

34/2014

1 July 2014

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**BOKO HARAM: THE BLACK FLAG
THAT OVERSHADOWS NIGERIA**

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BOKO HARAM: THE BLACK FLAG THAT OVERSHADOWS NIGERIA

Abstract:

Strategic weaknesses in the implementation of contra-insurgent measures, the existence of political confrontations and divisions, the exodus of the population of the north and the strengthening of the terrorist capabilities are among the factors that have increased the menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Resumen:

Debilidades estratégicas en las medidas seguidas por el gobierno, enfrentamientos y divisiones políticos, el éxodo de la población del norte y un fortalecimiento de sus capacidades son algunos factores que han contribuido a agrandar la amenaza de la violencia islamista de Boko Haram en Nigeria.

Keywords:

Nigeria, Boko Haram, Goodluck Johnathan, Islamism, internally displaced persons.

Palabras clave:

Nigeria, Boko Haram, Goodluck Johnathan, islamismo, desplazados internos.

As highlighted in a recent report on the chaotic situation that has taken place in the north of Nigeria, Boko Haram rebels appear to have succeeded in controlling an area with an extension of some 1500 km², located in the province of Gwoza (Borno State), after a series of successive attacks¹. In several villages that are confined inside this perimeter, the black flag is already flying after being hoisted by these Islamist rebels; whose threat over the Nigerian State continues to grow exponentially; reaching now the maximum alert levels. We find ourselves before the first territorial conquests of the Islamists, which mean a strategic leap in their confrontation with the Nigerian State.

On the other hand, they do not only exercise authority without barriers in the first piece of land they have taken off the political map of Nigeria so far. According to some documents published by several analysts in the last weeks, Boko Haram terrorists would have succeeded in infiltrating the armed forces². Only in this way—experts have concluded—is it possible to explain their easy entry into the garrisons they have attacked, or the quantity of weapons and military official uniforms owned by the Nigerian army they are using to camouflage their true purposes. By wearing these uniforms, they have deceived the entire population of some villages, killing hundreds of their trusting inhabitants³.

The same sources agree in pointing out that the ethnic and religious confrontation that has provoked Boko Haram's terrorist activity has also become lodged in the Nigerian army forces. On the Internet, some news is circulating of alleged shots from soldiers against officials and of mutinies in which some General would have been shot. As a cause of those incidents, it is inevitable to make reference to the massive kidnapping of more than two hundred teenage girls in the city of Chibok, which Abuja's authorities have not successfully solved yet.

This is the most terrible attack the Nigerian society has suffered during these last months, even though others have occurred that exceed, due to the number of casualties, the cruelty of the long and sinister captivity of the young students of Chibok.

As an example, more than 400 people of the town were assassinated by terrorists disguised as military men last June, or the bomb outrages committed at the 'viewing centers' during the World Cup held in Brazil. In one of these meetings in front of a large screen, a bomb blast claimed the lives of several dozens of viewers.

A MISGUIDED GOVERNMENT

Several factors support the stunning expansion of Boko Haram's violent Islamism through the northern States. The most surprising one for both Johnathan's government and analysts may be the

¹ Among other informative pieces, see: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/boko-haram-tightens-grip-on-northern-nigeria-region-1401993891>

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/09/us-nigeria-military-insight-idUSBREA4809220140509>

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27690687>

big capacity the terrorist group is showing when replacing its leaders and militants killed in combat against the army or in revenge actions perpetrated by Christian militias. The probable coexistence of several leaders, who would alternate in the exercise of maximum representation of Boko Haram, manages to mislead Abuja's authorities, hindering the monitoring of the group's activity. Without trying to undermine the importance of the policy implemented by Johnathan cabinet, focused on the mere repression and on boosting an escalation of violence in the most affected region, it is little discussed that the already applied measures have meant a failure of the government. Its most visible counterproductive effect is the spectacular increase in the number of militants that have taken arms against the State security forces, as well as the increase of its capacity to commit bloodier outrages and attacks. As a result, the threat Boko Haram represents for Nigeria already affects the foundations of the institutional structure of the State.

The exodus from those territories that are under Islamist violence has situated Nigeria as the third country of the world in number of internally displaced persons —with 3.3 million. This figure is only overcome by Syria and Colombia, in accordance with a recent report published by the Norwegian Refugee Council⁴.

The demonstrations of force spread to other areas of the country, where a tradition of cohabitation among different ethnic and religious groups exist. Furthermore, whenever they have a chance, they spread them to the capital, where the repercussion of terrorist acts multiplies.

Within their strategy of dismembering the northern States' society, Boko Haram has included among its objectives communal leaders, such as the Emir of Gwoza, killed last May.

On the other hand, the rebel group would be consolidating international alliances that would allow it to increase its operational capacity in the neighboring countries. In fact, for Boko Haram's ideologists the north of Nigeria constitutes, together with some areas of Chad, Niger and Cameroon, a historic territorial unit broken during colonial times. Therefore, they try to gain presence in that territory. Skirmishes across borders between its militants and the Cameroonian forces are frequent. In one of these episodes, the military of the neighboring country caused the death of approximately fifty Islamists.

The website *Africa in Transition*, developed by analyst John Campbell, makes a weekly monitoring of the attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram in Nigeria, which also includes incidents with neighboring countries' armies like Cameroon⁵.

⁴ <http://www.internal-displacement.org/blog/2014/as-violence-intensifies-due-to-boko-haram-jan-egeland-warns-nigeria-is-spiralling-into-the-abys-s>

⁵ <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>

THE ELECTORAL CHALLENGE OF 2015

The deteriorating situation of the northern States raises several questions on the political and economic situation of the country for the next years.

The first one is related to the elections of 2015. After the accreditation of the destructive potential of the radical Islamists, as well as their will to continue increasing it, the only alternative for the Nigerian government is to reform its counterinsurgent policy. Nevertheless, it has neither too much time nor enough margin of error. Even less if, as it seems, Boko Haram is obtaining successes in its strategy of infiltrating inside the armed forces.

The second open question is economic in nature, though it is also much linked to the situation of insecurity experienced in the northern region.

As macroeconomic data shows, Nigeria is currently the first economy in the continent, after having overcome South Africa a few months ago. Despite this positive information and the growth potential derived from the productive activity of Lagos and hydrocarbon revenues, such an antagonistic model does not seem quite sustainable, as it depends on oil exports and on the contributions of the former capital of the country, while the north remains depopulated and at the mercy of the rebels. Mainly, because Boko Haram will also focus its attacks on economic objectives.

In short, the current government finds itself compelled to shrink the situation in order to guarantee, at least, a certain level of stability from which other bigger initiatives can be put in place.

The mending of the possible fractures in the armed forces and the reinforcement of political cohesion are, in this context, some of the most urgent tasks.

Last 17th May, a Summit on Nigeria was held in Paris that brought together several Western African countries, the European Union and the United States.

The document that contains the conclusions of that meeting includes some measures to solve the kidnapping that took place at Chibok, as well as to strengthen cooperation at the security level and in the fight against Boko Haram. The United States and the European Union promised their firm collaboration with Abuja's authorities in order to implement more efficient measures that could stop the Islamist's advancement in the north of Nigeria⁶.

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⁶ <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/conclusions-paris-summit-security-nigeria/p33004>