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AFRICA NEWS

Chad's Army Helps Turn Tide Against Boko Haram

Islamist insurgency's long battle with Nigeria sparks economic downturn, draws neighbor into conflict



Chadian special forces rode atop a pickup truck during Flintlock 2015, an American-led military exercise, in Mao, on Monday. *PHOTO: REUTERS*

By **MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS** in N'Djamena, Chad, and
DREW HINSHAW in Abuja, Nigeria

Feb. 24, 2015 7:12 p.m. ET

Falling prices of cows and the rising cost of diapers in Chad have turned the tide in neighboring Nigeria's six-year war with Boko Haram.

Rampaging through northeastern Nigeria and attacking neighboring Cameroon in January, Islamist militants squeezed paths used by herdsman who walk one of Chad's main exports—cattle—to market in Nigeria. Boko Haram also choked off the flow of manufactured goods into Chad's capital, N'Djamena. Prices for everyday imports like plastic tubs have skyrocketed.

The smothering of trade routes signaled a call to arms for Chad, Nigeria's landlocked and poorer neighbor. Now its army—among Africa's most battle-hardened and feared—has been on the offensive in Nigeria, swinging momentum in a conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives, displaced more than a million people and seen Boko Haram abduct perhaps thousands of adolescents.

“We have two main means of access to the sea—one through Nigeria and the other through Cameroon,” said Chadian Brig. Gen. Zakaria Ngobongue. “It's like we have two nostrils through which to breathe. One is kind of stuffed up. If you stuff up the other nostril, how are you going to breathe?”

Chad is likely to leave Nigeria swiftly—as it has done in previous regional interdictions—before getting mired in a protracted counterinsurgency, commanders from African nations say. Some warn that the conflict risks swinging back in favor of Boko Haram after Chad exits.

“Nigeria needs to commit and be ready to engage,” said Maj. Gen. Abdelrahman Youssef Mery, commander of Chad's Special Anti-Terrorist Group.

For years, Nigerian officials viewed Chad with suspicion, while officials in Chad, Niger and Cameroon said they had considered Boko Haram a problem for their oil-rich neighbor to address. Those countries have been surrounded by failing states like South Sudan, Central African Republic, Mali and Libya, since the fall of Col. Moammar Gadhafi, who propped up several of the nations to Libya's south.

Chad's arrival in Nigeria in January inspired others to follow. This month, Niger dispatched 2,000 troops to fight along the Nigerian border. France is providing Chad and Niger, both former colonies, with logistics and intelligence from surveillance flights, a French Defense Ministry official said.

American Special Forces are training Chadian antiterrorist soldiers at annual multinational military exercises now under way in Chad. The exercises, which include

Nigerian Navy commandos, are aimed at preparing local forces to combat extremist groups. Washington is also looking to supply Nigeria with mine-resistant vehicles, President Goodluck Jonathan said in an interview this month.

“Before this time, these other countries were not too committed to joint operations,” he said of his West African neighbors. “The Cameroonian authorities used to get angry that we were entering their territory because there was no cooperation.”



A Canadian military policeman checks to make sure Chadian antiterrorism soldiers have unloaded their rifles before boarding a plane in Faya, Chad. *PHOTO: MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Chad's entrance has changed that. The collective push is turning the battlefield momentum against Boko Haram, after it captured many towns and villages in northeastern Nigeria. Just weeks ago, the group controlled territory the size of Belgium. In recent weeks, the Chadian army has liberated a 200-mile stretch of roadside towns in northeast Nigeria. On Saturday, Chadian troops helped Nigeria's army retake the town of Baga, where Boko Haram in January killed hundreds, if not thousands, of residents, witnesses said.

Boko Haram appears to be retreating into the mountains where Nigerian officials say it has built up a network of caves. On Sunday, it strapped a bomb to a roughly 10-year-old girl and sent her into a market in northern Nigeria, killing seven people, including herself, police and survivors said. On Tuesday, two separate suicide-bomb attacks at bus stations hundreds of miles apart killed 26 people, police said.

Human-rights allegations shadow Chad's reputation for battlefield prowess. In 2011, Amnesty International said the government was recruiting boys as young as 13 into its army.

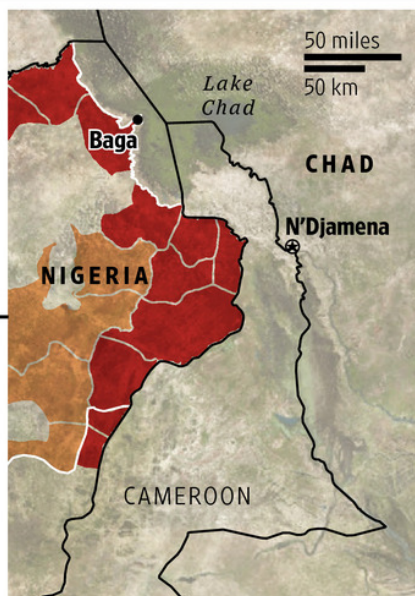
On Monday, Col. Moussa Khassim, a senior officer in Chad's antiterror group, assured local leaders in the town of Mao that the military has changed its ways. "We have an army that's well-equipped, well-trained and well-behaved," he said. "It's not like before."

Joining Forces

Chad's deployment of troops has helped Nigeria better contain Boko Haram. In Nigeria, local government areas that are held (■) or partially held (■) by Islamist insurgents



Source: Vigilante Group of Nigeria



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Nigeria says its army is penetrating Sambisa, the forest encampment where Boko Haram originally took some of the 276 schoolgirls it kidnapped in Chibok last April. In a televised news conference this month, President Jonathan said he hopes the campaign will free a few of the remaining 219 captive girls.

Until recently, Nigeria has freed very few of Boko Haram's hostages, its army

often waiting days to respond to attacks. But that is changing.

A separate group of 162 hostages was held for three weeks this year, in a makeshift jail in northeastern Nigeria, said one of the hostages, 45-year-old Amina Yusuf, who was kidnapped in late January. Last Tuesday, Ms. Yusuf said she peeked out a window to see that the captors had fled. Nigerian soldiers, led by local musket-wielding hunters, rescued the group, she said in an interview.

Officials have warned that the multinational coalition might not last. In his interview, President Jonathan guessed that operations will remain somewhat fractured: "I don't expect that all of us will come together, no," he said. "Chadians will be fighting from that end. The Cameroonians will also be fighting from that end."

Chad shed its reluctance to get involved after the fighting encroached on its livestock business. Chad's cattlemen traditionally drive their herds on foot through a sliver of Cameroon and into Nigeria, where the animals are trucked to cities like Lagos, the country's commercial capital. The livestock industry employs more than a third of Chadians and accounts for more than half its total exports, according to the country's

Ministry of Animal Resources.

But Boko Haram fighters have taken to stealing cattle and kidnapping or killing herders as they pass through militant-held territory in Nigeria. The Chadian Finance Ministry reports 8,000 head of cattle lost to the militants. In January, Nigeria's government said it had uncovered a Boko Haram plot to commandeer cows, stuff them with bombs, then walk them into crowded areas. Herders simply don't risk the trip.

The result is a surfeit of cattle in Chad's markets. A 900-pound humpbacked Chadian steer sold for some \$615 in Nigeria six months ago; now cattlemen are lucky to get \$350 for it in N'Djamena.

Chad has very little manufacturing of its own, and its consumers are fed, clothed and housed with imported goods that often transit the Cameroonian port of Douala, then travel by rail and truck some 700 miles to N'Djamena.

"The problem is that since Boko Haram started there is no possibility of using that route," said Kordje Bedoumra, Chad's finance minister. "Or if you do, you risk losing your goods."

On a Wednesday afternoon, a diaper dealer in N'Djamena sat glumly on a white plastic chair. "This is the last of my supply," he complained, referencing a pack of 35 Best Baby diapers whose price has risen to \$12.30 from \$8.75.

Across town, a pail-and-tub dealer worried about the 50% price rise Boko Haram had forced on him: "The thing people don't understand is why Nigeria won't fight Boko Haram," said Mohammed Abakar. "Why are they waiting for Chad to fight them?"

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