says he was taken by the army in Kukawa. The father believes his son was later killed at a waterhole near the town.
REUTERS/Christophe Van Der Perre

'I didn't see a single child survive'

Military round-ups of children plagued other towns, as well. They often followed visits by insurgents to the area or gunfights with the army, or were driven simply by the suspicion that young people were supporting the enemy.

In mid-2018, a few dozen kilometres southwest of Kukawa, the Nigerian Army stormed the town of Gasarwa after insurgents had passed through. Soldiers gathered children from the community and surrounding villages, two witnesses said.

"They kept rounding up more and more of them," said one of the witnesses, a soldier who told Reuters he participated in the shooting. "We opened fire."

He said the operation lasted from morning until almost midnight. "I didn't see a single child survive that day."

At least 40 children were killed during the operation, and likely far more, according to an armed guard who drove a vehicle in the convoy.



Falmata says she watched as soldiers shot dead two of her teen grandchildren in the street. A third, 9, was in the family home when soldiers set fire to it, she said.

Falmata, witness to 2018 army operation in Gasarwa

“They killed a lot,” said the guard, referring to the troops. He said he was among the first armed forces to leave Gasarwa, as children were still dying in the town. “One of them was screaming,” he recalled.

Residents described scenes of mayhem, as people fled amid the crack of bullets, blast of explosives and searing heat and smoke of burning buildings.

“They killed so many children,” said Faltu, a woman in her mid-50s. Running through the bush near Gasarwa, Faltu said, she caught sight of Nigerian troops standing by a pile of corpses “one on top of another; we can’t even imagine how they put those bodies together that way.”

She showed a reporter scars on her legs, from injuries she said she suffered while repeatedly diving into bushes to hide from the soldiers.

Falmata, a grandmother in her 50s, said her three grandchildren were among those to perish in the attack.

She watched the soldiers shoot one, a 16-year-old, in the street, along with his 18-year-old brother. The youngest, 9, was in the family home when soldiers burned it down, she said.

She held small photos of each grandchild in her hands for a reporter to see. The 16-year-old was in high school, she said, and had hoped to be a doctor or lawyer. The youngest loved to recite verses from the Koran.

Her eldest grandson, Falmata said, had hoped to join the civilian militia.

In another attack not far from Kukawa in 2020, soldiers swooped into the village of Alagarno early one morning in 10 trucks, indicating they were on the hunt for suicide bombers, according to two civilian witnesses. The two, a father and another villager, said that an army vehicle struck and killed a child.

The father said the soldiers referred to the young people as “bad seeds” – either insurgents themselves or relatives of the enemy. He said the troops shot his 5-year-old daughter dead as she ran away with his wife, and bludgeoned to death a neighbour's 9-year-old boy with a gun.



Falmata holds photos of her dead grandchildren. REUTERS/Libby George

Buried secrets

In many cases, the army has taken steps to keep the killing of children and other civilians out of the public eye, according to multiple military sources. Soldiers pressured bereaved parents to remain silent, the army restricted access to the warzone, and commanders ordered troops to keep killings secret.

Five soldiers and two guards told Reuters they had taken part in operations in recent years in which they had buried children's bodies in mass graves in remote places. In some cases, the army or CJTF members used shovels or excavators to bury piles of children's corpses, said civilians, soldiers and a local militia member.

Mass burials were partly done to hide the bodies from any local “noisemakers” who might call attention to the deaths, one soldier said.

Four mothers who said their children were killed or missing told Reuters the military warned them not to talk about what happened.

Because of pressure to keep quiet and fear of retaliation from the army, some parents said they had not reported missing children or been able to find out whether they might still be alive.

Late in 2019, the year before the waterhole massacre, the army rounded up eight boys in Kukawa between the ages of 6 and 15 during a search for children with suicide vests, according to two fathers interviewed by Reuters.

Three years later, the eight boys are still unaccounted for. The father of a missing 14-year-old, who described his son as a studious boy who wanted to be a pilot, said other parents opposed him when he suggested reporting their sons' disappearance to authorities. The parents warned that "anything could happen" to them if they did, he said.

The second father, whose only child was about 13 when taken, said he was also reluctant to report the matter to the government or army. "We're afraid that what happened to our children might happen to us."

He showed Reuters a creased photo of his son when he was 9, with wide eyes and the hint of a smile. He asked that the picture not be published for fear of attracting the military's attention.



Video screenshot of Ibrahim Attahiru delivering a speech to troops before the army-led campaign in Marte in February 2021. Source: Via Twitter

'Gallant troops'

The Nigerian Army also has targeted children as part of sweeping operations against entire areas and their populations, with little regard for whether the people there were insurgents or peaceful civilians, soldiers and other witnesses said.

The army has described such take-no-prisoners operations as a patriotic fight against terrorists. But sometimes they occur after a stinging defeat, and the killing serves as retribution, soldiers said.

Such was the case in early 2021, when the army's newly minted chief, Ibrahim Attahiru, arrived at an army base in the town of Dikwa, to rally his battered troops ahead of a counteroffensive in the nearby Marte area. The region of sparsely populated towns and villages is rife with conflict, lying just southwest of the Islamic State affiliate's Lake Chad stronghold.

Insurgents had in recent days routed Nigerian forces and killed a respected officer. It was a humiliation for the army, Attahiru and the government. Authorities had been eager to show they were pacifying Borno state. They had recently returned hundreds of civilians to New Marte, a town in the area, from which many residents had fled violence in recent years.

“Go after them and clear these bastards,” Attahiru said, according to Nigerian media covering the Dikwa speech. He gave the troops 48 hours to recapture the area.

Attahiru did not call for the deaths of children in his public remarks, some of which were captured on video posted on social media and verified by Reuters. But a soldier and two CJTF members told Reuters word filtered down from officers to the lower ranks that no one, including children, was to be spared.

“The commanders said they had the blood of Boko Haram and that they were traitors, hiding Boko Haram there,” recalled the soldier. The order was given, he said: “We should delete them.”

Musa told Reuters that civilians had fled when Boko Haram attacked. By the time the army counterattacked, “no civilian was around,” he said. Only combatants were left, so the soldiers “took them out.”

Musa said people sometimes mixed up Boko Haram fighters with soldiers, because they dressed similarly, so the military has been blamed for atrocities actually committed by the militants. Danbatta, of the CJTF, said civilians were killed in Marte, but by the insurgents, not government forces.



■ Soldier: ‘Their parents were Boko Haram.’

Witnesses described a roving massacre. The Nigerian Army fired bullets and explosives with abandon, according to another CJTF member and the soldier. Two residents said homes were set ablaze. Another described people fleeing the army in panic.

“For the rest of my life, I will never forget what happened,” said the CJTF member. About 200 metres out from the town of New Marte, he said, troops and the militia opened fire. He said he watched “small children” and women shot dead as they ran away. In all, he said he saw 14 children’s corpses that day.

Behind a trench surrounding the town, two women described seeing dozens of children’s bodies. Reuters could not confirm whether the women were talking about the same site.

Both women had been relocated by the government to New Marte with their families just months before, when officials had declared the area safe.

One of the women, Bintu, 40, said soldiers and militia members took her 15-year-old son during a house raid. She and other mothers followed the troops to a trench, only to see soldiers shoot her son dead with dozens of boys. She saw almost 30 bodies, she said.

Soldiers smashed open the door to the home of another mother, grabbing her 13-year-old son and 16-year-old daughter. They said the children “will grow up to become Boko Haram,” the woman, in her mid-40s, told Reuters. Her daughter was so sick with sickle cell anaemia that she couldn’t stand.



A mother in her mid-40s said soldiers barged into her home and seized her daughter and son. They told her the children “will grow up to become Boko Haram,” she said.

A mother describing the killings of two children in a 2021 army operation in the town of New Marte.

As the soldiers dragged the girl away, the woman followed, trying to tug her back, begging the soldiers to release her.

They shot her daughter dead, the woman told Reuters.

Still, she and the other mothers wouldn’t back down. “We had to get our children back,” she said. They followed the soldiers to a trench. There, she saw a mass of children’s bodies, some no more than 5 or 6 years old.

“They had already been killed,” the woman said. “There were more than 40 of them.”

One was her son. “Every time I see a boy like him now,” she said, “I feel a pain in my heart.”

On Feb. 23, 2021, when the operation was over, Nigerian Army spokesman Brigadier General Mohammed Yerima issued a statement praising the troops for retaking New Marte.

“Acting professionally and decisively, the gallant troops destroyed the terrorists’ resistance and dealt a decisive blow on their positions and inflicted heavy casualty on the criminals,” he said. Fourteen enemy fighters were killed, he added.

Army chief Attahiru died in a plane crash that May. His official biography said of the Marte operation: “The soldiers took up the gauntlet and fulfilled their chief’s desire to the delight of every Nigerian.”



“There’s a saying in Hausa, if you kill a snake but you don’t kill its young, there will be more battles ahead.”

A soldier who was at the waterhole massacre in Kukawa

Reviled and regretful

Some of the soldiers told Reuters they are tormented by their involvement in the killing of children, especially the very young.

One soldier described the first time he was ordered to kill a child, a young boy, near the town of Biu, in southern Borno state. “I’ll never forget it,” he said. The boy told him he had no allegiance to the insurgents and was in town simply to buy some tomatoes. He knew the child was innocent, he said, but refusing the order meant risking arrest.

“I shot him in the head,” he said. “I cried all night.”

The soldier who was at the waterhole in Kukawa said he uses drugs such as the opioid tramadol to numb his feelings. They render him indifferent to death – the enemy’s and his own.

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“When I take my tablets, and I’m fighting, I think, let us both die,” he said.

Several soldiers, guards and militia members said the ultimate blame for atrocities against children lay with the army’s top commanders. But some also said that in the field they were given broad leeway in responding to the brutal tactics employed by insurgents.

“We want to demonstrate we can go further even than the enemy,” one soldier said. “We have discretion to do illegal things, that’s the only way to explain it.”

Today, 13 years into the conflict, some civilians who once looked to soldiers for protection from the insurgents now consider the army a more menacing force.

Fatima, a woman in her mid-20s, told Reuters her 5-year-old stepson burned to death in the New Marte operation last year when soldiers torched the room in which he was sleeping.

“The soldiers have caused more harm for us than Boko Haram,” she said. “They kill any child that they get.”



Nigerian forces securing the vicinity of an insurgent attack in Maiduguri in 2019. Some civilians told Reuters they now fear the military more than the insurgents. REUTERS/File photo

Additional reporting by Eleanor Whalley in London.

Nightmare in Nigeria

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Nightmare in Nigeria

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