

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate

Last April, much of the world was horrified when the Boko Haram rebels of northern Nigeria kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls and vowed to marry them off. But the violence in Africa's richest country has a complex back story of religion, ignorance, corruption and injustice, as **Don North** explains

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate

By Don North

In the two months since I have been a visiting professor of journalism at AUN, I have watched with some concern as graphic maps bleeding red ink indicate the steady expansion of Boko Haram

Nowhere in northern Nigeria is there a bolder symbol of Western values and education – concepts that the militant Boko Haram rebels have vowed to eradicate – than the American University of Nigeria in Yola of the northeast Adamawa State.

With the US and Nigerian flags flying side by side, AUN is a modern university for 1,500 mostly African students and a faculty from over 30 nations set amid desperate poverty and a population with

an estimated 80 percent illiteracy rate. It is also a campus near the frontline of a worsening conflict that threatens this fragile foothold of advanced learning in Nigeria, an oil-rich western African nation of 174 million people divided by extreme disparities in wealth as well as by religion with a mostly Christian south and Muslim north.

AUN is just a few hours drive from the war between the Nigerian military and the Muslim fundamentalist Boko Haram, which translates as “Western education is forbidden.”

It’s hard not to miss the analogy of the phrase “barbarians at the gate” coined



Two thousand women and children, many of them widows and orphans of Boko Haram atrocities in the three north east states of Nigeria now under siege, crowd into the dark interior of the cathedral to await distribution of emergency food aid at the Catholic Diocese of Yola

by the citizens of the ancient Roman Empire when Attila the Hun and his Mongol hordes camped in the suburbs preparing a siege after having laid waste to much of Europe.

In the two months since I have been a visiting professor of journalism at AUN, I have watched with some concern as graphic maps bleeding red ink indicate the steady expansion of Boko Haram. There are almost daily reports of attacks on schools and colleges by suicide bombers and the killings of teachers.

Since 2004, the most reliable survey of deaths due to both Nigerian government and Boko Haram operations to date

is 25,322. It is estimated Boko Haram now occupies 20 percent of Nigerian territory mostly in the three northwest states, a land mass the size of Maryland and a population of more than two million. Boko Haram has declared the captured territory part of an Islamic Caliphate with its capital Gwoza, Borno State.

Just 90 miles to AUN's north, Boko Haram captured the village of Mubi after routing the 234th Nigerian Army infantry, which fled over the Cameroon border. But the frontlines of the conflict have been fluid, with Mubi retaken this week by a mixed force of local vigilantes, hunters from neighborin

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Meanwhile, Boko Haram reportedly overran the mostly Christian town of Chibok about 120 miles north of the AUN campus. Since Friday evening, there has been no contact with Chibok’s residents as it is believed the insurgents cut down cell phone towers as they do in captured villages.

While the conflict between the Nigerian government and the Boko Haram rebels has received only spotty attention from the world’s news media, the one exception was the global outrage in April over Boko Haram’s kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok. Though more than 50 escaped, the fate of the rest has remained a mystery even as their plight was highlighted by international women’s rights advocates, including US First Lady Michelle Obama. The case became the subject of the Twitter hash tag, “Bring Back Our Girls.”

According to some reports, the girls who remained captives may have been separated and hidden in the remote Boko Haram base in the Sambisa forest or across the border in Chad and Cameroon.

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau announced his intention to sell the captives into slavery and, in a recent video, indicated that he had “married them off.” He also claimed that more than 100 of the mostly Christian girls had converted to Islam.

The Nigerian government’s response to the kidnapping led to widespread criticism of President Goodluck Jonathan. For 19 days after the mass abduction, the government didn’t appear to have noticed. Then, President Jonathan accused unnamed northern political enemies of being behind Boko Haram and the abduction. To confuse matters more, the President’s wife Patience accused the girls’ parents of inventing the abduction to embarrass her husband.

A report issued by Human Rights Watch in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, re-

cently gave a harrowing account of the insurgents’ treatment of a growing number of captured girls, now estimated to exceed 500 since the insurgency began in 2009.

In interviews with 30 of the abduction victims including some Chibok girls, HRW wrote that the insurgent captors regularly rape and abuse them, force religious conversions and marriage on some, and force others to support fighters in combat by carrying arms and ammunition.

Bring back our girls

American University of Nigeria President Margee Ensign, a veteran educator from Sacramento, California, has been an active advocate of the “#Bring Back Our Girls” international campaign to find and free the Chibok prisoners. She established a foundation to launch “#Educate Our Girls,” a fund to bring 58 of the girls who escaped from Boko Haram captivity to AUN for an education.

A few months ago, Ensign and AUN’s chief of security Lionel Rawlins, a former US Marine, made a dangerous drive north through Boko Haram-controlled territory to bring 15 of the girls back to the AUN campus at Yola.

Ensign has strong views on how to defeat Boko Haram. “Terrorism thrives where hope and opportunity languish, and the escaped Chibok girls now studying at AUN are a strong reminder of the transformative power of education,” she said. “Education may be scary for the thousands of Nigerians who are afraid to send their children to school. A society without education is even scarier.”

The Nigerian founder of AUN, Atiku Abubaker, a philanthropist and former vice president of Nigeria, has promised to bankroll the education of other girls who escape the clutches of Boko Haram. Abubakar is a candidate for president in 2015, running on the opposition All Progressive Congress (APC) ticket.

Atiku Abubaker’s is a classic Horatio Al-

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate



After storming the village of Garta near the border with Cameroon on Oct. 23, Boko Haram slit the throats of village men and boys and abducted 60 more women

Despair is reflected in the faces of women refugees from Boko Haram attacks often burning their homes, murdering their husbands and kidnapping their children. They await distribution of emergency food aid provided by the Catholic church and the American University of Nigeria in Jola.

ger story set in Nigeria. The barefoot poor orphan met a group of US Peace Corps teachers in Yola and got an American education. Abubaker parlayed that education into a career in Nigerian politics and making a fortune in the oil industry.

Though the fury about last April's mass kidnapping has subsided – lost amid other international crises and outrages – Boko Haram has continued to commit atrocities. After storming the village of Garta near the border with Cameroon on Oct. 23, Boko Haram slit the throats of village men and boys and abducted 60 more women.

AUN has its own security force of 350 security guards trained and led by Rawlins. But tensions run high amid rumors of Boko Haram advances. The military has

declared a 9:00 p.m. curfew in Yola, where there are only a few government-operated refugee camps to handle the estimated 100,000 who have fled insurgent attacks. Most refugees are crammed into homes of their relatives, sometimes ten or more to a room.

In Yola, there are now massive traffic jams and often long lines at banks and gas stations. The Christian churches and the Muslim mosques work in concert to distribute food to the destitute refugees. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 700,000 people have been displaced externally and internally by the conflict.

None of my students have fled the campus in fear, nor have they been cringing behind their ivory towers, instead immers-

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate

The Nigerian government appeared to have been hoodwinked when officials announced negotiating a ceasefire with Boko Haram in secret meetings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

ing themselves in the pressing concerns of the community. AUN students help hand out basic food supplies purchased by religious charities, the US Embassy in Nigeria and USAID.

American concerns

The Nigerian government recently reported seeking arms purchases from South Africa and the Czech Republic, charging that the US government had blocked arms orders for the Nigerian Army. Since then it was widely reported in the media here that Americans were undermining the country's war on terrorism.

But US Ambassador to Nigeria James Entwistle chose the American University of Nigeria as the site to reassure Nigerians of US support in their struggle against Boko Haram. Entwistle, a seasoned State Department Africa hand, denied Nigerian press reports that the United States is not doing enough to contain Boko Haram.

"I disagree completely with these headlines," he said. "We are currently training an infantry battalion of Nigerian troops, who when their training is complete will deploy to the northeast to fight Boko Haram."

Entwistle, while reaffirming US support, cautioned that human rights abuses by the Nigerian forces were a consideration affecting Nigeria's requests for arms: "The kind of question we have to ask is will it be used in a way that affects the human situation. If I approve, I'm responsible for that. We take that responsibility very seriously."

Ambassador Entwistle admonished Nigeria not to think the war against Boko Haram could be won by buying high-tech equipment. To achieve results, he said the country must take the welfare and behavior of its troops more seriously.

Entwistle also admitted there were still open questions about Boko Haram: "Who are these guys and what do they want? I don't think we really understand them."

He observed that Boko Haram had gone from being a small insurgent group with a couple of guns to a very effective conventional force: "An open question we have to look at carefully is where is the military expertise coming from? How in the last year did they become more effective?"

These are questions being asked throughout Nigeria today as Boko Haram fighters expand their area of influence capturing a string of towns and villages in Borno state. At the same time, the Nigerian government appeared to have been hoodwinked when officials announced negotiating a ceasefire with Boko Haram in secret meetings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Boko Haram leader Abubaker Shekau ridiculed the government in a video. Appearing in combat fatigues and standing before a background of armored cars mounted with anti-aircraft guns, which the insurgents have been using lately in ground assaults, Shekau said, "We have not made ceasefire with anyone. It is a lie. We will not negotiate."

Behind Boko Haram

Accurate reports of Boko Haram successes are difficult to confirm as the insurgents announce occupations of territory and the Nigerian Army denies it. Nigerian journalists are not allowed to embed with Nigerian forces and few reporters venture into disputed territory to observe firsthand. The resulting confusion, contradictions and lurid rumors printed in much of the Nigerian press have left the populace confused and indifferent.

One source I have found reliable is the Catholic Bishop of Maiduguri, Borno State, Oliver Dashe. By email the Bishop has confirmed to me that at least 60 villages and more than 20 towns are currently occupied by Boko Haram. He estimates more than 30,000 refugees are crammed into Maiduguri, a city of about 1 million, with another 40,000 hiding across the border in Cameroon.

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate



The poorly armed government security forces often flee, not willing to stand and die for a nation whose legitimacy is widely seen as compromised by the corruption of its elites

AUN President Ensign and a USAID representative meets with the Islamic council in Jola to provide aid to refugees.

With recent advances, Boko Haram rebels have virtually encircled Maiduguri. In skirmish after skirmish, the insurgents have simply walked in, seized and plundered towns, killed men and boys and kidnapped the women. The poorly armed government security forces often flee, not willing to stand and die for a nation whose legitimacy is widely seen as compromised by the corruption of its elites. Because of scorched-earth policies and human rights violations, the Nigerian army and police are often feared as much as Boko Haram.

Contributing to the crisis is the fact that many military officers are political appointees, whose promotions are based on ethnicity and loyalty to politicians, not on their ability as warriors.

“The refugees are being neglected,”

said Bishop Oliver Dashe. “Many corrupt government officials never pass on food, clothing and relief supplies to them and many end up dying of hunger and disease.”

The Catholic bishop considers the Nigerian Army part of the problem instead of the solution. “Many Boko Haram sympathizers in the military dish out information on Army plans to sect members,” he claimed. “Some times funds for junior officers such as allowances, upkeep and arms purchase go into private pockets. The government must deal with the corrupt officers.”

The Bishop confirmed that Boko Haram has obtained armored tanks, personnel carriers, rocket launchers and anti-tank weapons. These high-tech weapons are

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate

Much of Nigeria's news media is itself divided along ethnic lines and, outside of a handful of responsible news outlets, is addicted to lurid allegations and dark conspiracy theories

presumed to have come from Nigerian or Cameroon armories, stolen or supplied by Boko Haram sympathizers in the military.

The outspoken bishop has also been critical of the government of President Goodluck Jonathan. "The inaction of the government and their silence is very disturbing," he wrote. "There is a disconnection between what our so-called leaders in Abuja [the capital] report in the media and the reality on the ground."

While the Bishop said Boko Haram has killed many Muslims, he placed their goal as Islamicizing northeast Nigeria and said the movement has "an international face and connections."

Much of Nigeria's news media is itself divided along ethnic lines and, outside of a handful of responsible news outlets, is addicted to lurid allegations and dark conspiracy theories. Some even portray Boko Haram as a government plot to destroy the largely Muslim north, while others suspect northern politicians are secretly supporting the insurgents to discredit President Jonathan, a southerner and Christian.

Presidential election

The presidential elections scheduled for February 2015 may prove to be the most bitterly contested since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. Conducting free-and-fair elections that the government has promised will impose additional strains on the security forces and providing election security could require drawing troops from the north, giving Boko Haram an advantage.

The danger presented by Boko Haram extends far beyond Nigeria, which although a troubled state is the most populous and wealthiest in Africa. Boko Haram may have regional ambitions. A consolidation of its successes in Nigeria's three northeastern states would give Boko Haram a strategic springboard to invade neighboring Niger, Cameroon and Chad – weak states that would have

difficulty surviving a serious siege

Using sources from the database in the library of the American University of Nigeria – as well as consulting several of Nigeria's more responsible newspapers, local security advisers and diplomatic sources – I have traced Boko Haram to its origins 34 years ago.

Its genesis began with a handful of Muslim clerics who followed the extremist Islam of the Saudi Arabian Wahhabis and Salafists. Boko Haram morphed slowly into its form today feeding on the poverty and illiteracy of northern Nigeria to form its ideology of fundamentalism and hatred. Poverty-stricken and disillusioned youth believing they had nothing to lose began to huddle under the black jihadi flag.

Nigeria also has a long history of religious conflict. Some of the most virulent were those stirred up by Muhammad Marwa, a Muslim preacher from Cameroon who settled in Kano, a large city in north-central Nigeria, and attracted a large group of followers. Marwa's objective was the purification of Islam and establishing Sharia law. He raged against Western education and its products.

His bitter condemnation of the Nigerian state led to him being known as Maitatsine, a Hausa word for "he who damns." He became close to declaring that he, not Mohammad, was Allah's true prophet.

In 1982, a government crackdown on Maitatsine and his followers led to violent riots that killed some 4,000 residents of Kano, including Maitatsine. But his movement lived on and in the following year resulted in continued riots in which 1,000 more were killed.

The mantle of Maitatsine was picked up by a charismatic preacher named Mohammed Yusuf in Maidiguri, capital of the Borno state. He had studied in Saudi Arabia and demanded justice for the poor through Sharia law. He was well-ed-

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate



To make sure Yusuf was not released again by his supporters, he was executed. In the days following Yusuf's murder, riots continued and the police killed many of his followers including family members

A refugee from Boko Haram occupied Mubi describes the attack of Boko Haram that captured her five children.

ucated, spoke English and lived lavishly with four wives and drove a Mercedes-Benz. Yusuf was often arrested, but always released through the intervention of politically powerful friends.

A spellbinding speaker, Yusuf denounced modern ideas of evolution, round earth and even the evaporation of water. His group, fashioned after Afghanistan's Taliban, began to be referred to by Nigerian journalists as Boko Haram because of the group's rejection of Western education.

The most recent spark for violence between Boko Haram and the government came in late 2009 when police watching a funeral procession through the streets of Maidiguri saw many mourners riding motorcycles without helmets which was a rule the police were determined to en-

force.

Boko Haram members resisted, as one must remove traditional Islamic caps to wear a helmet. The police attacked the funeral procession to arrest those not wearing helmets. Three died. Riots erupted.

A few days later, the police surrounded Yusuf's compound, arrested him and took him to the station. To make sure Yusuf was not released again by his supporters, he was executed. In the days following Yusuf's murder, riots continued and the police killed many of his followers including family members, racking up a death toll of over 1,000. The aftermath of Yusuf's murder was captured on a cell phone video and broadcast over northern Nigeria, assuring his status as a martyr and giving impetus to Boko

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate

The video shows a man kneeling in a camouflage vest with his hand in a sling. A Boko Haram soldier hovers over him with an axe which is later used in the beheading

Haram.

Yusuf had initially believed that an Islamic state based on Sharia law could be achieved without violence. His deputy and successor, Abubaker Shekau, argued that success would require an armed struggle and the group increasingly resorted to the murder of their critics and opponents.

The Nigerian security forces thought Shekau had been killed at the same time as Yusuf and other Boko Haram followers, until he appeared in videos several months later. However, as late as the end of 2012, Shekau had not been seen in person since the day Yusuf died three years earlier. He normally communicates through videos speaking in Hausa and Arabic and the occasional English phrase. In one of his public videos he said, “I enjoy killing anyone God commands me to kill – the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams.”

Nigerian security analyst Abdullah Abubaker said, “Shekau is now one of the world’s most wanted men with a price of 7 million US dollars on his head. He’s a fearless loner, complex, paradoxical, part-theologian, part gangster. Since he took over Boko Haram has become more radical with more killings.”

As a person and a leader Shekau is swathed in myth, but not charisma. He is no Lenin, Mao or Castro.

The rise of Boko Haram has heightened the state of insecurity in Nigeria with the increasing incidence of deadly bomb attacks on police forces, government officials, places of worship, public institutions and innocent civilians, even in the Nigerian capital Abuja.

The flames of terrorist insurgency are being fed by a failure of Nigerian security forces, the army and police to effectively stem the violence. The violence is fed, too, by endemic corruption and military brutality, continued economic challenges, high levels of poverty, illiteracy

and inaccurate reporting by most newspapers, government spokesmen and the military.

Boko Haram’s main base of operations is believed to be a large tract of jungle and scrub vegetation called the Sambisa forest near the Nigerian border with Cameroon. There are no roads in or out of the hideout.

Although Boko Haram cling to tactics and philosophies not seen since the Middle Ages, their one exception is the production of videos and distribution through Western social media, particularly Facebook YouTube.

The few insights on their operations are glimpsed in these videos produced by a special production crew. They are closely watched by Nigerian security forces even though Boko Haram is suspected of manipulating and falsifying some of the videos they produce. Sanitized versions recently seen on YouTube are still chillingly brutal and reminiscent of medieval rituals of punishment.

Slick video

A new video showing the beheading of a captured Nigerian Air Force pilot is clear and well produced compared to earlier grainy and low-resolution productions. The video shows a man kneeling in a camouflage vest with his hand in a sling. A Boko Haram soldier hovers over him with an axe which is later used in the beheading.

Speaking in English, the captive identified himself as a Wing Commander in the Nigerian Air Force and said he had been on a mission over Borno State when his jet was brought down.

“We were shot down and our aircraft crashed,” he said. “To this day I don’t know the whereabouts of my second pilot.” The video also showed burned aircraft parts with Nigerian military markings apparently signaling the insurgents’ ability to shoot down military planes. Al-

Boko Haram: Barbarians at the Gate



A man and woman accused of adultery are stoned to death, and there are additional beheadings in front of the black jihadist flag

A force of 350 Security guards on parade during the American University of Nigeria Homecoming week. They provide round the clock protection from possible terrorist attacks by Boko Haram insurgents.

though the Nigerian Air Force acknowledged an Alpha jet aircraft missing on Sept. 11, they denied the man apparently beheaded was the pilot.

However, friends of the executed pilot have posted his photo in the cockpit of a fighter bomber at Yola Air Base on Facebook on the page titled Nigeria Army Support Group. They identified him as Wing Commander Chimda Himeda.

Sharia law

In one of the videos, scenes of strict Sharia law being carried out are featured in new Boko Haram territory. A man and woman accused of adultery are stoned to death, and there are additional beheadings in front of the black jihadist flag. The crowd chants "Allahu Akbar" as the whippings and ston-

ing increase in tempo or as the axe falls on necks. One older video that clearly shows Boko Haram's attitude in combat begins with a pep talk by the commander. "You should look for victory or martyrdom," he says. "A martyr knows he is going to die, knows there are enemies, but goes to the battlefield anyway, without fear of death because he loves God and knows God will smile on him."

The attack begins at dawn. Hundreds of Boko Haram are videotaped walking through the bush. They begin firing AK-47s. When they receive return fire, they do not change pace or even look for cover. They keep walking almost casually into the fusillade.

Bullets whistle over the cameraman's head. "Allahu Akbar," he shouts con-

Boko Haram: **Barbarians at the Gate**

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tinually as around him fighters are being cut down.

Suddenly the camera goes down on its side. “They’ve killed me,” says a voice presumed to be the cameraman.

It is that sort of fanaticism that makes Boko Haram such a threat to Nigerians who hope for a future of education and modernity. Ready to die for their cause, the Boko Haram rebels are a difficult foe to either engage in peace talks or defeat.

Yet, beyond the danger from Boko Haram, there is also the ineptness of the government, as noted by one widely trusted Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, a playwright and poet, a winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1986.

“This is a government which is not only in denial mentally, but in denial about certain obvious steps to be taken,” Soyinka recently wrote. “It’s not only the

President and his advisors, it’s a certain section of the nation, some of whom enjoy for various reasons a nation in a state of chaos. They profit by it, and in fact some are guilty of provoking the situation. The international community must come to the rescue of Nigeria, as the government has failed the people.

“It is not just a Nigerian problem. ... This is a global problem.” **CT**

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