RESCUED INTO DESPAIR AND DEATH: INTERROGATING THE WOES OF SURVIVORS OF BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA, 2009-2017

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Keywords

Boko Haram, Insurgency, Ecology, Conflict Risks, Forced Migration & Peace; Internal Conflicts

Abstract

Research Problem:*This paper interrogates the plight of the over 2 million persons who survived Boko Haram insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria between 2009 and 2017 the majority of whom lives presently in various Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in Adamawa, Bornu and Yobe states.*
Method/Theory: *It employed the survey research method, which involved a critical content analysis of related written documents, Focused Group Discussion, as well as online oral interviews with key informants purposively selected by the researchers. As a purely historical study, no theory was adopted.*
Results: *It finds, among others that: the IDP camps, supposedly safe havens,have turned to centres of agony, despair and human abattoirs; IDPs suffer acute food shortages, undernourishment, diseases and inadequate health care; security officials have sexually exploited some of the women;Boko Haram suicide bombers have attacked the IDPs camps several times between 2015 and 2017, just as many have been killed by accidental bombings of the camp by the Nigerian Armed Forces with fatal consequences.*
Conclusion: *It concludes that IDPs encounter numerous humanitarian challenges daily making life traumatic and life threatening and that strenuous efforts should be made to address them.*
Key Contributions to Knowledge: *The paper identified the problems faced by IDP in their camps and suggested ways of ameliorating them.*
Recommendation: *The paper recommends an urgent proactive action by human rights organisations, law enforcement agencies, and governmental*

and non-governmental humanitarian agencies to combat despair and death in the IDP camps.

Introduction

Internally Displaced Persons living in IDP campsin the Northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe live under extreme environmental conditions. Their experiences are not only harrowing but traumatic. This paper is, therefore, set to interrogate the extent to which to which the expectations of IDPs have been met in the camps; the numerous hazards that the IDPs confronted in their various camps spread across the three states concerned between 2009 and 2017 and,make recommendations for government interventions to ease the discomfort of the affected people.

Meanwhile, there is no accurate data on the number of internally displaced persons due to the Boko Haram insurgency in North-East Nigeria between 2009 and 2017.Available records however, indicate that an average of 2-3 million persons became internally displaced (Okon, 2018:31; Kanta, 2020). According to Nigeria's National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons (2022), the majority of these survivors are mostly women and children. These were part of the lucky few who escaped death and kidnapping. They fled to formal and informal Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps established by Adamawa, Borno and Yobe state governments (IOM-DTM Reports, 2014, 2024). Some of the displaced persons also resided outside the camps within their host communities. According to the Borno State Strategy for Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement (2025), there were 1,817,799 Internally Displaced Persons across the 27 Local Government Areas of the State, made up of 335,947 households. They live in formal and informal camps in the State.

It should be made clear that this study is less concerned with the causes of displacement in the Northeast region has these have been extensively captured in some previous researches (Adeleye, 2023; Thomas & Turk, 2023; Onwe, Ojide, Subhan, &Forgenie, 2024). Rather, the paper was construed to document the difficulties faced by the IDP population in their camps in the affected states and make relevant suggestions to major stakeholders on how to ameliorate their living conditions in the IDP camps.

Statement of the Problem

Internal displacement is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. The country experienced it during the 19th-century Yoruba civil wars when a reasonable number escaped from war-torn areas into relatively peaceful locations such as Iwo in present-day Osun State, Nigeria (Usman, 2014; Usman&Falola, 2019; Adebayo, 2020). Similarly, in the early years of Nigeria's independence, the volatile relations of love-lost among various ethnic groups led to a civil war (1967-1970), which caused large-scale internal displacement across the country (Aremu, 2016; Aremu&Buhari, 2017). This was followed by the dislocations and displacements caused by militant ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta region of the country. However, the magnitude of internal displacement in the North-Eastern region of Nigeria since 1990 is rather too much for comfort. With well over 3 million persons displaced by insecurity orchestrated by the needless attacks of the Boko Haram insurgent group in the North-Eastern region of the country, the need for the establishment of camps to serve as temporary homes for Internally Displaced Persons became a matter of

necessity for the government. Unfortunately, life in the IDP camps became traumatic and full of life-threatening challenges. This paper, therefore examines the numerous problems that confronted the inhabitants in contrast to their expectations when they were initially hurled into the camps.

Aims and Objectives of the Study:

The main aim of this study is to examine the plight of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) living in the various IDP Camps in North-East Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. identify the basic factor(s) that brought about the emergence of large numbers of IDPs in North-East Nigeria;

ii. examine the expectations of IDPs and the realities of challenges in the various IDP camps spread across North-East Nigeria and;

iii. highlight some solutions to the problems of IDPs in North-East Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification:

Insurgency is an organised protracted military struggle designed and executed by locals, to weaken the legitimacy of government by increasing their own control. The goal of insurgency is political change with attendant effects on the economic and socio-cultural sectors. Though organised, insurgency is distinct from conventional war because of the asymmetrical power distribution between insurgents and government. As a result, insurgents use mobility, stealth and the knowledge of their local environment to their advantage for attack and defense.

Internally displaced persons (IDP) are people who have been forced to relocate to safer places within the confines of their home countries (Salami et al, 2020; Adeleye, 2023). They are usually victims of human or natural disasters such as wars, conflicts, flood or drought. For the sake of this paper, the focus is on people displaced by Boko Haram terrorist activities in the Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria with particular emphasis on Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states.

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Boko Haram insurgency and the challenge of Human Security in Northeastern Nigeria, 2009-2017

Numerous studies have submitted that the Boko Haram violent attacks have been responsible for internal displacements in the Northeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. (Onafowora, 2018; Godfrey &Tafida, 2022; Saka, &Bojang, 2022; Osadola&Emah, 2022; Adeleye, 2023,). Since 2009, these incessant attacks have created a great human security challenge not only in the Northeastern region, but across the country at large.Thousands of people have been killed, maimed and kidnapped by the Boko Haram group forcing many people to flee their homes and seek refuge in the IDP camps. A majority of the victims lost their sources of income and suffered untold hardship that has been unabated. This has posed a serious

threat to human security in the region to date, the most latent being a very high rate of internal displacement (Ogbue, Omiunu, &Okafor, 2024; Adamu, 2026).

Serrano &Pieri, (2014) added that the numerous efforts of the Nigerian Government at counterinsurgency against Boko Haram under the aegis of Joint Task Force (JTF) have been largely ineffective. They opined that insurgency by the Boko Haram and counterinsurgency by the Nigerian security operatives have produced what may be regarded as an unending cycle of violence and insecurity in Northeast Nigeria. Some studies (Adhikari, 2013; Obia, 2016) identified some of the factors fuelling insecurity in the Northeastern region to include: religious bigotry and fundamentalism; economic deprivation, especially unemployment, underemployment and poverty; deficient security architecture, sabotage and corruption among security agencies and government officials; and ineffective surveillance architecture, among others. To escape violence and the carnage and trauma it brings, over 2 million individuals, as of 2017, had beenforced to migrate from their homes and original settlements to the Internally Displaced Persons Camps established by the government in affected states (Saka&Bojang, 2022).

Establishment of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps in Nigeria: Rationale and Administration

The establishment of IDP camps in Nigeria is a child of necessity and a transient response to the effects of violence and disaster in the country in recent years. Its main goals are to: offer a safe haven out of conflict areas to the victims of violence/disaster; provide temporary shelter and accommodation for people fleeing for their dear lives from conflict or disaster prone areas; provide food and clothing, however meager, for the victims who are survivors of conflicts or disasters; act as centers of aids where humanitarian agencies and government agencies in charge of disaster management can reach the victims with relative ease; alleviate the psychological trauma of the internally displaced persons; take adequate steps to address the health challenges facing those affected by violence and disasters and were lucky to escape death and; proactively reduce the number of carnage in the post-conflict period, among others. It is, however, unfortunate that most of these goals, as highlighted above, have not been adequately met since 2009 when the Boko Haram insurgency started to displace people from their homes and permanent residencies in Northeast Nigeria.

The administration of the IDP camps in Nigeria has been the major duty of the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, which was established in 1989. Its main essence is to provide succour, care, protection and necessary support for refugees, migrants and IDPs across the country, among others (Okwara, Jooji, &Momoh, 2022). Akawu.Jideofor,& Luka (2020) however, reported that negligence, corruption and violation of rights of IDPs were basic challenges facing IDPs and suggested a centralization of government response to IDP camps.Ojengbede, et al. (2019) added that over fifty percent of women in IDP camps in Northeast Nigeria have experienced sexual and physical violence, among many other hazards. In spite of these findings, whether the agency has been effective and efficient in the discharge of its duties is yet to be fully investigated. Similarly, no research work has interrogated the various socio-economic, psychological, security and health challenges faced by occupants of IDP camps in Northeast Nigeria and recommending

ways of ameliorating them, in a single study. This is a gap this paper is set to fill.

Methodology

As a historical research, the study employed a survey research design. Data was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consisted of oral interviews with informants who were purposively selected and focused group discussion. A total of 50 informants were interviewed in three IDP camps, one each, in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States through telephone conversations between November and December 2024 while 20 officials of humanitarian agencies and 10 government officials of agencies related to Internal Displacement were engaged in Focused Group Discussions (FGD) in three separate locations in Abuja in February 2025. All the participants volunteered opinions on conditions of anonymity. Their responses were analysed qualitatively. The main rationale for using secondary sources was to identify findings of previous related researches and see how the present study relates to them. Hence, secondary sources of data used for the study included published journal articles, textbooks and official publications of government agencies and international organisations. These were subjected to critical content analysis to elicit relevant information for the study.

Results and Discussion of Findings

As a historical research, this section contains a qualitative and thematic analysis of data obtained fromin-depth interviews and FGDs for the objectives of the study in a narrative form.

Objective One: Factors that brought about the emergence of large numbers of IDPs in North-East Nigeria

According to available data, internal displacements in North-East Nigeria may be attributed largely to the numerous attacks by Boko Haram insurgents in the zone. Most of the IDPs recounted the recurring terror unleashed on their villages and towns by Boko Haram between 2009 and 2017. The unpleasant unending violent attacks on the people have spared no group of people. Everyone, including children, women and even physically challenged persons were subjects of attacks in Northeastern Nigeria (Akinbi, 2015). Two examples of abridged interview responsesthat support previous research findings will suffice here:

Boko Haram killed many people in my village. Male and female were killed. Sons and daughters of some villagers were killed. They kicked our doors open when we were sleeping. They attacked us at night. We could not defend ourselves. Police and Army did not come on time. We were not prepared. Majority of young and adult men were killed. I did not see anybody being raped physically; but some women who escaped shared personal experiences of sexual molestation by bandits. (KII/IDP/Adult, Female/2024).

These Boko Haram insurgents came to our house and neighbouring communities many times. Usually they come around 2 or 3 am in the night. They did not attack our community in the day or evening time. They use to shoot their guns many times. We were very afraid. Some of us were lucky to escape. We ran for safety into the bush. Some people were dead when we returned to the village. Many people were missing.We don't even know the whereabouts of many people. I heard that some women and girls were raped. Nobody told me in particular that

they were raped. May be they were afraid their husbands and friends. Our farms were burnt. They told us to pay money to go to our farms but we don't have money. Some farmers and their children were killed on the farm. Both men and women were killed. (KII/IDP/Male/2024).

From the above abridged interview excerpts, one may say that the most common forms of attacks was to murder able bodied men, both young and old, and kidnap women and children mostly at night; although some children and women were felled by the bullets of the Boko Haram insurgents while a majority of the women were victims of rape.Some lucky few who were rescued by government now live in the IDP camps. This aligns with the submissions of Okoli, (2022) and Amnesty International (2024).

Another finding of this study through oral interview is that the Boko Haram terrorists were also engaged in the destruction of farmlands, crops and agricultural inputs in Northeastern Nigeria. This is in line with the findings ofAdelaja& George, (2019) and Okonkwo, (2025). These unnecessary destructions of farms have necessitated the displacement of many farmers and the resultant effect of food shortage and food insecurity across Nigeria today. The situation has not abated till date as Boko Haram insurgency has continued to affect human and food security.

Objective Two: Expectations of IDPs and the realities of challenges in the various IDP camps spread across North-East Nigeria

Oral interviews with occupants of the IDP campsrevealed thatsome of their basic expectations included: peace and security; access to the basic needs of life, namely food, clothing and shelter; access to medical treatment and health facilities. Incidentally, all of these became a mirage. In reality, acute food shortages and food rationing, lack of balanced diet, starvation, undernourishment, diseases and inadequate access to health care facilities became the daily experiences of the occupants of IDPs camps. Other challenges are: exposure to harsh weather conditions due to inadequate make-shift open shelter accommodation facilities in the camps that are overcrowded, inhuman treatment in the hands of the security personnel, rape and sexual assault against girls and women, disease epidemics in the face of inadequate health facilities, insecurity, and lastly, death, due to the occasional attacks on IDPs camps by the Boko Haram group and accidental bombings of IDPs camps by the Nigerian Armed Forces(Adeleye, 2025;. Okereke, 2023).

When asked to narrate their general experience since being in camp, some of the occupants have these to say:

> *Government tried for us. Some of uswere brought here by officials of government. I don't know them. They came with some buses. I have been in this camp since 2014 with two of my children. We sleep under the shed. The cold is too much at night. There is heat in the afternoon. It is not good for us. They give us food, sometimes twice a day; sometimes once. The food is not enough. We are managing. We use to fall sick. There is no adequate treatment. There is a clinic for us but doctors don't come regularly. Drugs are not always available. Many diseases are affecting us. Malaria, cold, and cough are very common. I have seen some people dying but not many. Most of them are children.* (KII/IDP/Adult, Youth, Children/Female, Male/ 2024).

Another adult female occupant of the camp also shared a similar experience. According to her:

> *My house was burnt by Boko Haram.This camp is not okay for us. I have not been having good sleep in the camp. They said my blood pressure is high. My drug has finished now. I don't know how soon they will give me another one. Many children are dying here. Government should give us better attention. We desire good food and clean water. We sleep in overcrowded spaces.* (KII/IDP/Female, Adult, 2024).

A related opinion was offered by a male IDP. He said:

> *This camp is not conducive for anybody. There is no room to sleep. We sleep in this open space. Rain and sun are affecting us badly. Security is not enough. BokoHaram came here on two occasions to attack us. Some people were killed and some were kidnapped. Nigerian security officers are troubling us. They harass women too much. I was told by some women that uniformed men raped them or molested them sexually. Army has bombed this place once. They said they were sorry for the mistake. I want to go back home.*(KII/Male, Adult, 2024).

The above litany of woes of inhabitants of IDPs camps point to the fact that the Nigerian government only rescued the victims of insurgency in the study area from perceived death into real death and psychological trauma and despair that are better imagined than real. It is indeed ironical to observe that supposedly safe havens have turned to abattoirs; expectations of security turned to despair; fear and anxiety multiplied among the inhabitants; hunger increased in magnitude while psychological trauma and depression became rampant. Children, women, the wounded and other set of less-privileged citizens were the worst hit.

Apart from the above, IDPs have become targets of recurrent attacks of Boko Haram insurgents even in the camps as substantiated by extant literature. Space will not permit us to list all attacks on IDP camps by Boko Haram insurgents. In one of its pathetic reports, the OCHA Reports (2022) on the security situation in the Northeastern region indicated that Boko Haram insurgents carried out series of violent attacks on IDP camps and other civilian population in the region in 2022. Not less than 60 deaths were recorded while numerous others suffered varying degrees of injuries due to the attacks. These attacks further reinstate the security concerns of IDPs and the urgent need for governments to stem the tide of violence in the region. Earlier in 2017, the Aljazeera in its reports of 24th July that at least eight people were killed after female suicide bombers attacked two camps hosting internally displaced people (IDP) in Maiduguri, Borno State. It was said to be the first of its kind on a displaced persons camp in the city which is the birthplace of Boko Haram.

Majority of women in IDP camps were victims of rape and sexual violence of different magnitudein the hands of Boko Haram, security agents and camp officials. Though these could not be personally authenticated by the researchers, as claimed by some of the women IDPs interacted with; it falls in line with previous reports in the literature (Human Rights Watch, 2014, October 27;Sherwood, 2014; Ojengbede, et al. 2019);European Union Agency for Asylum, 2021; Okoli, 2022; Amnesty International, 2024). The implication is thatthemoral sanctity and integrity of the women could no longer be guaranteed. This is really traumatizing the victims and making life unbearable in the IDP camps.

It was noted that perhaps the most traumatic and ironic experiences of IDPs are cases of deadly fatal attacks on their camps by the Nigerian Military. Some selected cases will suffice. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in its 2017 report observed that the Boko Haram attacked IDP camps for not less than 29 times between September 2015 and 2017(Aimée-Noël, 2017). These attacks were reportedly carried out by female suicide bombers. The aims of these attacks are not clearly stated but one may suggest that they were carried out to instill fear and anxiety in the people for no just cause as a terrorist group.

Similarly on January 17, 2017, an accidental attack was carried out by the Nigerian Air Force on the Rann IDP camp in Maiduguri, Borno State (Campbell, 2017). Though the exact numbers of casualties are not known, various reports insinuate that over one hundred people died while many were seriously injured. The victims included men, women and children as well as humanitarian workers providing services for the IDPs. The attacks were carried out on the target by the Nigerian Air force as a result of mistaken identity as the site was presumed to be a Boko Haram hideout. This fatal error of judgment may only be explained as lack of adequate intelligence on the part of the Nigerian military. Innocent persons were sent to their early graves as a result of this costly avoidable error.

The Business Day (6 May 2021) also reported another mistaken attack by the Nigerian Air Force on Damboa village in Borno State where close to 20 persons, including children and women lost their lives. This was another fatal mistake that called to question the competence and integrity of the Nigerian military and its personnel. In what appears to be a collation of fatalities resulting from accidental attacks by the Nigerian military, Sobowale (2023) reports that over 425 persons including children and women had been killed by military accidental bombings between September 2017 and 2023. This is heartbreaking and should be condemned by all.

Objective Three: Suggested solutions to the problems of IDPs in North-East Nigeria

It is necessary to acknowledge the recent efforts by the government of Bornu State to resettle and reintegrate IDPs back to their communities of origin or other safe locations. However, given the fact that majority of IDPs still reside in the camps, it is imperative to chart a new course for a better management of the IDP camps for them to experience a new lease of life. Here, the recent report by Baba-Ibrahim (2024) on the plight of the resettled IDPs in Borno State following the closure of IDPs camps by the State Government is a major pointer to the fact that more still need to be done in the area of adequate security provisions for resettled victims of Boko Haram insurgencies in Northeast Nigeria so that resettled people would not be plunged into another round of displacement.

Some of the displaced persons and officials of government and humanitarian agencies provided some clues to a better management of IDP camps as transcripted below:

> *Government should demonstrate willingness to take good care of us. Let them allocate more funds to our welfare. They should bring more food and ensure even distribution. More houses should be constructed to solve accommodation problem. We need vaccination for children. They are exposed to too much danger. Schools and vocational training centres should be established so that young ones will not suffer in the future. Health workers should come and live with*

us so they can attend to us on emergencies. Government should buy more drugs and equip the clinics and health centers. We want to go back to our homes. Security is all we need in our communities.(KII/IDP/Adult,Youth,Children/Male/2024).

Humanitarian officers also offered related suggestions on improved living conditions in the IDP camps. They submitted during Focused Group Discussions in Abuja that:

> *The Government should make adequate provisions for effective security, monitoring and surveillance of IDPs camps. This is to prevent undue attacks against the life and property of the inhabitants. The deployment of adequate numbers of competent police officers, both female and male, within and around IDP camps and settlements is a major step in the right direction to provide adequate security for displaced persons and allow supplies to get to them easily. There should be improved training and discipline for security officers deployed to IDP camps to reduce their unconventionalbehaviours.* (FGD/Adult Male/Female/ 2025).

In their own submission, government officials were of the opinion that a lot still need be done to improve the welfare of occupants of IDP camps in Nigeria as summarised below:

> *There should be improved funding for IDP management. This will allow adequate feeding and improved medical treatment for IDP. Adequate security should be provided for civilian workers on the camp for them to deliver their duties efficiently and effectively without fear or intimidation. Government officials deployed to camps should be mobilized with good logistics and good remuneration as motivation for effective service delivery. More health workers should be deployed to the camps while the health facilities and supplies should be improved and expanded.* (FGD/Adult/Male,Female, 2025).

Judging from the above, it may be suggested that humanitarian agencies should beef up their activities to provide necessary support and supplies to the IDPs in order to reduce casualties in the camps and promote the dignity and sanctity of life.

Similarly, the various agencies in charge of emergency interventions (National Emergency Management Agency and its counterpart States' bodies) should see to the adequate provision of basic necessities of life to the inhabitants of IDPs camps. To this end, Government can raise the bar of votes allocated to IDPs in the nation's budget.

Furthermore, there is the need for the government to address the root causes of insurgency and every other thing that may be promoting violence and internal displacement in the country. This will not only reduce the burden of huge allocations to security matters but promote the deployment of such funds for developmental tasks.

Lastly, corruption must be tackled boldly if these policies and government interventions will come to fruition. A situation where some people will be feeding fat on the resources meant to take care of people in IDP camps is not the best. All loopholes used to siphon public funds budgeted for IDP camps should be blocked.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the plight of IDP in their camps in Northeast Nigeria. It found that

though the camps were meant to be safe havens and places of succourfor the rescued victims of Boko Haram insurgency; the opposite was the case. The camps turned out to be centers of psychological trauma, neglect, inadequate care and abattoirs as most of the occupants of the IDPs suffered acute food shortages, starvation, undernourishment, diseases and inadequate health care while some of the women were sexually exploited by security officials. Apart from that, BokoHaram suicide bombers attacked the IDPs camps severally between 2015 and 2017 with fatal consequences just as accidental bombings of the camp by the Nigerian Armed Forces have also killed many others. Life in the IDPs camps was so traumatic to the extent that some of the IDPs prefer death with dignity in their homes to living a miserable life in the camps. In the light of this, it is highly expedient that urgent pro-active and coordinated action(s) be taken by major stakeholders including human rights organisations, law enforcement agencies and governmental and non-governmental humanitarian agencies to address the ugly plight of Internally Displaced Persons as the only antidote to despair and death in their various camps.

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