

Policyweekly

Repented Terrorists and the Challenges of Reintegration

The Experience of North-East Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1 There is a need for transitional justice in the North-East.
- 2 There is a need to increase community engagement in the region.
- 3 The Nigerian government should address the public trust deficit.
- 4 There is a need for pre-emptive measures to prevent re-radicalisation in the North-East.
- 5 There is a need for a surveillance plan in the North-East.

Counter-terrorism operations in North-Eastern Nigeria have achieved appreciable success in the last ten months. Following the United States' [sale of weapons](#) and training of Nigerian forces, counter-terrorism efforts in the volatile region were scaled up to the detriment of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) fighters. Their jihadist attacks had been on for over a decade. However, in a twist of fate, a supremacy battle between Boko Haram and its breakaway ISWAP faction resulted in the [killing](#) of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau on May 19, 2021. The re-invigoration of Nigerian forces coupled with the killing of Shekau and the violent pressure on the remaining Boko Haram terrorists to join ISWAP had led to two related developments. First, the targeting of Shekau's loyalists had forced many of them to flee to the North-West, leading to an escalation of banditry in the area. Second, it has led many

Boko Haram and even moderate ISWAP terrorists and their families to surrender to the Nigerian armed forces.

According to the Defence Headquarters, terrorists and their families have surrendered to government forces alone in the last seven months. The repentant terrorists' appeal to be given a second chance and their former victims' resentment of the proposal have triggered a heated debate on whether or not the former terrorists should be allowed to return to their communities. Nextier SPD Policy Weekly edition examines how best to rehabilitate and reintegrate former violent non-state fighters in the North-East.

Unforgettable Violence

Jihadist terrorism has raged on and devastated the North-East and parts of the Lake Chad Basin (LCB) for over a decade. One of its insurgent tactics involved abduction of thousands of boys and girls for (ab)use as child soldiers, sex slaves, and suicide missions. The mass abduction of the [Chibok and Dapchi schoolgirls](#) made global headlines. The terrorist strategies involved arson, kidnapping, sexual rape, displacement, assassination, bombing, suicide missions, and beheading. These have led to a wanton loss of lives directly and indirectly. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) [report](#), while direct jihadist violence had taken the lives of 35,000 people in the three worst-hit states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe in the last decade, an estimated 314,000 people had died from indirect causes across the northern region. In 2019 alone, Boko Haram was responsible for the death of 1,245 persons, which amounted to [9 per cent](#) of the deaths from terrorism globally. In addition, jihadist terrorism has displaced more than [2 million](#) people in Nigeria and approximately 2.4 million people in neighbouring countries such as the Lake Chad Basin. These horrors have led to both local and global condemnation of Boko Haram and ISWAP by victims and non-victims alike.

Programming Reintegration, Negotiating Forgiveness

Nigeria's efforts to win the war on terror with a peaceful means started in 2013 when the [Goodluck Jonathan administration](#) extended an olive branch to Boko Haram leaders and created a framework for amnesty and disarmament. However, the leaders of [the](#)

[group rejected the amnesty](#). As Hakeem Onapajo [argued](#), following the rejection, a new agency called "Countering Violent Extremism" (National Security Corridor) was formed to tackle the root causes of recruitment into Boko Haram and create a process of rehabilitating defectors of the group. In 2016, the Buhari administration set up a [new](#) de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programme (code-named Operation Safe Corridor) for high-risk (hardened fighters) and low-risk (moderates) defectors from Boko Haram. The high-risk defectors were to be prosecuted even after defection, while the low-risk were to undergo a 52-week intensive de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programme. The programme included de-radicalisation therapies, vocational training, primary education, and religious re-education before reintegration into society. Two rehabilitation centres were created for the programme in Mallam Sidi camp in Gombe State (for male defectors) and the Bulumkutu Rehabilitation Centre in Maiduguri, Borno State (for women and children) (ICG, 2021).

However, the reintegration of former terrorists into their communities have been hard to achieve because of the resentment of victims and their families. For example, since 2016, the government has only been able to reintegrate [500](#) former fighters despite the government's deployment of strategic communication. In their narratives, the authorities argue that the reintegration of de-radicalised combatants will engender sustainable peace and security and help bring the decade-long insurgency to an end (Saheed, 2022). In August 2021, Retired Brigadier General Abdullahi Ishaq, a Security Adviser to the Borno State government, argued that reintegration successfully reunited families. Despite the Borno State Governor's expression of [90 per cent](#) confidence in the genuineness of repentant terrorists, communities that lost several lives, homes and livelihoods to terrorism have hardly been swayed. They believe that the repentant terrorists would re-offend. The communities have not been consulted and effectively carried along in reintegration programming.

Addressing the Dilemmas of Reintegration

Government efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate former fighters in Nigeria's North-East have been characterised by challenges, including whether to forgive the repentant terrorists. Several measures can

address these challenges, which are critical to sustainable stabilisation programmes and peace-building in the region.

1. The Need for Transitional Justice:

As exemplified by the cases of post-genocide Rwanda, repentance does not foreclose the need for justice. Repentance should acknowledge the moral imbalance created by heinous violence; it must also be atoned for through justice. Former terrorists in the North-East should be made to show remorse for their atrocities. As a moral philosopher, Christopher Bennett [argued](#) about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "apology is important because, when sincere, it represents a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer. It means that the person apologising has made some moral progress, moving from the position of simply, or perhaps defiantly, thinking that they were perfectly entitled to act as they did, to see that other people's interests matter. They are moving towards being someone with whom the victim can resume a relationship". The absence of this in the North-East has created the impression that the government is paying more attention to the repentant terrorists than their victims.

2. The Need for Community Engagement.

In the North-East, there has been an excessive focus on the former terrorists alone to the detriment of other victims, including people who may have been exposed to terrorists' ideologies. Post-conflict peace-building is a holistic exercise for fighters, victims, and other vulnerable groups, including counter-terrorists. As demonstrated by the [experiences](#) of Germany, the United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden, de-radicalisation programmes should be inclusive to be successful. Primarily, there is a need to see community engagement as critical. Thus, the Nigerian government needs to widen the scope of its de-radicalisation programme in the North-East to cater to more victims. One way of doing this is to contract credible civil society organisations to identify

traditional rulers and religious leaders to lead this engagement because of their day-to-day interaction with people at the grassroots.

3. Addressing Public Trust Deficit: Public officials and the institutions they represent are often viewed with suspicion because of persistent government deception. A continental [survey](#) of public trust in 37 African countries showed that Nigerians trust state institutions the least. As a result, federal and Borno State governments' claims that ex-terrorists have been sufficiently rehabilitated and de-radicalised and thus fit for reintegration have been received scepticism. This public trust deficit has fueled communities' resentment towards former fighters. The government needs to build public trust by keeping its promises and claims.

4. The Need for Pre-emptive Measures to Prevent re-radicalisation: In the North-East, appropriate pre-emptive strategies to discourage easy recruitment into terrorism need to be put in place. In United Kingdom's [CONTEST \(Counter-terrorism Strategy\)](#), four methods were implemented. One of them was preventing people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. One way of doing this in the North-East is to ensure a robust post-reintegration engagement plan that economically engages the defectors after rehabilitation. This was absent in the programme, perhaps because of [increasing unemployment and high poverty rates](#).

5. The Need for Surveillance Plan: To monitor the possibility of recidivism of reintegrated terrorists, the government and other stakeholders need to institutionalise sophisticated monitoring systems to keep ex-fighters under surveillance after reintegration. Maintaining a thorough database of reintegrated former terrorists and ensuring community involvement in surveillance is essential.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

Nextier SPD (www.nextierspd.com) is an international development consulting firm that uses evidence-based research to develop and build knowledge and skills to enhance human security, peace, and sustainable development as means to achieving stability and prosperity in Nigeria, and in the African region.

Conclusion

Nigeria's efforts to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate terrorists who surrendered to government forces in the North-East have been partially successful. Such actions are critical to sustainable peace-building in the volatile region. To ensure a successful de-radicalisation programme, many challenges, including injustice, lack of community engagement, public trust deficit, inadequate pre-emptive to prevent re-radicalisation, and poor surveillance of reintegrated individuals, need to be addressed.

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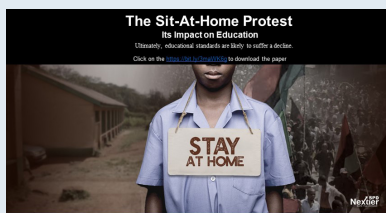
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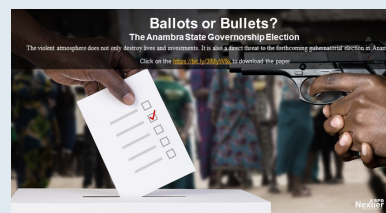
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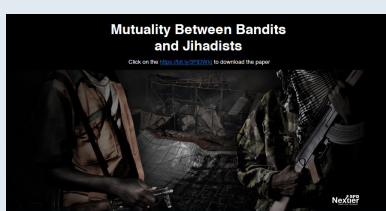
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