ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Strategy Implementation Plan Report

January – March 2016

Highlights

While President Buhari's promises to defeat Boko Haram by the end of 2016 were not met and declarations of a "technical defeat" were made, Nigeria's fight against Boko Haram has seen improvements in the previous three months. Military operations conducted by the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in coordination with elements from the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) have reclaimed areas in Borno once controlled by the militant group and have provided access to civilian populations that were previously isolated and unreachable.

However, the fight against Boko Haram and other violent extremist groups in the ECOWAS region is not over. Boko Haram continue to attack places in Nigeria's northeast and have recently increased their attacks in northern Cameroon. Furthermore, improvement must be made in the way the MNJTF approaches its fight with Boko Haram. The 8,700-strong force created by the MNJTF to help control Nigeria's borders with neighbouring Cameroon and Niger have so far been ineffective. And while the United States has recently created a drone base in Cameroon to assist in intelligence gathering, intelligence-sharing and access to quick and actionable intelligence is wanting. Factors including lack of adequate resources, poor coordination, political corruption and the inability of leaders to agree on a joint strategy have constantly plagued the MNJTF and hindered meaningful progress.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliates struck new ground in Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Niger. On a single day, AQIM and Boko Haram attacked separate targets in Niger. Since the attacks on the Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako and the Splendid Hotel Ouagadougou, many countries in West Africa and the Sahel belt continue to increase military presence in public places to advert likely attacks.

The Current Landscape of Violent Extremism in West Africa

Suicide bomb attacks were very prominent in Boko Haram operational zones. Women and girls are still being used for suicide bomb attacks in Cameroon and Nigeria, targeting IDP camps, markets, churches, mosques and other soft targets. A particularly brutal attack in January in Dalori, Borno State claimed the lives of 86 people, many of which were children.

Many arrests have been made by Malian officials following the extension of State of Emergency in early January 2016. Although several terrorist groups remain active in northern Mali, the peace process is gaining momentum. Many people are returning their homes in Timbuktu as peace and stability improves. Aid workers project roughly 41,000 Malian refugees have returned home as a fragile peace agreement signed in mid-2015 has taken hold. Commercial activities are

said to be steadily picking up in Gao and Timbuktu, but many returnees continue to live in difficult conditions with ruined houses, lootings and a near absence of sources of livelihood. In many places, food and clean water are difficult to come by and a considerable lack of resources has caused inflation rates to skyrocket, leaving many unable to afford basic sustenance.

According to reports, Islamic fighters are considering using car bombs, attacking public areas popular with foreigners and targeting beaches according to unnamed sources. Economic activity has been paralyzed in Chad and northern Cameroon following frequent Boko Haram attacks on trucks transporting goods from Nigeria's Borno state to the two nations. Trucks have been diverted despite MNJTF checkpoints on the borders and have become a regular occurrence. As a result, shops in N'djamena have not received supplies from Nigeria's Borno state, a major source for goods. In the most recent attack, the insurgents drove three trucks loaded with goods destined for northern Cameroon and the Chadian capital, N'djamena, to an unknown destination. Chad and northern Cameroon have supply routes originating from Maiduguri in northeast Nigeria.

Government Responses

Globally, approaches to dealing with violent extremism are still evolving. Killing as the primary means of defeating violent extremism is clearly not working; more must be done to counter the conditions that lead to it. Many violent extremist group leaders and operatives, including those of Boko Haram and Ansar Dine, have been killed or arrested, but attacks have not stopped. Government response to terrorism has largely been hinged on military might rather than on tackling the root causes of terrorism. For instance, since the attack in Côte d'Ivoire, government has responded by increasing military presence in civil areas. However, leaders must realize that increased military presence is not sustainable in the long run. More holistic approaches to countering violent extremism are required.

Military heavy handedness has in many cases driven citizens into the hands of criminal gangs, militias and religious violent extremist in Northern Mali. Rampant human rights violations perpetrated by military forces in the Sahel were well reported by Amnesty International. Often, human rights violations are a result of soldier and peacekeepers who are afraid for their lives and react violently to perceived threats. However in many cases these violations are the result of untrained soldiers or simply for personal gain, including rape, unlawful detention, forceful disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues

Human rights are increasingly being sacrificed in the name of national security. The vast majority of human rights violations perpetrated by the states are not reported in media outlets. These violations, however, play right into the terrorist's hands, as their violence is often aimed at instigating violent state reactions on the populace, thereby isolating the government from its people. Terror and insurgency leadership then attempt to fill the security vacuum left behind.

States with limited resources such as those in the ECOWAS and Sahel region are more prone to turn quickly to violence as a reaction to terrorism, making them desirable for terrorism and insurgency groups because of their limited ability to organize effectively against such groups.

According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), an estimated 23.5 million people in the Sahel, amounting to almost one in six persons in 2016, will not have enough to eat, and at least 6 million of those require emergency intervention. The present of humanitarian condition in the Sahel reflects the level of abject poverty, rapid population growth, climate change, and armed conflicts and violence across the region.[1] Violent extremism is one of the leading causes of the deteriorating humanitarian crisis unfolding in Nigeria. Food crisis has reached a chronic level in the Lake Chad region, where over 4.45 million people face severe food insecurity from ongoing violence by Boko Haram.

A record number of people are in need of emergency relief in the Lake Chad Basin region. According to a report by the ECOWAS Counter Terrorism Tracker,[2] an estimated 2.5 million people—including 2 million Nigerians and half of which are estimated to be children—have been displaced by the conflict with Boko Haram. The large majority of displaced have sought refuge with host communities, placing an unsustainable strain on already meagre resources. Those unable to find host families have been forced into government-run IDP camps that have been widely reported to have horrible living conditions, are greatly under-resourced and are lucrative targets for Boko Haram attacks. Human rights violations, including women forced to provide sex to guards for food, have also been reported.

Recommendations

In view of these challenges, the ECOWAS CTSIP fills the gap for the need of robust and proactive policy recommendations to address the security issues of terrorism within the region. The CTSIP is built on the primacy of terrorism prevention and respect for human rights. Our policy recommendations emphasize good governance and a democratic culture as prerequisites for effective counter-terrorism. Counter-terrorism requires both military and non-military strategies and tools, however CTSIP observes that the largest percentage of efforts usually lean toward military means. Cooperation among states and technical assistance in all fields constitute a cornerstone for the successful implementation of this strategy.

- African countries must think beyond their individual country's security and think holistically about areas of influence outside their borders. African leaders must meet and

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[1] http://www.unocha.org/sahel/about-sahel

[2] The ECOWAS Tracker (www.ecowascounterterrorism.org) is an online tracker that documents terrorist incidences, government responses, humanitarian issues and regional and international collaboration towards resolving the threat of violent extremism.

address these grey areas and develop joint counterterrorism strategies that apply limited resources effectively and efficiently.

- Porous borders and state-within-state spaces that are not governed by a legitimate central government must be collectively addressed through a continent-wide strategy. These areas give violent extremist organizations the space required to recruit, train and plan attacks. If we are to rid the ECOWAS of violent extremist organizations, we must take away the safe havens they have found in West Africa.

- Transparency of the state and its institutions is essential. There is need to operate an open policy with consistent interface with civil society and the media as a measure of galvanizing national support. ECOWAS citizens must view their local and national governments as legitimate entities that can provide for their basic security and survival needs.

- ECOWAS states need to share actionable intelligence and information. Cooperation in investigation, prosecution and counterterrorism operations is essential to defeating violent extremist groups in the region. Without effective cooperation, grey areas in which violent extremist groups thrive are bound to emerge.

- Those who have been displaced need to be provided with psychological, mental, physical and emotional support before they are returned to their communities. Governments need to guarantee their safety, ensure rebuilding of their community, houses, markets, roads/bridges before they are returned to their respective communities.

Conclusion

Violent extremist groups pose a serious threat to international peace, security and stability and constitutes a criminal act that undermines efforts aimed at achieving democracy, good governance and development. In West Africa, particularly within the ECOWAS bloc, the challenges posed by violent extreme groups have further impoverished many people and created dire humanitarian crisis. The reversal of democratic and development gains of previous decades[3] is a result of the chaos caused by these elements.

There is a desperate need to increase state response that addresses these threats using a holistic, whole-of-government approach. The unfortunate inability of the region to form a common alliance against crime and terrorism has made the region a breeding ground for criminals and terrorist organizations.

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3 Banfield J. Tell (2015) Like It Is the role of civil society in responding to serious and organised crime in west Africa, International Alert, September 2015.