FIXING A FALTERING COUNTERINSURGENCY: SYSTEMIC REFORMS TO OVERCOME BOKO HARAM IN NIGERIA
Fixing a faltering counterinsurgency: Systemic reforms
to overcome Boko Haram in Nigeria

Transparency International (TI) is the world’s leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation. With more than 100 chapters worldwide, TI has extensive global expertise and understanding of corruption.

Transparency International Defence and Security (TI-DS) works towards a world where governments, the armed forces, and arms transfers are transparent, accountable, and free from corruption.

Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) is a non-governmental, non-profit, advocacy, information sharing, research, and capacity building organisation. Its purpose is to strengthen the link between civil society and the legislature through advocacy and capacity building for civil society groups and policy makers on legislative processes and governance issues.

Acknowledgements: This policy brief reserves a special recognition to the pioneering research and investigative works by Chiemelie Ezeobi, Precious Igbonwelundu, Iwuoma Ivy Kanu, and Mahmud AbdulSalam who were participants at a journalism fellowship conducted by the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) in collaboration with the Transparency International Defense and Security Project (TI) with support from the Foreign Ministry of the Netherlands.

Author: Freedom Chukwudi Onuoha, Ph.D.
Editors: Mohamed Bennour, Barney Cullum, and Bertha Ogbimi

Design: Unimike Global Concept

© 2023 Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC). All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in parts is permitted, providing that full credit is given to CISLAC and provided that any such reproduction, in whole or in parts, is not sold or incorporated in works that are sold. Written permission must be sought from CISLAC if any such reproduction would adapt or modify the original content.

Published April 2023

© Cover photo: Unimike Global Concept

Every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the information contained in this report. All information was believed to be correct as of March 2023. Nevertheless, CISLAC cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of its use for other purposes or in other contexts.

This policy brief profiles the nature and impact of delayed troop rotation, incidents of PTSD, the complicity of security forces in arms trafficking and the consequences for mission success. The report concludes with recommendations to revive a counterinsurgency that is faltering in the face of Boko Haram and ISWAP.
Introduction

Nigeria is struggling to rein in an Islamist insurgency, which took root after an uprising in July 2009 and has since spread to the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Despite efforts of the Nigerian military to defeat the Boko Haram terrorists and the splinter rival faction, the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), the terrorists have proven resilient and highly adaptable. The Nigerian government has largely relied on the military as the preeminent kinetic tool alongside other paramilitary, security law enforcement institutions and self-defence groups to counter the evolving threat. Hence, it has initiated successive military operations with different code names: Operation Restore Order, Operation Boyona, Operation Zaman Lafiya, Operation Lafiya Dole and Operation Hardin Kai, among others, in the northeast, especially Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states.

The sustenance of the military-led counterinsurgency (COIN) operations has resulted in increased budgetary allocations to the defence and security sector. For instance, a total of ₦11.18tn ($24.27 billion) was budgeted for security from 2015 to 2022.¹ Military onslaught partly contributed to the splintering of Boko Haram, with the emergence of the ISWAP in 2016. Encouraged by modest initial successes recorded against the group such as the reclaiming of territories previously held by the terrorists, freeing of abducted citizens, and the interception of terrorist logistic networks, President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration has repeatedly claimed since 2016 that the group has been ‘defeated’, ‘technically defeated’ or ‘decimated’.

Repeated attacks on military, civilian and humanitarian targets since then have proven that the insurgency is far from being defeated despite claims by the Nigerian government. If anything, recent revelations prove that Boko Haram and its rival faction, ISWAP, have spread tentacles to more states². Existing research and media investigations have increasingly highlighted the role of corruption in the military as a major factor responsible for the failure to defeat the terrorists. The Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI), which is the world's leading assessment of corruption

Fixing a faltering counterinsurgency: Systemic reforms to overcome Boko Haram in Nigeria

risks in government defence institutions, rates Nigeria's overall country score in 2020 as "Very High Risk". The overall score is a composite indicator of five key corruption risk areas: financial, operational, personnel, political, and procurement. Such assessment of the risk of corruption in Nigeria’s defence sector is particularly telling given that a lot of money meant to bolster the COIN campaign against Boko Haram has allegedly ended up in officials' pockets, the BBC has reported.

The widely reported $2 billion arms procurement scandal or Dasukigate which implicated the former National Security Adviser (NSA), Sambo Dasuki, retired service chiefs and generals, politicians and their cronies is a high-profile example. Analysts and scholars believe that entrenched corrupt practices undermine the COIN capabilities of the military at the strategic, operational and tactical levels respectively. Research on the issue of corruption has focused almost exclusively on the nature, scale and impact of the misappropriation of funds meant for the procurement of weapons for COIN operations. Yet, other challenges plaguing the military such as rising cases of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to delayed troop rotation, and the complicity of security forces in the trafficking of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) among others, have gravely undermined the effectiveness of COIN operations in the region. While these developments are different, the prevalence of corruption in the military is implicated in their occurrence and persistence in the theatre of COIN operations.

This policy brief reflects on the nature and impact of a delayed troop rotation, incidents of PTSD and the complicity of security forces in arms trafficking and the consequences for mission success. The aim is to underscore how poor oversight of the defence and security sector has contributed to these negative trends, and to proffer actionable recommendations for addressing the deficit to enhance the prospects of COIN operations in the northeast.

The brief is a synthesis of insights from two papers and five investigative reports conducted by journalists who were participants of a journalism fellowship sponsored by the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) in collaboration with the Transparency International Defense and Security Project (TI). Some existing literature were also used to corroborate and complement the findings of the media investigations.

---

Delayed Troop Rotation

Troop rotation is a standard deployment practice that ensures the military does not overstretch its human resources while on active service. A troop rotation plan specifies the time enlisted soldiers leave their base and experience combat for a specific duration or serve in overseas deployment. It is crucially important for mission operational effectiveness and the wellbeing of the personnel deployed in combat or hostile environment. Some critics believe that conducting stability operations using unit rotation is a self-defeating system that limits the forces available for post-conflict stability operations and COIN operations, hinders continuity, negatively affects the mindset of leaders, and inevitably prolongs the conflict. However, most proponents of troop rotation maintain that a robust rotation cycle preserves combat readiness and effectiveness. It equally helps to increase deployment stability for the soldiers and families of these units.

In the context of northeast COIN Operations, delayed or non-rotation of troops is a lingering challenge that has impacted soldiers’ morale and confidence. According to a standing policy on troop rotation which came into effect in 2016, officers and soldiers of the Nigerian military who had spent more than two years in the northeast fighting Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgents were expected to be replaced with new troops, freshly deployed to the region. This seems not to be the case as soldiers have at various times complained about their lengthy or extended periods of deployment. Despite the rotation policy, there have been instances where troops have stayed in the northeast for up to five years or beyond without rotation.

Worse still, an entire Battalion sometimes is left for years without redeployments. For instance, soldiers of the 3 Battalion of the Nigerian Army deployed in Gamboru/Ngala and Rann since February 28, 2016, were still on the battlefield against the insurgents as of November 2022. While the standard deployment period for soldiers involved in the war is two years, media investigation revealed that Nigerian military authorities are yet to effectively implement this policy of rotating soldiers prosecuting the COIN operation. Military officials have attributed their inability to implement reliable and predictable rotation plan to a shortage of manpower for COIN operations in the northeast. Given the frequency and intensity of violent criminality in Nigeria, about 80 per cent of military personnel are currently deployed in internal security operations across the 36 states of the federation responding to escalating insecurity.

These ISOs have overstretched the available manpower in the military, thereby making the predictable rotation cycle difficult. But a more ominous factor seldom acknowledged as having an impact on troop deployment and rotation is the problem of corruption. Soldiers have repeatedly cited corruption in the deployment process as hampering effective troop rotation. Studies have

---


shown that bribery of senior officials to get favourable or preferred postings is a prevalent practice within the Nigerian military. The patronage system involved in operational deployment has implications for troop rotation. First, such a corrupt system permits certain individuals to get to occupy key positions on the war front from where they can make more money. Second, it allows for some soldiers to lobby to be posted or avoid being posted to a particular area. While some soldiers have lobbied to stay out of the northeast, others have lobbied to be posted either to the south-south zone (Niger Delta region) where they may benefit from illegal oil bunkering or to be deployed to the southeast region where they can extort money from people at countless checkpoints mounted by the military and other security agents. Between August 2015 and December 2018, Nigerian security forces pocketed ₦100 billion ($330 million) in roadside bribery and extortion in the Southeast. A breakdown of the questionable operation showed that the military (Army, Navy and Air Force) received ₦6 billion ($13 million) of the total sum.

With these corrupt actions, the military can only manage with a dysfunctional troop rotation method for the northeast operation. For instance, following the rotation of troops in 2022 by the military high command, some soldiers of the 145 Battalion under the 5 Brigade of the Nigerian Army, who had been deployed to the theatre of war since 2016, expressed concerns about authorities omitting their Battalion. Meanwhile, some of the soldiers alleged that their inability or unwillingness to pay bribes to influence their posting may be responsible for their non-deployment. Similarly, personnel of the 3 Battalion of the Nigerian Army in Gamboru/Ngala and Rann areas of Borno State lamented the frequency of rotation with officers' corps and some other units, while their situation has remained the same. There have been reports of low morale among some soldiers who have complained of inadequate equipment to fight against the armed groups and the non-rotation of troops. Consequently, this situation has contributed to the persistence of the insurgency. In a recent attempt to deal with soldiers’ unwillingness to fight, the Defense Headquarters issued a directive in 2022, that unmotivated soldiers should be identified and compulsorily discharged or retired across the theatre of war.

---

12 Samuel Ogundipe (2018, December 24). ‘Updated: Nigeria security forces extort n100 billion in southeast in three years –report’. Premium Times,
14 Mahmud, Abdulsalam (2022). Insurgency: How the military's failure to implement 'rotation policy' affects troops in N/East
Fixing a faltering counterinsurgency: Systemic reforms to overcome Boko Haram in Nigeria

The issuance of intimidating or dismissive pronouncements such as this that tended to suppress the genuine concerns of soldiers is a common official refrain of military leaders in Nigeria. Yet, combat fatigue among soldiers is known to undermine the overall military operations' strategic goal, especially when it results in acts of insubordination among troops. This was the case in August 2018 when soldiers refused to board the military plane conveying them to Marte, one of the towns in Borno state liberated from Boko Haram terrorists. They seized the Maiduguri International Airport for close to two hours, shooting sporadically into the air to protest their long stay on the battlefield. A soldier, who has spent about 10 years in Borno State lamented that most of the soldiers who have stayed in the northeast for up to five years are battling with combat fatigue, depression and mental illness.

Rising Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Partly resulting from delayed troop rotation and poor welfare schemes in the ongoing COIN effort is the rising cases of mental and health-related disorders. Cases of soldiers either committing suicide, killing/harming their colleagues or superiors or suffering from depression, somatisation and substance abuse (PTSD), among others, are rife in the northeast. The mental disorders result from the horror and hazard the soldiers encounter while fighting ideologically-driven terrorist groups. Studies have established a causal relationship between extended troop deployment in conflict zones and the prevalence of PTSD, in which case Nigeria, experienced a marked increase in the rate of combat-related PTSD among soldiers in the past 15 years.

The manifestation of PTSD is evident in the cases of suicide committed by some soldiers or instances where soldiers have killed or harmed their colleagues triggered by health or mental disorders. In 2017, a soldier committed suicide after reportedly killing his commanding officer in Chibok, Borno state. In July 2020, a soldier, Azunna Maduabuchi, attached to the 202 Battalion of the Nigerian Army, Bama, Borno state, reportedly killed a Lieutenant who had refused to give him a pass to visit his family. Yet, occurrences of this nature seem not to have abated, as another soldier shot and killed his Platoon Commander in Maiduguri, a Lieutenant in the Nigerian Army, in January 2021. Recently on November 17, 2022, a soldier working in the frontline operations in Damboa, Borno State, killed a humanitarian worker and injured a helicopter pilot. Although there

---


18 Precious Igbonwelundu, Addressing rising PTSD, others among soldiers. The Nation, 4 December 2022, https://thenationonlineng.net/addressing-rising-ptsd-others-among-soldiers/

19 Precious Igbonwelundu, Addressing rising PTSD, others among soldiers.
was no evidence of the immediate cause of his action, “reports put that he was depressed, having been at the battlefront for a long time”\textsuperscript{20}.

The Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Faruk Yahaya, acknowledged in November 2022 that the prolonged deployment of troops in various operations was putting pressure on the troops which “had a resultant effect of high casualty rates, injuries, damage to equipment and accumulated stress, as well as other mental disorders such as PTSD”\textsuperscript{21}. With the spate of emotional resentment by soldiers on the frontline since early 2020, the military authority had reportedly dispatched psychologists and medical experts, to address the emotional, psychological and mental health needs of troops fighting Boko Haram terrorists. However, the recurrence of PTSD-related acts among soldiers suggests that either the military authorities have not paid due attention to it or that the mechanism put in place to manage it is ineffective. In October 2022, the Defence and Police Officers Wives Association (DEPOWA) initiated the construction of a PTSD Wellness Centre in Abuja, to attend to military and police personnel with mental health challenges. The concept of the PTSD Wellness Centre is relevant but its location far from the theatre of active hostility or combat meant that it is designed to serve the military elite more than soldiers on the frontline who need such critical support.

The cases of PTSD are hardly surprising given that the Nigerian military has not faithfully implemented its troop rotation policy. In addition, administrative high-handedness, poor welfare and corruption compound the challenging psychological atmosphere of the troops. The failure of the military to properly manage this issue has led soldiers to take to substance mis-use, further endangering the COIN operations.

**Arms Trafficking by Security Forces**

Aside from resulting in mental and physical health disorders among some troops, delayed troop rotation and poor welfare schemes have partly contributed to criminal indulgence by some soldiers. The growing complicity and connivance of security forces in the organised trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) is another worrisome development in the ongoing COIN operations. The multi-dimensional security threats currently bedevilling Nigeria have heightened the proliferation of SALWs across the country.

Most studies and media investigations on arms proliferation in Nigeria have largely focused on activities of non-state actors such as kidnappers, bandits, insurgents, terrorists, separatist agitators and other criminal gangs in arms smuggling or trafficking\textsuperscript{22}. A report by SBM Intelligence and


Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) suggests that about 6,154,000 SALWs are illegally circulating among civilian non-state actors and criminals in Nigeria. Cross-border arms smugglers often traffic such weapons from conflict-ridden places like Mali, Libya, South Sudan, and Central African Republic.

Thus, attention has been on the porosity of the nation’s international borders, weak obsolete firearms control legislation, shortage of surveillance equipment, and the impact of escalating criminality as major factors implicated in arms proliferation in the country. Yet the shade and scale of the complicity of security personnel in organized arms trafficking have not received adequate scholarly attention despite media revelations of this unwholesome trend. Recent revelations about the complicity of security forces reveal how this threat has evolved and permeated the security and defense sector. In September 2021, for instance, the Office of the Auditor General for the Federation (OAuGF) made an astonishing revelation about the magnitude of service weapons that could not be accounted for. According to the report, about 178,459 different types of arms and ammunition were missing from the Nigerian Police armoury in 2019. Out of this figure, 88,078 AK-47 rifles and 3,907 assorted rifles and pistols were missing across various police formations in Nigeria.

Suffice it to say that the complicity of soldiers in illicit weapons trafficking is not of recent origin. During the height of militancy in the Niger Delta, some officers of the Nigerian Army were implicated in the sales of arms to militants. A criminal syndicate led by one Major Suleiman Akubo stole more than 7,000 weapons worth around N100 million ($850,000) between 2000 and 2006, and sold them to Niger Delta militants and criminal gangs. With over a decade of insurgency in the northeast, the phenomenon of gun-running involving the nation's security forces has become increasingly entrenched and embarrassing. Although data in table 1 is not exhaustive, it indicates that the practice is now prevalent in the ongoing COIN operations.

Table 1: Complicity of security forces in arms trafficking in the Northeast

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Suspect(s)</th>
<th>Nature of Complicity</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2022</td>
<td>Private Emmanuel Iorliam (Nigerian Army)</td>
<td>The serving soldier with 156 Task Force Battalion, Maiduguri, Borno State, was arrested at a military checkpoint on his way out of Maiduguri, while in possession of several ammunitions hidden around his waist</td>
<td>Private Iorliam steals arms and ammunition from his base and sells them to criminal gangs – bandits and terrorists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2021</td>
<td>Corporal Sanni Mohammed (Nigerian Army)</td>
<td>The soldier attached to 198 Special Forces Battalion of the Nigerian Army was caught with 2000 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition at the Borno Express park in Maiduguri, Borno State</td>
<td>He was arrested by the officials of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2017</td>
<td>Privates Eric Nwokoye and Macaulay Fortune (Nigerian Army)</td>
<td>A military court martial in Maiduguri sentenced the two Nigerian soldiers to 23 years each in prison for stealing ammunition meant for combating Boko Haram</td>
<td>They were arrested in Yola, Adamawa State, with a cache of arms stuffed in a large bag they intended to transport via a commercial taxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2016</td>
<td>Unnamed 16 officers of the Nigerian Army</td>
<td>The Nigerian Army commenced the trial of 16 officers, including a Brigade Commander, allegedly involved in the theft and sale of ammunition</td>
<td>For the Brigade Commander, out of the 21 anti-aircraft guns allocated to his Brigade, only one was received</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from online media reports

While these are among the few widely reported cases, it is conceivable that several other cases have gone undetected or unreported. The common refrain to the Official Secret Act of 1962, which precludes the disclosure of certain security-related information, suggests that the military may have covered up such an ignominious act to protect its image. But the few that have come to the limelight reveal the entrenched nature of corruption in the defence sector. Factors such as poor welfare of soldiers, delayed troop protection, weak stockpile management, and limited oversight and accountability mechanisms contribute to the permissive conditions for some soldiers to engage in these forms of criminal acts. When soldiers endure extended tours of duty or are poorly catered for, the tendency is for some personnel to exploit rapport and networks established with the local people and economy for selfish or criminal enrichment.

In the absence of effective stockpile management or robust oversight mechanisms over armoury, the risk of loss and theft becomes exceedingly high as stockpiles are stolen or criminally diverted faster than they are replenished. The implications of such corrupt practices for COIN operations in

---

Fixing a faltering counterinsurgency: Systemic reforms to overcome Boko Haram in Nigeria

particular and national security more broadly are dire. It compromises anti-arms trafficking interventions at the national, regional and international levels. It equally exacerbates the challenge of criminality and insecurity by creating and sustaining access to SALWs by non-state actors. Boko Haram's access to weapons through battlefield capture or supplies by compromised soldiers has enabled them to sustain violent attacks on diverse targets. As data in Figure 1 indicate, the group carried out a total of 1,694 attacks in Nigeria between 2014 and 2021, resulting in 16,215 fatalities. The highest number incidents took place in 2020 with 378 attacks while the highest number of fatalities was recorded in 2015 with 5,607 deaths.

*Figure 1; Boko Haram Incidents and Fatalities in Nigeria, 2014 - 2021*

Source: Compiled from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Dataset.

Beyond Boko Haram, a report traced some of the arms and ammunition linked to herders–farmers conflicts in Nigeria to stockpiles of Nigerian defence and security forces. More importantly, the complicity of soldiers in arms trafficking causes serious reputation damage to the military and undermines the critical efforts of patriotic troops. Even worse, such acts corrode or erode public trust in the military and discourage the civilian population from volunteering information and intelligence to defence and security forces.

**Conclusion**

Boko Haram terrorism remains a major security threat to Nigeria and defeating the terrorists is one of the critical priorities of the nation’s military. Despite the huge resources expended in the COIN operations, violent attacks by the group have persisted amidst official claims that the terrorists have been defeated or decimated. Underlying the inability of the military to effectively defeat the external enemy (the Boko Haram/ISWAP), is the enemy from within: corruption. Poor accountability mechanisms meant that available resources are not judiciously utilised for the

---

28 by Conflict Armament Research (CAR), Dispatch from the field Nigeria’s herder–farmer conflict. London: CAR, 2020
procurement of sufficient equipment and provision of welfare support to troops on the frontline. This results in poor welfare schemes, flawed deployment practices, delayed troop rotation and pilfering of arms stockpiles by soldiers. These intricately related challenges are largely nourished by corruption, weakening the ability of the military to defeat current and future security threats. These issues have severely undermined the effectiveness and efficiency of COIN operations. Unless they are comprehensively addressed, the military’s fight against Boko Haram and ISwap will continue to flounder. There is a need for system-wide reform to entrench transparency and accountability in the way the military utilises the resources – money, personnel and materiel – available for COIN operations.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following recommendations are made to help in effectively tackling the three critical areas already highlighted in this brief – delayed troop rotation, incidents of PTSD and the complicity of security forces in arms trafficking.

a) The military should overhaul its deployment strategy and troop rotation framework, including adopting robust monitoring of its implementation, to ensure that officers and soldiers do not overstay in their deployments to conflict zones. Troop rotation policy should drive and derive from strategic deployment, by mopping up troops unnecessarily stationed at checkpoints, in the Southeast, to free up additional manpower for a nimble COIN campaign in the northeast.

b) The military should prioritise the general welfare of troops and closely track the quantity and quality of supplies to those on the frontlines through regular audits and random surveys.

c) The Defence Headquarters should establish and deploy a mobile team of psychologists that are skilled in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to regularly visit various military locations across the theatre of war in the North East to render emotional, mental and psychological support and therapies to soldiers.

d) The legislators (Senate and House of Representatives) should embark on routine and unscheduled visits to the Armoury Sections of the nation’s defence and security forces to verify the state of the Ammunition Register critical to ensuring proper stockpile management. This will assist in the timely detection of illicit depletion and diversion of the armoury. Poor national inventory and oversight practices mean that depletion of national stockpiles through theft, loss, or battlefield capture cannot be easily identified.

e) The Office of the National Security Adviser should initiate a robust framework of multi-agency and multi-country collaboration to curtail the cross-border smuggling of SALWs in the region.

f) The President should set up an independent Committee (Strategic Review Team – SRT) to provide an in-depth and objective evaluation of military operations to ascertain successes and setbacks as well as document lessons. Lessons learned will help in mainstreaming transparency and accountability mechanisms in current and future military operations.