

Nigeria after the Chibok Abductions: An Update on Human Rights and Governance

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. Congress

Madeline Rose

Senior Policy Advisor, Mercy Corps

First, I want to thank Co-Chairmen Jim McGovern and Joe Pitts and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this timely discussion and inviting Mercy Corps to speak. We are heartened to see so many events of solidarity with the people of Nigeria here in Washington this week.

Mercy Corps is a global humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action—helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. We are headquartered in Portland, OR and work closely with the Congressional Oregonian delegation here in Washington DC.

Mercy Corps has worked in Nigeria since 2011. We work in 10 states, on three tracks of work: reducing farmer/pastoral violence, spurring inclusive economic growth by addressing structural inequalities that oppress adolescent girls, and alleviating human suffering in the NE. We are frontline humanitarian responders in Gombe, Adama and Southern Borno, and just last week released new research on the drivers of youth involvement in Boko Haram. Today, I'll outline the core characteristics of the crisis civilians are facing in NE, discuss [our new research](#) on Boko Haram, and then provide recommendations.

Core characteristics of the humanitarian, protection and rights crisis

The violent conflict in NE Nigeria prompted by Boko Haram has led to widespread displacement, violations of International humanitarian law and human rights law, protection violations, and a humanitarian crisis.

Since the start of the conflict in 2009, more than 20,000 people have been killed, and over 2,000 women and girls have been abducted. 2.5 million civilians have fled their homes, of whom 2.2 million remain currently internally displaced inside Nigeria while 200,000 are seeking refuge in the Lake Chad Basin region. In total, 7 million people are in need of emergency, life-saving humanitarian aid in the four worst-affected states in the North-East, Adamawa, Borno, Gombe and Yobe, with at least 3 million in insecure and inaccessible areas.

Since the abduction of the Chibok girls, at least 1.3 million children have been uprooted by Boko Haram violence across four countries in the Lake Chad region.

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This volume of displacement and those in need of lifesaving assistance is among the highest of the world, shy of Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo but larger than South Sudan, Iraq, and Yemen. We say this not to compare tragedies, but to demonstrate that these communities are indeed in “crisis,” a word that has many important political ramifications. They deserve a proportional response from their government and the international community – which they have been very slow to receive.

Of those displaced, 92 per cent of internally displaced people are living in host communities – not government-run IDP camps. Basic services in communities are being exhausted, leading to serious protection risks for displaced populations.

There is also a stark absence of displaced boys and men, which leads us to believe – as others have suggested – that Boko Haram is abducting and possibly killing more boys than we currently have the access to data necessary to corroborate.

What this looks like in real time is a scenario in which groups of children and adolescent girls – ranging from ages 4-17 fleeing BH, or the military campaign against them, and are now living on the outskirts of Gombe Town. The 15 or 17 year old is now the de facto head of household caring for the younger girls in the group. She has no money, and no way to make money, so we’re seeing a spike in adolescent girls selling sex for food or sex for money to buy food.

Mercy Corps is working to mitigate these risks by administering an electronic vouchers response, in which we’re supporting displaced women and girls with access to cash –via a voucher card – while subsidizing local vendors to absorb the increase in demand for goods. We’re also providing livelihoods grants for displaced families to start businesses so that they can generate their own income.

Understanding what drives Nigerians to Boko Haram

It’s important to remember that Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as an anti-government Islamic sect, but began to gain notoriety in 2009 as its actions became more radical and deadly. Since 2009, they have become one of the most deadly armed groups on the planet.

In order to better understand how to support communities in the NE, Mercy Corps recently conducted research to learn what makes certain young people enlist in BH and others reject. We interviewed 145 people, including 47 former Boko Haram youth members, and then family members of former members, youth who resisted joining and local leaders.

Our key findings were:

1. Youth see in Boko Haram an opportunity to get ahead in society, through business support.

Resembling mafia-style tactics, BH applies a recruitment strategy of predatory lending in which they exploit common desires of youth in this region, to get ahead economically and distinguish themselves in their communities. The use of financial incentives, in the form of loans and other business support, incentivized some youth to join because entrepreneurship can help them fulfill their desire to get ahead.

2. Broad frustrations with government inadequacies, neglect and lack of services created initial community acceptance of Boko Haram. BH took advantage of deep grievances around government inadequacies and security abuses to gain a foothold in communities. About half of former members said

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their communities at some time generally supported the group, hoping it would bring a change in government. However, that support waned as Boko Haram's tactics became more brutal.

3. There is no demographic profile of a Boko Haram member. Members we spoke to came from diverse backgrounds. Some had jobs, and others did not. Some had attended secular school, others Islamic school, and others had dropped out. Profiling in youth interventions based on demographics is unlikely to be successful.

4. Influence from social and business peers is a key factor in recruitment. Almost all former members cited a friend, family member, or business colleague as a factor in their joining Boko Haram. That person's influence in the youth's life mattered more than the number of people in a youth's network who joined.

5. Youth who have escaped Boko Haram are already returning to their home communities, yet no formal reintegration processes exist. As youth leave the seemingly porous Boko Haram, the issue of how to integrate these former fighters back into their communities is undefined and polarizing. However, the current approach to handling former fighters is preventing them from reaching their goals and risks pushing them back into violent activity.

6. Local counter-narratives on the hypocrisy of Boko Haram are working. Youth who resisted joining shared a narrative of Boko Haram as a corrupt, greedy organization focused on enriching its leaders. These messages are being crafted by religious and traditional leaders at a very local level and speak to community members' existing concerns about corruption and unresponsive governance.

UNICEF also released a remarkable report yesterday that we highly recommend reading. They found that the number of children as suicide bombers in Boko Haram has dramatically increased.

Recommendations for the U.S. Congress

1. First, support necessary humanitarian and fragile states funding levels in the FY17 appropriations process, specifically International Development Assistance (IDA) and Economic Support Funds (ESF).

The humanitarian crisis in Nigeria is occurring at a background of the largest refugee and displacement crisis the world has experienced since WWII – with 60million people displaced worldwide and none of the current wars fueling displacement abating anytime soon. These are unprecedented times. The US humanitarian community requests \$2.8 billion for IDA which funds OFDA's ability to respond.

But ultimately, the most effective way to bring down the cost of humanitarian aid is to reduce the necessity to resort to it. ESF funds allow groups like Mercy Corps to do programming in places like Nigeria that address root causes of conflict and effective development, and peacebuilding programming in complex environments. Mercy Corps therefore urges Congress appropriate \$6.08 billion for ESF to countries of strategic importance to the United States (and equal to the President's request).

2. Support the Nigerian government to rebuild civilian trust in government by addressing the needs of conflict-affected youth and communities by urgently scaling up its humanitarian response in the NE.

The Nigerian government faces both the challenge and opportunity of building trust with communities and showing that it can effectively address their needs. We see the Nigerian government's response to

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the crisis in the NE as a key opportunity to rebuild trust with communities by effectively implementing community-driven recovery and development initiatives. The strategy should focus on assistance to meet communities' and youth's self-identified needs for protection and livelihoods support, including both internally displaced persons and host communities, and set a foundation for long-term improved governance and development.

The plan should be developed in a participatory manner, and implemented with budget transparency. Communities want to feel listened to, want real access to voice their opinions, and want to see tangible results from their government.

3. Help the Nigerian government develop a comprehensive plan to reduce violent extremism in the long run, including (a) immediately preparing for comprehensive reintegration of former fighters, (b) amplifying local narratives that are already working to prevent recruitment, and (c) building a federal budget that will deal with the systemic drivers that allowed them to rise in the first place.

On reintegration: Planning for justice must be prioritized to facilitate a peaceful transition into a post-conflict environment in the Northeast. Some youth who have escaped Boko Haram are already returning to their home communities. Seemingly arbitrary decisions around the fate of returning youth, including, in effect, 'house arrest' for indefinite periods of time, stand to deepen grievances of former fighters and risks pushing them back into violent activity. Importantly, the defectors and returnees that we spoke with seek a better life for themselves after Boko: roughly a third of youth who had escaped spoke of returning to secular school, going for the first time, or going to university, to pursue a new livelihood. Others spoke of continuing their businesses or starting new ones, becoming traders, lawyers, mothers, and fathers. They hope not only to survive, but to thrive. However, communities, local authorities and the national government have no systemic approach for reintegration.

On local narratives: We are already seeing influential local leaders, particularly religious and traditional leaders, delivering resounding anti-violence messages. Government and donors should support locally rooted NGOs and religious and media organizations to amplify effective messages.

On a long term strategy: One clear research finding for us was on access to finance and opportunities for youth independence. Boko Haram's use of financial inducements, in the form of loans and other business support, successfully incentivized youth to join because entrepreneurship can help them fulfill their desire to get ahead. Exploring options for youth grow their businesses, such as identifying and providing informal and formal financial services that are youth-friendly and Islamic-compliant, may provide safe ways for youth to satisfy their ambitions.

4. Do not lose focus on the Middle Belt. President Buhari and his Ministry of Agriculture should make progress towards ending chronic violence between farmers and pastoralists across the country, particularly in the Middle Belt.

From 2012-2014, Mercy Corps conducted research on the economist costs of conflict between farmers/pastoralists in Nigeria. We found that the Nigerian economy stands to gain up to US \$13.7 billion USD or 2.3 trillion NIRA annually in total macroeconomic progress in a scenario of peace between farmers and pastoralists in Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Plateau alone. These gains represent up to 2.79% of Nigeria's officially reported Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or 0.8% of the "total economic product" of Nigeria, including the informal economy.

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Reducing chronic conflict in the Middle Belt can help return desperately needed revenue back to the national government, start to improve economic stability and growth in the heart of the country, and serve as a demonstrable governance “win” for the Buhari Administration – in a context where other fights, such as the fight against Boko Haram, will be much more difficult.