



Nigeria—Boko Haram Weakened, Yet Still a Threat

At the start of 2015 the extremist group, Boko Haram, had established control over a substantial part of Borno State in Nigeria. During the year the group also aligned itself with ISIS and declared its territory an ISIS caliphate in Africa, but to date there is little evidence that ISIS has provided concrete support to Boko Haram. Official reports indicate that since 2010 the group may have killed about 15,000 people, although other reports put the toll over 100,000. Some 2 million people are still displaced from their homes because of Boko Haram attacks.

In early 2015, the Nigerian government along with neighboring Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin launched a series of military efforts that have taken back control over most of the territory that had been captured and reduced the size of Boko Haram forces. These efforts were reinforced when the new Nigerian President, Muhammedou Buhari, assumed the Presidency in May 2015. Yet although Boko Haram is no longer the force it was, it is still resilient enough to continue deadly terrorist attacks that killed up to 100 people in one strike in February 2016. There is every indication that Boko Haram will remain a real threat to the Northeastern states of Nigeria for the foreseeable future.

Boko Haram, a name that means “Western education is forbidden,” started off in 2002 as a small, insignificant Islamic sect that considered the secular, corrupt and repressive Nigerian government and all Muslims that accepted it to be illegitimate. Its goal was to establish Sharia law in Nigeria. In 2009 when its leader died in police custody, Boko Haram turned extremist, launching terrorist attacks against police and military barracks,

markets, schools and places of worship, both Muslim and Christian. In 2014 it expanded its attacks to neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Niger and succeeded in establishing control over a part of Borno State. Most of the people killed and injured in Boko Haram attacks have been Muslim, but Christians have been clear targets and Muslim-Christian relations have suffered as a result.

From the beginning of Boko Haram attacks, the Church has condemned its brutal acts and has called on the government to protect the security of all Nigerians. The Church has worked with Muslim leaders to promote inter-faith harmony and prevent people from succumbing to Boko Haram’s tactics. During a recent assembly of the Nigerian Bishops’ Conference, Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja declared support for the legitimate efforts of Nigerian forces to quell the terrorists. At the same time, he also stated that “... Boko Haram members are not foreigners. They are our kith and kin. Does it not make more sense to win them back to our communities and to bring about reconciliation of minds and hearts? ... Long after the military war is ‘technically’ won, we shall still have on our hands a lot of healing and reconciliation to do...”

Cardinal Onaiyekan called on the government and on religious leaders to create greater opportunities for religious institutions to play a positive role. For years, the Church has worked with Christian and Muslim leaders to promote good governance and inter-faith efforts to build peace and reconciliation. The Church hopes to expand on those efforts in the future.

