

More ICRtoP Resources on Nigeria...

[ICRtoP Blog: Electoral Violence in Nigeria is not Inevitable](#)

[ICRtoP Blog: Crisis in Nigeria: A Case for RtoP's Second Pillar](#)

The Crisis in Nigeria

- I. [Background](#) II. [Inter-communal & Political Unrest](#) III. [Boko Haram](#)
IV.

[Nigerian State Conduct](#)

V.

[Response: National, Regional & International](#)

VI. □□

[Response: Civil Society](#)

VII.

[Conclusion](#)

I. Background

In March 2014, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navi Pillay, [stated](#) that Nigeria was “currently facing its most daunting set of challenges for decades.” The country is split between Muslims and Christians, with an area called the [middle belt](#) edging the predominately Muslim north and Christian south. Ten percent of the country follows indigenous sects, constituting over 174 million people, and close to 350 ethnic groups speak 250 languages. The country is also divided along economic lines. As of February 2014, [CFR](#) recorded poverty levels at 72 percent in the north, starkly [contrasting](#) the 27 percent in the south and 35 percent in the Niger Delta.

These divisions and inequalities, and the existence of vulnerable peoples, alongside ongoing battles against insurgent groups and high levels of [corruption](#), have contributed to the current security crisis in Nigeria. Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)) and the

[CFR Nigeria Security Tracker](#)

purport that over 25,000 people have been killed in the country since 1999, and events since the start of 2014 have reached unprecedented levels. In April 2014, Amnesty International published a

[briefing](#)

expressing concern over actions by both

[Boko Haram](#)

, the Nigerian militant Islamist group, and the Nigerian state security forces that may constitute “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity,” urging the immediate investigation of violations of international humanitarian law. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (GCR2P) also warned of the gravity of such acts,

[stating](#)

, “indiscriminate violence heightens the risk of further mass atrocities, including possible crimes against humanity.”

Targeted violence, increased lawlessness, escalating sectarian tensions, the state’s inability to protect, and its military’s own contribution to human rights violations, has raised significant alarm as to whether the international community is bearing witness to mass atrocity crimes – or could in the near future. In May 2014, one month after Boko Haram’s [abduction](#) and continued detention of 276 schoolgirls,

the International Criminal Court Prosecutor,

[Fatou Bensouda](#)

,
[said](#)

that crimes committed by Boko Haram fell within the jurisdiction of the Court, which has authority over cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

II. Inter-communal & Political Unrest

Jos, the capital of Nigeria’s North-Central Plateau State, is located in the middle belt. The middle belt has areas on each side of it comprised of distinct, majority religious identities. Between 17-20 January 2010, Muslim-Christian tensions turned violent in Jos, with at least 400 people

[killed](#)

and 18,000 displaced before the military restored order. According to a

[statement](#)

issued by Nigerian Civil Society on the crisis, by 19 January, “the incident had escalated into mass violence, in which residents from different communities in the city systematically attacked one another.” Media reports

[indicated](#)

that hate messages transmitted through cell phones incited individuals to such attacks. In response, Human Rights Watch (HRW)

[stated](#)

, “This is not the first outbreak of deadly violence in Jos, but the government has shockingly

failed to hold anyone accountable.” Reports by

[HRW](#)

also surfaced accusing the Nigerian military and police units of responding to the violence with excessive force against civilians.

On 7 March 2010, HRW

[reported](#)

a massacre south of Jos that left at least 200 Christian villagers dead. The International Crisis Group

[recorded](#)

two other attacks on villages by Muslim Fulani gangs the same day that were in “apparent retaliation for Jan[uary] violence,” raising the day’s death count to 500, mostly Christian women and children. Such events led the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (

[GCR2P](#)

) to suggest that these atrocities may “rise to the level of crimes against humanity.”

The unrest persists in the region. HRW’s

[World Report 2013](#)

addressed further episodes of inter-communal violence in the Plateau and Kaduna States of the middle belt. Over 360 people were killed in 2012 in these locations, with victims “hacked to death, shot, and burned alive – in many cases simply based on their ethnic or religious identity.” The report also mentioned discriminatory state and local policies towards “non-indigenes” people, which “continue to exacerbate inter-communal tensions and perpetuate ethnic-based divisions.” On

[16 March 2014](#)

, Fulani Muslim herders attacked three Christian villages and killed more than 100 civilians in Kano. The New York Times

[reported](#)

that middle belt violence is typically separate from Boko Haram activity (refer to Section III), but “analysts say there is a risk that the insurgents will try to stoke the conflict in central Nigeria.”

While recorded attacks have been linked to specific ethno-religious groups, an NPR

[article](#)

warned of attributing this violence to religious or ethnic hatreds, explaining that social, economic and political factors underpin the area’s cycles of violence.

III. Boko Haram

The group originated in 2002, in the capital of Nigeria’s northeastern Borno state, Maiduguri, under the leadership of Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusef. It is commonly referred to as Boko Haram, which colloquially translates to ‘Western education is sin.’ According to

[CFR](#)

, and with “aims to establish a fully Islamic state in Nigeria,” Yusef’s followers consisted

predominately of individuals from the impoverished north: Islamic students, clerics, and the unemployed. Prior to 2009, the small group of Islamists openly challenged the state with impassioned speeches. Kyari Mohammed, in ‘

[The Message and Methods of Boko Haram](#)

,’ explains it was not until July 2009 that the group moved from this “*dawah*

(proselytisation) phase to violent armed struggle.” Yusuf was

[summarily executed](#)

while in police custody, and following this development, the group not only grew more radicalized, but it also broke into factions.

[Abubakar Shekau](#)

is the current leader of the militant group.

Regarding the

[methods](#)

of violence utilized in this new phase, Boko Haram has adopted targeted assassinations, suicide bombings, and hostage-taking, with an increasingly global reach. Since the middle of 2010, the group has targeted media outlets, journalists and schools, as well as kidnapped both locals and foreigners. The group’s strength and resilience has succeeded in posing a significant threat to the government. CFR

[highlights](#)

that, “Boko Haram fighters often are, indeed, better armed and equipped than the government’s forces.” Crisis Group

[furthers](#)

that wealthy politicians and businessmen funded the group in the past, before, as a former member of Nigeria’s State Security Service (SSS) puts it, “they lost control of it.” Nevertheless, Boko Haram’s political ties have

[allegedly](#)

continued.

July 2009 – December 2013

In July 2009, following an alleged disagreement with police forces, 14 Boko Haram members were shot in a joint military and police operation. The military suppressed the group’s reprisal revolts in six northern states, with the crackdown leaving over 800 dead, the majority of which were sect members and civilians. Attacks continued, culminating in the 30 July 2009 execution of Yusuf in custody. From August 2011–June 2012 Boko Haram violence significantly escalated, with the suicide bombing of a UN building, and multiple attacks on security facilities, banks, and churches, resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties. In October 2012,

[Human Rights Watch](#)

released a report accusing Boko Haram’s “widespread and systematic murder and persecution” as likely amounting to “crimes against humanity.” The second Boko Haram instigated ‘State of Emergency’ was declared in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, May 2013, and from June–October 2013 multiple confrontations between Boko Haram and state forces resulted in

hundreds of deaths. In September 2013, Boko Haram was suspected of an attack on a college that killed 40 students. Crisis Group then

[reported](#)

in December 2013 that 200 insurgents, dressed in military uniform, coordinated an attack on state military targets in Maiduguri, and later that month, several hundred fighters attacked military barracks outside Bama.

January - May 2014

In early 2014, the frequency and scale of Boko Haram attacks, mainly targeting civilians, increased significantly. In February, the group killed at least 59 people, when they

[opened fire at a high school](#)

in Yobe State. In March, at least 75 people were killed in

[Maiduguri blasts](#)

, attributed to Boko Haram. In April, Boko Haram gunmen

[abducted](#)

276 schoolgirls from their dormitory in northeastern Borno state, merely hours after more than 70 people were killed in a

[bomb attack](#)

near Abuja. In May, three separate attacks, a Boko Haram

[assault](#)

on the town of Gamboru Ngala on the Cameroon border (at least 336 deaths), a car

[bombing](#)

in Jos (at least 118 deaths), and an

[attack](#)

on a military base in Yobe State (49 deaths) killed more than 500. Throughout June and July at least another

[2,000](#)

casualties were recorded in multiple attacks, among which was the Gwoza massacre

[killing](#)

at least 200, mostly Christian, in several villages in Borno State and a series of attacks in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, killing around 171 people. Until the end of 2014 at least another

[6,000](#)

deaths were recorded as a result of continuous violence. In early January the deadliest single massacre to date was recorded as a series of mass killings were carried out by Boko Haram militants, destroying the entire town of Baga in north-east Nigeria,

[killing](#)

as many as 2,000 people. Boko Haram now

[controls](#)

up to 70% of Borno State, which has been most affected by the insurgency. The cumulative death toll varies according to sources, ranging from

[7,500](#)

deaths in 2014 according to the Nigerian Social Violence Project (John Hopkins University Africa Program) to

[18,000](#)

according to the Nigeria Security Tracker (Council on Foreign Relations). Furthermore, cumulative deaths since the start of the insurgency range from

[11,121](#)

to

[33,000](#)

IV. Nigerian State Conduct

President Jonathan signed the [Terrorism \(Prevention\) Act in 2011](#) , [amended](#) in 2012. The bill authorizes the death penalty, upon conviction, for any individual convicted of stated terrorist acts. State security officials have also gained extra powers, without legal encumbrances, including two declared states of emergency (the first initiated in

[December 2011](#)

in Borno, Yobe, Plateau and Niger states, and the second,

[May 2013 until present](#)

in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states), and the

[cutting of cellular service](#)

in May 2013. Despite these added measures, the Nigerian government has

[failed](#)

in its responsibility to protect its citizens from deadly incidents, which possibly

[classify](#)

as 'crimes against humanity.' Security officials have proven unreliable, allowing Boko Haram "

[freedom of movement](#)

" and access to vulnerable targets, and "the majority of the insecurity burden will continue to be shouldered by the public,"

[states](#)

Serrano and Pieri, if a new approach to this ongoing crisis is not initiated. For in fact, out of desperation from the lack of protection offered by the state, local

[youth vigilantes](#)

have taken the responsibility upon themselves, forming the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

Leading international organizations' reports on Nigeria's human rights situation in 2012 and 2013 have provided consistent and repeated mention of documented atrocities by Nigerian military and police forces (JTF), including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary dragnet arrests, illegal and arbitrary detentions, and torture. Amnesty International stated in its [Annual Report 2012](#) that, "hundreds of people were unlawfully killed, often before or during arrests on the street. Others were tortured to death in police detention," adding that few police officers had been held accountable. In its

[World Report 2013](#)

, Human Rights Watch repeated the same allegations against Nigeria's forces, and supported such impunity claims, explaining that authorities had not yet prosecuted the relevant individuals for unlawful killings dating back to 1999.

The Nigerian government's handling of the insurgency has significantly contributed to the radicalization of the Boko Haram, pushing "the [movement](#) to the extreme end of the spectrum." It is [suggested](#) that the June 2009 shooting of Boko Haram members at a funeral procession, just prior to the July uprising, was seen as "a declaration of war," as was the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf. Boko Haram has since identified the civilian population as a key tool for their protection and operational success against the JTF, and as a result the JTF has "[resorted](#) to taking vengeance on the whole civilian population." This indiscriminate response has garnered Boko Haram greater support in the community, even with their knowledge of the group's own role in atrocities. The state's inability to protect its population, marred by the JTF's lack of distinction between civilians and combatants, has had the effect of increasing Boko Haram's confidence in their endeavors, as well as its membership numbers.

Weak political leadership by President Jonathan has also contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The president was often poorly informed and did not [grasp](#) the gravity of the situation, failing to provide political guidance in order to navigate an effective counterinsurgency. Moreover, the Nigerian military is increasingly [overwhelmed](#), as it is not appropriately trained and strongly undermanned to fight an insurgency that spans 150,000 square kilometers. In dire need of security sector reform, the army is [experiencing](#) a high rate of desertions and accounts of Nigerian soldiers [fleeing](#) military bases in fear of Boko Haram attacks are a testament to the need of military strengthening. Most of all, Nigeria must cooperate more closely with regional actors and accept assistance from neighboring countries.

V. Response: National, Regional & International **National** *Nigerian State* Amin u Waziri Tambuwal, Speaker of the House of Representatives, stated on 11 March 2014 that federal lawmakers must be prepared to act to end the violence. "Nigeria is running out of excuses for our failure to live up to our responsibility to protect our citizens," said Tambuwal. President Jonathan [appointed](#) veteran security chief, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, as his new defense minister. On 17 March, Nigeria's National Conference [commenced](#) in Abuja, with aims to discuss Nigeria's future.

Regional

Joint Regional Offensive

In reaction to the 2014 swell in Boko Haram activity, France, The Republic of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger entered into an [agreement](#) with Nigeria on a “massive, joint offensive” against the insurgency. Decided at a meeting in Abuja on 5 March 2014, the deal includes the enhancement of coordination and intelligence exchange. The countries also committed to effective border policing, and all

[acknowledged](#)

“Boko Haram’s propensity to instigate ethno-religious conflicts.” Following this agreement, at a meeting in Yaounde, defense ministers from the six-nation Lake Chad Basin Commission (

[LCBC](#)

) agreed to establish a multinational force to bolster security in the

region. While this force did not prove effective as extensive violence continued to occur, a revisited Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was

[authorized](#)

in January 2015 by the African Union Peace and Security Council and strongly supported by the UN. Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin have committed to

[contribute](#)

to a force of 8,700 troops, which will be stationed along the Nigerian border in order to contain Boko Haram’s regional expansion. On 4 February 2014, Chad

[killed](#)

more than

200 Boko Haram militants in an offensive along the Cameroon border, signaling the increased effort of regional actors to destroy the Islamist insurgents’ stronghold in Nigeria.

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (

[ECOWAS](#)

), of which the Nigerian state is a member, has maintained a limited reaction to the ongoing crisis. In

[remarks](#)

, issued 3 March 2014, ECOWAS specifically denounced the 25 February attack on the Yobe state school, as well as affirmed that efforts to rid the region of terrorism is a collective task.

More concrete action to assist the state commenced March 2014, when the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security of ECOWAS

[confirmed](#)

a partnership with the UN and the Nigerian government in a new Weapon Collection

Programme for northern Nigeria. The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (

[SALW](#)

) is

[cited](#)

as “the root cause of state of insecurity engineered by Boko Haram sect.”

AU

In March 2013, the AU Mission to Mali and the Sahel ([MISAHEL](#)) initiated regional security efforts aimed at combating terrorism, [recognizing](#) that combating violence of this nature extends beyond the efforts of a single country. At the opening of the 18th session of the Assembly of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 30 January 2014, the [AUC](#) Chairman, Dr. Jean Ping, [expressed](#) support for the government of Nigeria's fight against Boko Haram.

International

International Criminal Court (ICC)

On 5 August 2013, the Prosecutor of the ICC indicted Boko Haram, [stating](#) that since July 2009 the group has "launched a widespread and systematic attack that has resulted in the killing of more than 1,200 Christian and Muslims civilians," and that there is reason to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed. In February 2014, news [reports](#) surfaced that the Court remained in the preliminary stages of examining the gravity of such acts and had the Nigerian government's cooperation. The Court also explained that any crimes committed by the Nigerian Army would also fall under the Court's scrutiny. In May 2014, ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, [announced](#) that crimes committed by Boko Haram fell within the jurisdiction of the Court. In her most recent statement in January 2015, following the attack on the city of Baga and the reported use of women and children as suicide bombers, ICC Prosecutor Bensouda denounced a disturbing [escalation](#) in the levels of violence. The Prosecutor underscored that the intentional targeting of civilians cannot be [tolerated](#) and that the perpetrators of such crimes must be "thoroughly and impartially investigated and prosecuted." She concluded by reminding Nigeria, as a State Party to the Rome Statute, of its [obligation](#) to ensure that crimes that "shock the conscience of humanity" do not go unpunished, adding that the ICC is conducting an examination of the situation in the country.

United Nations

Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon

[expressed](#)

serious concern on 20 January 2010 about the renewed violence and crimes in Nigeria, and called on all political and religious leaders to work together to address the underlying causes of the recurring sectarian violence in the country. In

[remarks](#)

at a press conference on 14 March 2014 during her mission to Nigeria, Ms. Navi Pillay reported that Boko Haram has, “targeted some people simply because of their religion or professional occupation, and indiscriminately killed and maimed many others.” She also publically acknowledged human rights violations committed by security forces, and disclosed that close to half a million people have been displaced within Nigeria. In May 2014, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

[stated](#)

, in response to Boko Haram’s threats to

[‘sell’](#)

the abducted schoolgirls, that the group’s actions could constitute ‘crimes against humanity.’

Security Council Statements

The Security Council, on 19 January 2015, [condemned](#) in the strongest terms the recent escalation in attacks by Boko Haram, highlighting the suicide bombings reportedly involving children, as well as the January 3-7 attacks in Baga, causing massive destruction of civilian homes. The Council also strongly welcomed the Multinational Joint Task Force and its revamped effort to combat Boko Haram. In a 2 February 2015

[statement](#)

, the Council reiterated their deep concern of Boko Haram activities that jeopardize regional peace and stability, urging regional assistance to enhance military operations and coordination to immediately combat Boko Haram, commending the Chadian army’s swift operations in the collective fight against the militant group.

Member State Actors

Nigeria is currently

[cooperating](#)

with the United States and United Kingdom on counter-insurgency efforts. Following the 25 February 2014 Yobe State school attack, Nigeria

[called upon](#)

France for assistance in combating the group. In May 2014, the Nigerian State

[welcomed](#)

the

[dispatch](#)

of a US team to aid in recovering the schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram. The

[UK](#)

,
[France](#)

and

[China](#)

also have teams on the ground in Nigeria to assist these efforts, and an

[Israeli](#)

counter-terrorism team was in transit on 13 May.

VI. Response: Civil Society

Human Rights Agenda Network

(

[HRAN](#)

), a network of civil society and other organizations working on human rights issues in Nigeria,

[reported](#)

to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in March 2014 "increased cases of extra judicial executions and summary killings; continued use of torture as state-condoned tool of law enforcement; widespread gender-based violence and sex crimes," as well as a "repressive counter-terrorism administration resulting in increased gun violence and insecurity,". HRAN added that the duty to protect citizens ultimately rested with the Nigerian government. The

Network on Police Reform in Nigeria

, (NOPRIN

)

another network of 46 civil society organizations in Nigeria, gave

[recommendations](#)

for a multidisciplinary approach to dealing with terrorism, including, the need for restoring public confidence and cooperation with police/security forces and for the government to address the socio-economic root causes of crime and corruption.

Human Rights Watch

(

[HRW](#)

), on 19 January 2010,

[called](#)

on the Nigerian government to take concrete steps to end the discriminatory policies lying at the root of much of the country's inter-communal violence. HRW has also released two reports, one on

[accountability](#)

for inter-communal violence in the middle belt (December 2013) and on Boko Haram

[attacks](#)

and security force abuses in Nigeria (October 2012). International Crisis Group has

[recommended](#)

ceasing "heavy-handed" military and police methods, addressing impunity within security forces,

and the state's effective engagement with community, civil society and traditional leaders. The Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

(
[GCR2P](#)
) lists Nigeria's population as one at 'imminent risk.' On 15 March 2010, the organization produced the

[policy brief](#)
, "Atrocities in Nigeria's Plateau State and the Responsibility to Protect," which analyzed the response of relevant actors to attacks in the middle belt. In 2012, Amnesty International compiled the

[report](#)
, "Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence," containing a section titled, 'Failing to Protect and Prevent,' in which AI stated, "Nigeria is obliged under national and international law to protect the right to life and security of the person of everyone on its territory."

In response to the Chibok schoolgirl [abduction](#), the West African Network for Peacebuilding

(
[WANEP](#)
) issued a
[press release](#)

, on behalf of its 500 member organizations, calling for urgent action, including for the Nigerian Government to, "within the context of the Responsibility to Protect, take necessary steps in the coordination of Security for the protection of other girls in Borno State and in a timely manner." The

African Women's Development and Communication Network
[\(FEMNET\)](#)

and the
West African Civil Society Forum
[\(WACSOFF\)](#)

have also issued statements condemning Boko Haram's actions, and calling for collective support, at all levels, in recovering the girls

VII. Conclusion

The conflict in Nigeria is an example of a state's inability to protect civilians from organized killings conducted by a non-state insurgency group. Boko Haram has extended its influence and ideology [beyond](#) the country's borders—its own [movement](#) has been building in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and it has been [inked](#) !

to armed groups operating in Mali such as
[Ansar Dine](#)

,
[AQIM](#)

, and

[MUJAO](#)

. Furthermore, the violence has caused a severe
[refugee crisis](#)

,
with 3.2 million Nigerians forced to

[flee](#)

their homes. Approximately 1.6 million are internally

[displaced](#)

, while another 1.6 million are refugees seeking safety in neighboring countries such as Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

The country is set to hold presidential elections in 2015. Previous national elections in 2011 resulted in over eight hundred deaths, creating a volatile environment that allowed Boko Haram to gain greater influence. Many northern Nigerians view President Jonathan's presidency as [ill](#)
[egitimate](#)

, arguing that he disregarded a power-rotation agreement that would have ensured a Muslim president. The

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

[postponed](#)

mid-February elections to March 28

th

2015, citing security reasons.

[According](#)

to security officials, the delay would provide the military with more time to secure areas currently under control by Boko Haram. A legitimate electoral process and a peaceful aftermath are critical, as a repetition of the violence that ensued following the last election could provide an opportunity for Boko Haram to gain more power. Thus, the following weeks will prove pivotal as the Multinational Joint Task Force and the Nigerian Army launch their offensive against Boko Haram.

As the inter-communal violence, political unrest, and corruption demonstrate, Boko Haram attacks are not the only issue facing the country, and many analysts suggest that the government's counter-insurgency actions will continue to fail for reasons beyond that of being outgunned. Nigerian analyst [Chris Ngwodo](#) suggests Boko Haram "is an effect and not a cause; it is a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos." The crisis in Nigeria has rapidly become a complex national, regional, and global issue, requiring a comprehensive response if action to protect populations is to be effective.

To read more about Nigeria's upcoming election, read our blog post [here](#) .

Special thanks to Brianna Burt for her work in writing this page.□