



Ambush as Terrorist Weapon: Living in the Mind of the Enemy

Summarised Recommendations

- 1** More recruitment of security personnel.
- 2** Sensitisation against intelligence leakage.
- 3** Use of state-of-the-art surveillance equipment.
- 4** Countering the Jihadist ideology.

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For further discussion of pragmatic implementation of the recommendations, please contact



www.nextierspd.com
info@nextierspd.com
+234 701 002 7301

The great hope that the reported killing of Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Jamatu Ahli Al-Sunna lil Da'wal Jihad (Jas) faction of Boko Haram, would significantly reduce jihadist terrorism in northern Nigeria has not been realised. In the last few weeks, over 6,000 Boko Haram fighters have surrendered to State forces following renewed counter-terrorism attacks and the supremacy struggle between JAS and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Despite this feat, ISWAP remains resilient, and it effectively weaponises ambush as a strategic tactic. Since it broke away from the original Boko Haram sect in 2016, it has killed hundreds of military personnel and members of the pro-government militia (Civilian Joint Task Force) in ambush.

The most recent of such lying in wait was the grisly murder of Brigadier-General Dzarma Zirkusu and three other soldiers on November 13, 2021, in Borno State. The Nigerian Army Special Forces Commander in Chibok and his team were on a reinforcement mission when ISWAP fighters killed them. Sadly, both military personnel and their collaborative CJTF members have been unable to come to grips with the deadly ambushes. Indeed, terrorists' weaponisation of ambush indicates intelligence failure on the part of the Nigerian military establishment. Thus, this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly examines the challenges posed by incessant ambushes of military personnel by terrorists and suggest

ways to address the growing threat.

Ambush as Terrorist Weapon

Ambush is one of the strategic tactics in new wars. Often, both formal and informal fighters resort to the use of ambush against their enemies. Ambush has been a regular feature in Nigeria's terrorism and banditry landscape. Between 2019 and 2021 alone, about 366 soldiers, policemen and members of the CJTF have been killed in ambushes laid by terrorists in the North-East and bandits in the North-West. Of the figure, 337 were soldiers, and 29 were police and CJTF operatives. The security agents also neutralised 92 terrorists in the encounters. Apart from the conflict actors, 111 civilians were caught in the crossfires during the period, bringing the total number of those killed in the ambushes to 569. Since 2018, ISWAP has targeted military formations and convoys, resulting in a 20 percent rise in fatalities in 2021. Despite the increased budgetary allocation to the security sector, public peace and safety remain elusive across the country. In the 2021 Appropriation Act, the Ministry of Defense was allocated N840.56 billion. The killing of Nigerian troops by terrorists has had far-reaching effects on both sides. While it has emboldened and promoted impunity among the terrorists, it has had a demoralising effect on the state troops who are under-equipped and overstretched.

Drivers of Ambushes

Security experts and serving military personnel have identified the core drivers of ambushes in Nigeria. According to one officer who has served in the North-East, “a number of counter-terrorists are battle-weary, leading to vulnerability to ambushes” (Key Informant 1). Indeed, members of the armed forces and allied security organisations are deployed across several front lines in Nigeria. While most of them are stationed in the North-East and the North-West, some others are battling with the secessionist Biafra militants in the South-East. The inadequate number of personnel has led to prolonged deployment at the front lines without relief. The resultant weariness often leads to fatal mistakes, including vulnerability to ambushes. According to Key Informant 2, “ambush of military personnel is purely a product of leaked intelligence”. Indeed, there have been complaints of moles within the security structures that are sympathetic to the terrorists and divulge intelligence because of religious or ethnic sentiments. To Key Informant 3, “terrorists resort to ambushes is informed by the nature of their ideology. They do not care if they die”. Most jihadist terrorists are always ready to die for their religious ideology. As a result, they are not afraid of risky operational tactics, including ambushes. However, to Key Informant 4, incessant ambushes of state troops “are traceable to the inadequate availability of the needed surveillance. The terrorists and bandits deploy some of the best surveillance equipment”.

Addressing Deadly Ambushes

The incessant ambush and killing of counter-terrorist troops in Nigeria is disgraceful and emboldens the rebels, and prolongs the war on terror. Thus, a number of measures are required to reduce terrorists’ deployment of ambush against security operatives.

1. More recruitment of security personnel: Considering the multiple theatres of armed conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, there is the need for more security personnel to be recruited to rise to the challenge posed by rebels and terrorists. When the number of security personnel is high enough, the planning or execution of ambush can be easily nipped in the bud as done in Western societies.
2. Sensitisation against intelligence leakage: For several years, the culture of corruption and inadequate professionalism among security personnel have led to intelligence leakage to criminals and rebels (Smith, 2007). Considering the enormous costs of the leakage, security personnel should be trained on the salience of keeping intelligence secret to avoid untoward consequences to the state and society.
3. Use of state-of-the-art surveillance equipment: Many Nigerian security personnel are vulnerable to ambush because they lack the needed state of the art gadgets for modern security governance. The use of body cameras and other land, air, water surveillance equipment is still not a standard norm. While the introduction of the Fathom Eye by the Nigeria Navy is a step in the right direction, the use of such state-of-the-art surveillance facility should be encouraged in all the security forces, especially those serving in the front lines, which are susceptible to ambush.

4. Jihadist ideology: In addition to target hardening, sensitisation should be employed in disabusing the minds of vulnerable groups of jihadist ideology. Education on tolerance and inter-faith dialogue should be promoted across the country, especially in areas where people are easily misled about religion, ethnicity and other cleavages.

Conclusion

The war against terrorism and banditry in Nigeria is far from over. Terrorists and bandits often strategically weaponise ambush against the state troops. This strategy emboldens the rebels and decimates the ranks of Nigerian security personnel who are not even many enough for public protection. To avoid this failure, more security personnel should be recruited. Also, there is a need for sensitisation to eradicate the unprofessional leakage of intelligence to criminals and terrorists and the procurement of state-of-the-art surveillance equipment for security personnel and the use of sensitisation to reduce the vulnerability of people to jihadist indoctrination.

References

Key Informant 1, interview with military officer who has served in the North-East against Boko Haram fighters

Key Informant 2, interview with an academic who researches insurgency and counter-insurgency in Nigeria.

Key Informant 3, interview with an academic who researches peace and conflict studies in Nigeria.

Key Informant 4, interview with military officer who is currently serving in the North-East against Boko Haram fighters.

Smith, Jordan Joseph (2007), *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Authors:

Dr Iro Aghedo is an Associate Consultant at Nextier SPD and a Senior Lecturer at the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria.

Dr Ndu Nwokolo a Managing Partner and Chief Executive at Nextier SPD.