

HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS AND THE NORTHEAST PHENOMENON

By

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Abstract

This study explores humanitarian interventions in the northeastern part of Nigeria where the country is challenged by the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents for over thirteen years of heinous attacks on the Nigerian State and the people. With incessant attacks on communities and thousands fleeing their homes to displaced persons' camps, the majority of them would have to survive mostly on humanitarian aid and relief materials. The article argues that in the face of pervasive terrorism in the northeast region, the federal government cannot single-handedly carry the weight of humanitarian emergencies. This paper stems from the complexity of the Nigerian problems ranging from insurgencies, internal displacement, human insecurity and humanitarian crisis threatening the existence of Nigeria as a single corporate entity. The crux is that responding to humanitarian emergencies as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts is largely dependent on local and foreign interventions especially as it concerns meeting the basic needs of the displaced populace. Thus, this work employed a qualitative research design to examine the challenges that befall Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps and how such issues could be resolved to alleviate the suffering of displaced persons and prevent dire humanitarian crises across the region. The study, therefore, recommends the involvement of humanitarian agencies to assist the government mobilise resources for those directly affected by the Boko Haram menace.

Keywords: Humanitarian Crisis, Northeast Nigeria, Internally Displaced Persons, Terrorism

Introduction

When Muhammad Yusuf, the late Boko Haram leader was summarily killed under police custody in July 2009, no one anticipated the unprecedented humanitarian disaster that was to follow. From 2010 to 2018, *Juma'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* popularly known as Boko Haram was responsible for an estimated 35,000 combat-related deaths and 18,000 deaths from terrorism. This made the terrorist group the deadliest in sub-Saharan Africa (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019). Owing to the incessant attacks on communities and towns in northeast Nigeria, over 3.4 million people have been displaced, including over 2.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and an estimated 684,000 IDPs in Cameroon, Chad and the Niger Republic (UNHCR, 2022). While the terrorist group has shown a level of impeccable organisation and ability to carry out heavy assaults and strategic attacks between 2009 and 2014, its adaptive nature, fractured leadership, splintered operations and foreign ties continue to complicate efforts to bring the group to its knees. The implication of this for the millions of IDPs is that they need humanitarian assistance.

The issue has become a global concern, and many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) & International Organizations (IOs) are moving into northeast Nigeria to respond to humanitarian emergencies. NGOs and IOs like the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (ICRC), Caritas International, UN humanitarian agencies and *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) are providing emergency relief aid and human development programmes in the North East, aimed at improving the living conditions of

the IDPs. The paper highlights ways how NGOs could be managed to aid the effectiveness and efficient deployment of soft power in terms of humanitarian aid and vocational developments to improve the human security of the northeast people.

Research Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research approach to discuss the dire humanitarian situation in the northeastern part of Nigeria as a result of prolonged Boko Haram insurgency. Internally displaced persons, key informants and government agencies were interviewed on a wide range of issues affecting camps and humanitarian activities. To better understand the humanitarian crises affecting the northeastern region of Nigeria, some of the humanitarian agencies listed in this work were also engaged in a discussion. The work equally assessed the efforts of the NGOs and offered suggestions on how to address the challenges therein.

Conceptual Framework /Clarification

Terrorism: since the 9/11 attack on US soil, terrorism has attracted near-obsessive attention by scholars in the fields of international relations, global politics, psychology and political science etc. Weinberg, Pedahzur & Hirsch-Hoefler (2004) observed that few terms or concepts in recent times have proved as hard to define as terrorism. Drake (1998) conceptualized the term as the recurrent use or threatened use of politically motivated and clandestinely organized violence, by a group whose aim is to influence a psychological target to make it behave in a way that the group desires. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political and social objectives” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005).

One of the difficulties associated with the term since the 1970s is the fact that a thin line exists between a freedom fighter and a terrorist, this is a direct consequence of the

political and ironic effect it attracts (Weinberg et al, 2004). For example, Menachem Begin, as the leader of the Irgun (Lehi’s Zionist rival) in post-war Palestine, used the description ‘freedom fighters’ for his followers rather than ‘terrorists’. Nevertheless, Pedahzur et al (2004) surmise the concept of terrorism as a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role.

Humanitarian Crisis: According to SESRIC (2017), a “humanitarian crisis” is understood as a situation in which there is a wide threat to human life, safety, health and well-being. Some scholars view it as the loss of basic human dignity. A humanitarian crisis is also conceptualized by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2022) as a single occurrence or a string of events that pose a risk to the health, safety, or well-being of a neighbourhood or a sizable population. Conflict can be internal or external, and it typically spreads across a broad land region. The main drivers of humanitarian crises are conflicts, epidemics, or complex emergencies (SESRIC, 2017). Crises across the world usually reflect complex characteristics where conflicts interweave with already existing vulnerabilities that may include but are not limited to socio-economic, political and environmental tensions. These existing situations may include entrenched poverty, political instability, food insecurity, and environmental degradation. When conflict, poor governance, environmental degradation, poverty and natural disasters become intense, people are usually forced to abandon their homes for other places they deem safe or accommodating of their sufferings (UNCHR, 2019).

Insurgency: Like many concepts in contemporary security issues, the term “insurgency” has gained more popularity and is sometimes used interchangeably with “terrorism”. Lammers (2017) defines insurgency as the activity of a group of actors

that uses violence to contest the sovereignty of the established regime with the aim of political change. To him, the use of violence determines insurgency as a subset of rebellion; while insurgency can also, employ non-violent means to enforce political change, the complete absence of violence would rather define a situation as other forms of rebellion such as civil disobedience or protest (Rowen, 1990). Osakwe et al., (2013), consider insurgency as a protracted violent conflict in which one or more groups seek to overthrow or fundamentally change the political or social order in a state or region through the use of sustained violence, subversion, social disruption, and political action. Fearon & Laitin (2003) define insurgency as small bands of lightly equipped guerrillas that often employ the tactics of fighting against contested authority until it is worn down. As such, insurgent groups often resort to such acts as guerrilla warfare, sabotage, or terrorism by inflicting casualties, disrupting missions or logistics, or simply denying the established authority until it is worn down (Lammers, 2017). Through these acts of violence, insurgents hope to demonstrate to the terrorized population that the established authority is unable to guarantee their safety, thereby coercing support from the displaced population.

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO): The term, "Non-Governmental Organization" or NGO, according to Lewis (2010), came into use in 1945 because of the need for the UN to differentiate in its Charter between participation rights for intergovernmental specialized agencies and those for international private organizations. According to Turner and Hulme (1997), NGOs are generally registered organizations, community groups, professional associations, trade unions, and cooperative charity organizations whose aim is to improve the well-being of their members and of the areas in which they exist. They include groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of the government and that have primarily humanitarian or

cooperative rather than commercial objectives.

NGOs are also private agencies in industrial countries that support international development, indigenous groups organized regionally or nationally, and member groups in villages. NGOs can mobilize private funds for development, distribute food and family planning services and promote community organization (Turner & Hulme, 1997).

Counterinsurgency

There is no universal agreement on the definition of counterinsurgency. However, a counterinsurgency (COIN), according to the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009), is "the blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously contain the insurgency and address its root causes". This paper views counterinsurgency operations as a combination of non-military and military efforts designed to concurrently degrade, diminish and contain the insurgency as well as tackle its root causes.

Perspectives on Humanitarian Intervention

Unlike conventional warfare, non-military methods are frequently the most effective rudiments, with military forces playing an enabling role. COIN is an extremely multifaceted undertaking, which demands of policymakers not only a detailed understanding of their specialist field but also a comprehensive knowledge of a wide variety of affiliated disciplines (U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide, 2009). Both military approaches and humanitarian interventions are necessary for a humanitarian emergency. The two perspectives are potent for the understanding of this paper. Thus, counterinsurgency operations and humanitarian interventions in northeast Nigeria are considered an act of humanitarian intervention. However, the time at which they are applied makes the understanding of humanitarian intervention ambiguous. What is therefore, questionable

about NGOs is the intent behind their activities, whether moral or immoral.

Non-kinetic measures, according to Nwolise (2019), can transform the ideological narrative inculcated in the people's minds by Boko Haram fighters. Galula supported Mao Zedong in the revolutionary war when Mao Zedong said that gaining the people's and communities support could be accomplished through "active friendly minorities," such as neutral organizations. Thus, Military forces must effectively protect the local populations and informants so that they can cooperate without fear of retribution by the aggressor. This will significantly improve interpersonal relationships and help communities regain their trust.

Locula in Nwolise (2019) argues that humanitarian intervention should not only be the result of reactive military intercession but also of the power holder's ability to do everything within their individual and collective states to intervene as early as possible. This reference the significance of humanitarian agencies in dire emergencies. This article implies that political will should be more proactive in driving non-kinetic methods rather than relying on a purely kinetic strategy.

Galula (1964) reinforces this when he contends that:

In revolutionary warfare, strength must be assessed by the extent of support from the population as measured in terms of political organisation at the grassroots. The counterinsurgent reaches a position of strength when his power is embedded in a political organisation issued from, and firmly supported by the population.

Thus, counterinsurgency is simply a-whole-of-society approach. Simply put, a combination of the military, government and the people are imperative to the fight against insurgencies in Nigeria.

Humanitarian Emergencies in Northeast Nigeria

A humanitarian emergency, according to the OHCHR (2022), is an event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or well-being of a community or other large group of people, usually over a wide area. In Nigeria, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have a long history of meeting human needs. Their first hands-on experience occurred during the 1967–1970 Nigerian–Biafran Civil War when they saw first-hand the extent of the misery and malnutrition experienced by the people of southeastern Nigeria. Although the Federal Government referred to it as "collateral damage" and saw it as a necessary evil during a conflict, in the eyes of the international community: NGOs are seen as a symbol of two significant concepts. The first concept arises from the desire to address fundamental human needs, while the second is a "militant" strategy that denounces those who carry out heinous deeds during times of war. This combination is what makes NGOs such useful institutions.

The humanitarian crisis in Nigeria's northeast and the Lake Chad region was reported to be one of the most severe in the world (UN, 2017). The United Nations reported that most of the 140 million people suffering from acute hunger around the world live in just ten countries. These countries are Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Haiti, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen and Nigeria (UN, 2021). Accordingly, "approximately 4.4 million people are facing acute food insecurity in the conflict-affected region. An estimated 8.5 million people need humanitarian assistance in the worst-affected states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe as of 2017 (UN, 2017). Civilians continue to bear the burden of a conflict that has led to enormous food and nutrition crises, widespread forced displacement, and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

After the presidential elections in 2011, Nigeria witnessed several deadly attacks in the northeast region, leading to an increased number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees across its borders. “The ongoing violence in the northeast caused population displacement to other states, including Abuja, and people also fled to countries such as Niger and Cameroon” (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2013). Lack of access to basic medical services became a serious problem in the region and a large number of people were living in conditions of extreme hunger. In 2012, the humanitarian situation in the region had become gloomier, attracting humanitarian intervention in field operations.

On May 19, 2015, the Africa Programme at Chatham House hosted a meeting that brought together representatives of humanitarian organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), and relevant stakeholders (Africa Programme Summary, 2015). This meeting focused on the humanitarian situation in Nigeria in light of the brutal attacks on civilians by Boko Haram and the growing threat of terrorism. Through coordinated logistics and civil-military coordination efforts, humanitarian teams can now access some previously inaccessible areas (UN, 2017). This progress has revealed new depths of devastation and humanitarian need.

In 2019, as the situation further deteriorated, some aid workers were abducted and killed by armed insurgent groups. Also, new counterterrorism laws increased restrictions on humanitarian action, leaving millions of people in desperate situations without aid. This unfortunate twist, only left people living in government-controlled areas in and around the state capital, Maiduguri, to benefit from humanitarian assistance. Despite the numerous challenges experienced in the previous years of humanitarian operations, including the loss of a health facility and some health workers, a range of basic

emergency responses across the northeast region was maintained. Consequently, the strategic focus of humanitarian partners since 2018 has been on integrated and coordinated lifesaving assistance, strengthened protection of civilians, enhanced humanitarian access and durable solutions, especially for those returning home after a period of displacement (UN, 2017).

The UN World Food Programme reported in October 2021 that “displaced families in Nigeria’s northeast are knocking on the door of starvation” following years of insecurity in the region that have disrupted livelihoods and forced hundreds of thousands of people to migrate. It further noted, “We are facing very severe levels of hunger that we have witnessed since; this is probably the highest that we are witnessing since the crisis exploded in 2016.” The United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Nigeria, Matthias Schmale, explained that a total of 8.4 million Nigerians would need humanitarian support in the northeast, saying that 4.1 million people would face severe pain from food insecurity in the region (Tauna, 2022). Thus, human insecurity threatens societies and exacerbates conflicts, which no individual or country is immune to.

Figure 1: Children being assessed for malnutrition at one of the IDP camps in Borno State, Nigeria



Source: UN News

Humanitarian Agencies, Trust and Counterinsurgency Efforts in Northeast Nigeria

From what has been examined so far, it is evident that humanitarian and development assistance provided by NGOs is extremely important in maintaining a strong and stable environment, particularly in conflict regions. Also, providing relief and aid materials to the civilian population caught up in the cross-fires of the parties in conflict is vital in ensuring that they do not become easy tools of recruitment by the terrorists or insurgent groups.

The military has made unprecedented gains on the kinetic front by regaining territories, dismantling the physical caliphate, and rescuing tens of thousands of victims while capturing thousands of insurgents. Substantial efforts have not been achieved in terms of non-kinetic measures. In understanding non-kinetic measures, the work simply put it in a simple term as a strong political strategy and policy on socio-economic and humanitarian benefits such as medical facilities, access to food and water, vocational and skill acquisition programmes, development aid etc are the needed non-kinetic power to drive counterinsurgency operations in the northeast. The counterinsurgency operational plan lacked a central coordinating authority that could better harness the values of humanitarian partners during the first phase of the war. Nwolise, (2019) noted that national efforts in counterinsurgency operations in the northeast are not balanced in terms of kinetic and non-kinetic application because at first, the military tactic did not impact the dire humanitarian conditions of the people as the fight was purely considered a military matter.

The reality of the humanitarian situation today is such that even responding to a preventable disease outbreak, hunger and poverty have become huge challenges owing to the growing mistrust of humanitarian agencies. Several allegations such as espionage, intelligence gathering, corruption,

prolonging the counterinsurgency efforts, supplying the adversary, “aiding” and “abetting” among others have been reported against them in the Northeast. This has raised concerns among local and international observers. For example, the military accused the UN's children's agency, UNICEF, of spying for the Boko Haram group in 2018 while the Nigerian Army accused the international NGO working with MSF, Action Against Hunger, in 2019 of supplying the Islamist group with food and drugs (Njoku, 2020).

Some NGOs have been perceived as loyalists of Amnesty International or foreign organizations posing as aggressive opponents of security agencies and their activities. For instance, Action Against Hunger, and Mercy Corps were suspended in Maiduguri for their involvement in activities capable of sabotaging military counterinsurgency efforts (Njoku, 2020). These activities such as supplying food, fuel and medicine to Boko Haram insurgents have greatly threatened the success of counterinsurgency efforts.

The reality on the ground is that the Federal Government cannot single-handedly carry the weight of humanitarian intervention. It is also worth mentioning that very few organisations have helped provide humanitarian support to Nigeria since the insurgency in the Northeast started. Although humanitarian interventions are urgently essential for the displaced people of the Northeast, it is important to state that their activities must be carefully harnessed and monitored within the counterinsurgency strategy of the government so as not to allow aid to fall into the wrong hands.

It is important to highlight that even though Nigeria is well known to have a serious food insecurity problem; the country has been receiving various forms of "assistance" from international parties. For instance, on April 21, 2022, Mr Martins Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, allocated US\$15 million from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to support critically needed

humanitarian assistance in north-east Nigeria, including food security (United Nations, 2021).

In 2015, Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), a non-kinetic operation to deradicalize, rehabilitate, and reintegrate (DRR) repentantly surrendering ex-combatants linked with BH-ISWA members into communities, was established (USAID, 2020). As part of the counterinsurgency strategy, OSC works with international organizations like the Centre for Democracy and Development. Through Creative Associates and a \$4.6 million cooperative agreement with international NGOs, the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Nigeria's primary technical partner for the development and implementation of the national DRR programme, invested about \$7.5 million between 2016 and 2020 (USAID, 2020).

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that collaborations fall under the purview of international humanitarian law as an act of humanitarian intervention. The main argument of this article is that improved national security objectives are required to coordinate and harness NGOs into the Northeast Plan through an appropriate organizational structure.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper discussed the role of NGOs in counterinsurgency in the context of humanitarian intervention by examining humanitarian emergencies and the plights of the northeast people in the pervasive insurgency. The article posits that a great number of NGOs in Nigeria have anti-national interests; however, branding all humanitarian agencies operating in the Northeast region as anti-peace will bring untold hardship to IDPs and refugees across Niger, Chad and Cameroon borders. It took a cursory look into the growing mistrust of NGOs in the counterinsurgency effort in the Northeast. The proper harnessing of credible agencies into the interagency collaboration

platform against insurgency will lessen the humanitarian crisis and improve the living conditions of the Northeast people. The following are some of the recommendations:

- To mitigate humanitarian emergencies in Nigeria and the northeast, in particular, the country needs to properly harness humanitarian agencies so they can extend their resources to victims and communities in dire need. A trusted and competent body should supersede the activities of humanitarian organisations.
- Federal Government of Nigeria should pursue a strong and concise MOUs with the NGOs. Terms and conditions of engagement with the NGOs should be clearly articulated. Proper monitoring of their activities should be done to ascertain that they are not anti-national interests.
- A dedicated research agenda for NGOs' activities in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. Data generated should guide policies and approaches to interacting with NGOs. To achieve this, human, financial, and institutional resources need to be committed to research.
- The deployment of strong political will and action is imperative to countering ideological narratives of violent extremism.
- The transfer of developmental and vocational programmes to victims and communities by NGOs will also help promote positive social change and integration. In simple terms, the effective carrying out of meetings to determine the immediate needs of the affected population is crucial. It is also important that responses from meetings be documented and communicated to humanitarian actors so that they can respond appropriately.

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