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Down but not out

With Boko Haram suffering a number of setbacks, the onus is on the Nigerian government to take steps to ensure a more peaceful future

Whenever the name Boko Haram is mentioned, it immediately brings to mind the plight of more than 270 teenage girls abducted from their school dormitory in Chibok, north-eastern Nigeria, in April 2014. What seemed like a mild revolt in 2009 when it started soon metamorphosed into one of the deadliest terrorist organisations in the world, one responsible for more than 20,000 deaths to date.

Because of the group's brutality, Nigeria was ranked alongside Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan as among the world's five most terrorised nations last year, according to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) just released by the Institute for Economics and Peace, an independent think tank that monitors the impact of terrorism in 163 countries.

At the height of the insurgency in 2014, Boko Haram's black flag was flying atop public buildings abandoned by government officials, making it the de facto authority in the region. The abduction of the girls caused international outrage and condemnation that jolted former president Goodluck Jonathan into action to stop the menace posed to the country and the West African sub-region.

A coalition of civil society organisations and relatives of the girls began a campaign with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls to mobilise the international community, attracting famous names like Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai who helped put pressure on the government to find and rescue them.

Terrorists on the run

Corruption in the government and the military, however, undermined the fight. It was no surprise when voters rejected Jonathan in the March 2015 presidential elections. Opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari, who made subduing Boko Haram one of his major campaign promises,

emerged the eventual winner. True to his word, on assuming office on 29 May 2015, he ordered the military high command to move from the Nigerian capital, Abuja, to Maiduguri, capital of the state of Borno and hotbed of the insurgency.

With support from the G7 countries, the European Union and Russia, military assistance suspended under Jonathan was resumed, enabling the government to launch a rejuvenated campaign. Thanks to improved welfare packages and better conditions of service, the troops were now better able to neutralise the enemy. Equally significant was the introduction of a Multinational Joint Task Force from the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger – all members of the Lake Chad Basin grouping – to complement Nigerian troops. This led to an 80 per cent drop in killings by Boko Haram last year, according to GTI.

Towns and villages captured by Boko Haram were liberated. And on Christmas Eve 2016, Buhari announced that troops had retaken Sambisa Forest, a stronghold of the insurgents. The terrorists in effect no longer controlled territories they had held before the change of government.

After its leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group in 2015, Boko Haram began to experience internal bickering that culminated the following year in Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of Mohammed Yussuf, who founded Boko Haram in 2002, replacing Shekau as leader. The two men thereafter seized control of each of the two main factions.

Weakened by the split, and with better intelligence provided by western countries and much improved coordination of the campaign in the sky and on land, the terrorists were soon on the run in the face of superior firepower. Government troops captured some ranking fighters, though a number of them have been released in exchange for many of the Chibok girls. The deal between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram that made the prisoner swap possible was brokered by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Swiss government.

Conciliatory approach

Despite the setbacks it has suffered, there's no doubt Boko Haram still has the capacity to cause trouble. They regularly engage troops in skirmishes, and ambush soldiers and civilians with deadly results. Hungry insurgents continue to raid villages and markets to steal food, fuel and other essentials. Female suicide bombers also remain unrelenting, hitting soft targets including mosques, schools and camps used by millions of internally displaced persons. The publicity derived from these attacks

seems to be what's driving them more than any desire to Islamise the region.

How can the government consolidate this victory? First, the onus is on it to take a conciliatory approach to insurgents who are willing to surrender and reintegrate into society. This will encourage more fighters to abandon the cause and come out of hiding. Second, the development plan recently initiated for the impoverished region with the support of the United Nations and major donor countries must be used to rebuild the region's broken infrastructure.

Roads, schools, hospitals and houses need to be improved while the people deserve to be empowered. These projects will benefit millions of unemployed young people, who will become engaged and less likely to be drawn into trouble. And agriculture, the mainstay of the region before the war, will need to be revived to boost food security.

Crucially, the Nigerian government must polish its human rights policy. The security forces require training to improve their relationship with civilians. Perhaps Boko Haram would have been an irrelevant body had its founder Yusuf not been executed in police custody after a revolt in 2009. The military should be trained to treat the civilian population with decency and civility or they will lose the respect of the populace. 'A heavy-handed or solely military response will not bring peace and may be counter-productive,' International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based independent organisation working to prevent wars and shape policies that will build a more peaceful world, said in a report.

Heeding that advice would help Nigeria to handle groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra, Niger Delta Avengers and the Iran-backed Shiite group Islamic Movement of Nigeria, perceived to be hostile to the authorities, without forcing them to embrace violence.



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