

Written Testimony

by Lantana Adbullahi

Submitted to the Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs

May 15, 2014

Members of the Senate, Ladies, and Gentlemen, good morning:

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Flake, members of the committee; I would like to begin by thanking you for convening this important and timely meeting and for giving me the opportunity to speak today on this crisis. I also thank the Honorable Mr. Jackson, Honorable Ms. Gast, and Ms. Friend for their testimonies today. I thank all of you for your leadership, commitment, and efforts to help Nigerians respond to the growing crisis in our country.

My name is Lantana Abdullahi, and I work on conflict transformation and violence prevention with Search for Common Ground in Nigeria. Since 2004, we have been developing innovative media and community projects in Nigeria that encourage mutual understanding across ethnic, religious, and gender lines. I recently led a project to empower Muslim and Christian girls from northern Nigeria and promote them as peacebuilders, and I currently work with communities, women, youth, and civil society groups to prevent violence and promote peace. The testimony that follows reflects my own views, which are informed by my experiences as a mother, a Nigerian, and a peacebuilder.

I will begin by speaking briefly on the events that have brought us together today, then I will discuss some of the causes of the current crisis, and I will conclude with some practical actions that can be taken to respond to the immediate crisis and bring about long-term solutions.

The Current State of Affairs

On April 14, 2014, the Islamist militant group Boko Haram abducted more than 200 girls from a school in Chibok, a town in northeastern Nigeria. While the identity of the girls is still being confirmed, the abductees included both Muslim and Christian girls. This abduction was just one of the latest attacks for which Boko Haram has claimed responsibility. Boko Haram was created in 2002 and intensified its insurgency in 2009, with the aim of imposing its own version of Islamic law throughout Nigeria. In the past five years, the group has targeted the United Nations headquarters in Abuja, churches, the police, markets, and schools throughout northeastern

— **END VIOLENT CONFLICT** —

Nigeria, and it has regularly engaged in bloody combat with the Nigerian military and police forces. These attacks have led to over 3,000 deaths,¹ a state of emergency declaration in May 2013 in three northeastern states, and the displacement of tens of thousands of my fellow citizens. In all, Boko Haram's actions have affected more than 10 million people. It risks becoming a regional crisis and placing serious strains on Nigeria's relations with neighboring Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.

Underlying Challenges

The abduction of the Chibok school girls last month is a sad escalation of the terror the Nigerian people have witnessed since 2009. This crisis comes as a result of four long-running challenges that not only affect the northeastern parts of the country, but also have the possibility to produce widespread impact across all of Nigeria and in neighboring countries.

The first challenge is corruption and lack of confidence in the government at every level in Nigeria. Many Nigerians are frustrated, and they feel that there is a high degree of corruption in the country. Boko Haram argues that corruption is the result of democracy and western influences. They argue that democracy is a Western import that has not succeeded in Nigeria. This description resonates with frustrated, poor, and desperate people who perceive a growing gap between rich and poor and suspect that politicians are using their public offices to secure private wealth.

The second challenge is chronic poverty. This is of particular concern in northern Nigeria, which is historically disadvantaged in comparison to the more developed south. The effects of poverty on the population are pervasive: without a strong economy or income-generating activities, many parents send their children to the only schools available. An exclusively Koranic school education without other practical training offers limited opportunities for students when they graduate, as it leaves out subjects such as mathematics, science, and the liberal arts, leaving students unprepared and unable to find adequate employment. Thus, these youngsters are more susceptible to recruitment into violent groups. Additionally, Boko Haram first made in-roads with the local population by offering food and shelter, thereby taking advantage of people's vulnerability that resulted from poverty.

The third challenge stems from the geographical location of the Boko Haram insurgency. Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states—where this violence has originated—are located along Nigeria's border with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Weak borders and governance in the remote region allow for the trafficking of individuals and arms across countries. Boko Haram can not only facilitate the trafficking of victims, but it can also escape prosecution and seek refuge in neighboring countries when the situation becomes too precarious for them in Nigeria.

¹ "[World Report 2013: Nigeria](#)." Human Rights Watch.

Finally, these challenges go hand in hand with the lack of a strong civil society and media presence. In recent years, many different local and international organizations have been moving to the region but have yet to deliver a strong impact. Media programs and outlets continue to have limited reach compared to the rest of the country, and citizens have few opportunities to make their voices heard on national issues. Consequently, the local population does not trust the available news sources, leaving no suitable outlets for popular expression.

Key Opportunities and Recommendations

I have been deeply touched by the attention the tragedy of the Chibok Girls' kidnapping has garnered both in Nigeria and in the world. Their kidnapping comes after a long wave of killings, kidnappings, and abuses, and it underscores the need for new approaches to the crisis. Thus far, citizens living in the most-affected areas have seen little on-the-ground response to the crisis apart from the current offensive undertaken by security forces. Yet despite these operations, the insurgency persists, and human rights groups have presented grave reports of extremely serious abuses committed by the security actors. While securing the girls' release will be a short term gain, ensuring lasting peace in the region requires that the militancy issue be addressed from multiple angles. It also requires the engagement of all stakeholders – communities, civil society, government, and its international partners – to ensure context-specific and sustainable solutions to improve human security, peacebuilding, and the prevention of future atrocities.

While the violent actions perpetrated by Boko Haram have increased in scale, quantity, and frequency, there are a few reasons to be hopeful.

First, we have witnessed a decrease in reprisal violence within affected communities. During earlier periods of the insurgency, victims of violence appealed to their own communities, often divided along religious and ethnic lines, in order to attain justice or retribution. Recently we have seen more and more Christians and Muslims working together, supporting one another, and recognizing the need to unite to prevent violence. With the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, we have also seen a more concerted effort by Nigerians across the country to recognize the tragic consequences of the conflict in the northeast.

Secondly, in the past there has been poor coordination with the international community and neighboring countries. However, the global attention generated by the abductions of the girls and the campaign by CSOs, as well as the World Economic Forum for Africa hosted in Nigeria, have created an opportunity for foreign technical assistance from the US, UK, and France.

These two changes present an opportunity for the US government to support Nigerians as they try to respond to this crisis.

The challenges and opportunities call for a running engagement and specific actions to face long-standing problems. With this in mind, I make the recommendation for practical courses of action.

The first set is focused on addressing the human consequences of the current crisis in three key ways:

- a. **There is an immediate need for trauma healing and psychosocial support to victims of violence in northeast Nigeria.** The psychological legacies of violence will create long-term scars, both for these girls, as well as the thousands of their fellow citizens who have lost loved ones, experienced abuses, lost their homes, and otherwise suffered as a result of the violence.
- b. **There is an urgent need for humanitarian support.** Tens of thousands of people have fled in fear, becoming refugees in neighboring countries and fleeing to other parts of Nigeria. In some places the influx of refugees has overtaxed local water and food supplies, overcrowded schools and clinics, and competes with locals for economic opportunities. There is a need to ensure the protection of women and children fleeing the violence, to ensure they are not exposed to sexual exploitation. There is also a need to work with the displaced people to ensure that in their desperation, they do not themselves become recruited into militancy and violence.
- c. **Finally, there is need to begin planning for early recovery.** The Nigerian government and its international partners should begin working with local communities to begin planning for how to rebuild from the devastation, including repairing infrastructure and homes that have been destroyed, creating economic livelihoods opportunities, and implementing emergency programs, such as catch-up education programs for those whose schooling has been disrupted by war.

Even while addressing its consequences, the international community can also undertake specific steps to help bring the crisis to an end in four ways:

- a. **Support a regional approach to prevent the Boko Haram militancy from becoming a broader crisis.** There needs to be regional collaboration to work with border communities and governments to improve security along the borders between Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. The porous borders between these countries have facilitated human trafficking, arms and drug trade, and the movement of mercenaries. Securing the borders will limit terrorist activities and prevent the spread of militancy. The regional collaboration should not be limited to the formal security forces, but can involve local leaders, civil society, media, and governments in all four countries to recognize a shared interest in more secure and productive communities, with a particular focus on youth. Actions can include strategic livelihoods programming, community empowerment, and supporting pluralistic platforms for dialogue on diversity and tolerance through the media sector.
- b. **Allocate adequate funding to support a robust community-focused approach to improving human security in northeastern Nigeria.** The US strategy to support northeastern Nigeria should focus on empowering women, youth, local leaders and

religious groups within the conflict-affected areas of the northeast. Building cohesive, empowered, and resilient local communities will help reduce the risk of recruitment, create alternative ways for local residents to raise their concerns to government officials, and help reduce the risk of recruitment of young people. Such an approach should also include civil society capacity building and media engagement to document security conditions and monitor allegations of human rights abuses.

- c. **Work with civil society, religious and local leaders, Nigerian authorities, the security forces and the National Human Rights Commission to prevent and monitor human rights abuses.** This includes providing support platform building to strengthen relationships between civil society groups and the NHRC to prevent abuses in the North. Operations have been marked by reports of grave human rights abuses, and ensuring that there is a transparent process for addressing these grievances, agreed upon by all stakeholders, will prevent the allegations of abuses from becoming new grievances.
- d. **Consolidate the gains in peacebuilding throughout Nigeria.** Alongside the crisis in the Northeast, Nigeria is facing a series of other violent conflicts in the Niger Delta, as well as in the Middle Belt. Additionally, the nation will be looking forward to elections next year. Even as we focus on resolving the crisis in the Northeast, it is critical that sufficient funds should be allocated to continue to support the consolidation of peace in the Niger Delta, interfaith peace efforts in the Middle Belt, and support the electoral process.

Conclusion

I would like to close with a personal story. Three years ago, I was in Maiduguri. As soon as I arrived, I was shocked to hear explosions all around us, serving as a painful reminder of the violence that my relatives, friends, and fellow citizens are subjected to on a regular basis. Witnessing the routine violation of my relatives' rights and liberty particularly saddened me. Their ability to move freely was heavily restricted—even during joyous celebrations they were constantly made aware of their lack of freedom. Yet it also warmed my heart to see how resilient my family was, as well as their friends, neighbors, and communities. Despite the terror, women still went to the market. Children courageously still attended school. My fellow Nigerians were going about their lives in spite of the violence that surrounded them.

My visit to Maiduguri strengthened my commitment to work as a peacebuilder in Nigeria, to ensure that all Nigerians, both Christians and Muslims, can work together and live free of fear. I am reminded today that my experience is not unique and millions of people throughout northeastern Nigeria are affected by violence and gross violations of their individual rights and freedoms.

Thank you once again for giving this opportunity and for your interest in supporting us to overcome the challenges facing our country.