

Gombe state's capital has accepted hundreds of internally displaced people from the neighbouring states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. Extreme violence has led some 250,000 civilians to flee their homes and find refuge in safer areas, staying mainly with host families. UNHCR / H.Caux, March 2014



## BRIEFING PAPER

# Nigeria: Fleeing Boko Haram's relentless terror

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As the world's attention has focused on Boko Haram's kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls in the north-eastern Nigerian town of Chibok, other aspects of the Islamist group's terror have been largely overlooked. Not least among them, its brutal violence has caused significant forced displacement in the north-east of the country and beyond.

Nigeria's National Commission for Refugees (NCFR) recently made data available to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) showing that as many as 3.3 million people have been internally displaced in the country by violence, including at least 250,000 people who have fled armed conflict perpetrated by Boko Haram. [IDMC's Global Overview](#), published on 14 May, reported that Nigeria had the largest displaced population in Africa and the third largest in the world behind Syria and Colombia.

The mass abduction of the schoolgirls and unrelenting attacks on civilians have served to highlight the security and geopolitical threat Boko Haram poses to Nigeria and the wider region. The scale of the internal displacement it has provoked should also be cause for the most serious concern.

Nigeria has ratified the African Union Convention for the Assistance and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, also known as the Kampala Convention. It has also been developing a national policy on internal displacement, but the process has lost momentum at the final stage. Such a framework is crucial

to guide the response to the displacement crisis Nigeria faces. It should be adopted and implemented as a matter of urgent priority.

### What is Boko Haram, and what threat does it pose?

Boko Haram took up arms against Nigeria's government in 2002, with the aim of establishing an independent Islamic state. It initially targeted government and religious facilities in the north-eastern states of Bauchi, Borno, Kano and Yobe, but it has since expanded its activities to other areas, carrying out increasingly frequent and sophisticated attacks against the civilian population.

The group's use of suicide attacks, bombings and raids have spread to most northern states and south towards Abuja, and its targets have become almost exclusively civilians. It has looted villages, killed and kidnapped residents, used forced conscription and abducted women and girls.

Boko Haram also seems to be trying to establish a transnational presence or to acquire greater international visibility. Indications include the 2011 attack against the UN Compound in Abuja, cross-border kidnappings, alleged contacts with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab, and its reported presence in Niger, Cameroon, and Mali.

It is likely that these developments have as much to do with group's efforts to service its logistical needs and advance its domestic political aims, but it has had a significant impact on regional stability and human security. It has also been a factor in

straining political relations between Nigeria and neighbouring Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Given the group's growth in ambition, capability and reach, comparisons with the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and Central Africa are not unwarranted.

The government's strategy to combat Boko Haram has been narrow and short-sighted from the outset. It launched a military crackdown in 2003, pushing most of the group's members into neighbouring countries, only to see them re-organise and re-emerge stronger and better armed after a period of relative peace that ended in 2009.

The government's counterinsurgency operations and use of force have increased since 2013, exacerbating violence and displacement in the region. The declaration of a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states in May 2013, and the creation of civilian self-defence groups known as civilian joint task forces (CJTF), have also aggravated the spiral of violence and pushed this formerly urban group into isolated rural areas.

Boko Haram's attacks have continued in the north-east since the state of emergency was imposed, and they have escalated in frequency and impact since the beginning of 2014, resulting in the death of at least 3,000 people. In a region the size of Greece, nearly 50 per cent of the population has been affected by the conflict.

### Patterns and scale of internal displacement linked to Boko Haram

Insecurity, poor roads and the insurgents' destruction of communications infrastructure hamper the collection of data on internal displacement. Despite the limited capacity, how-

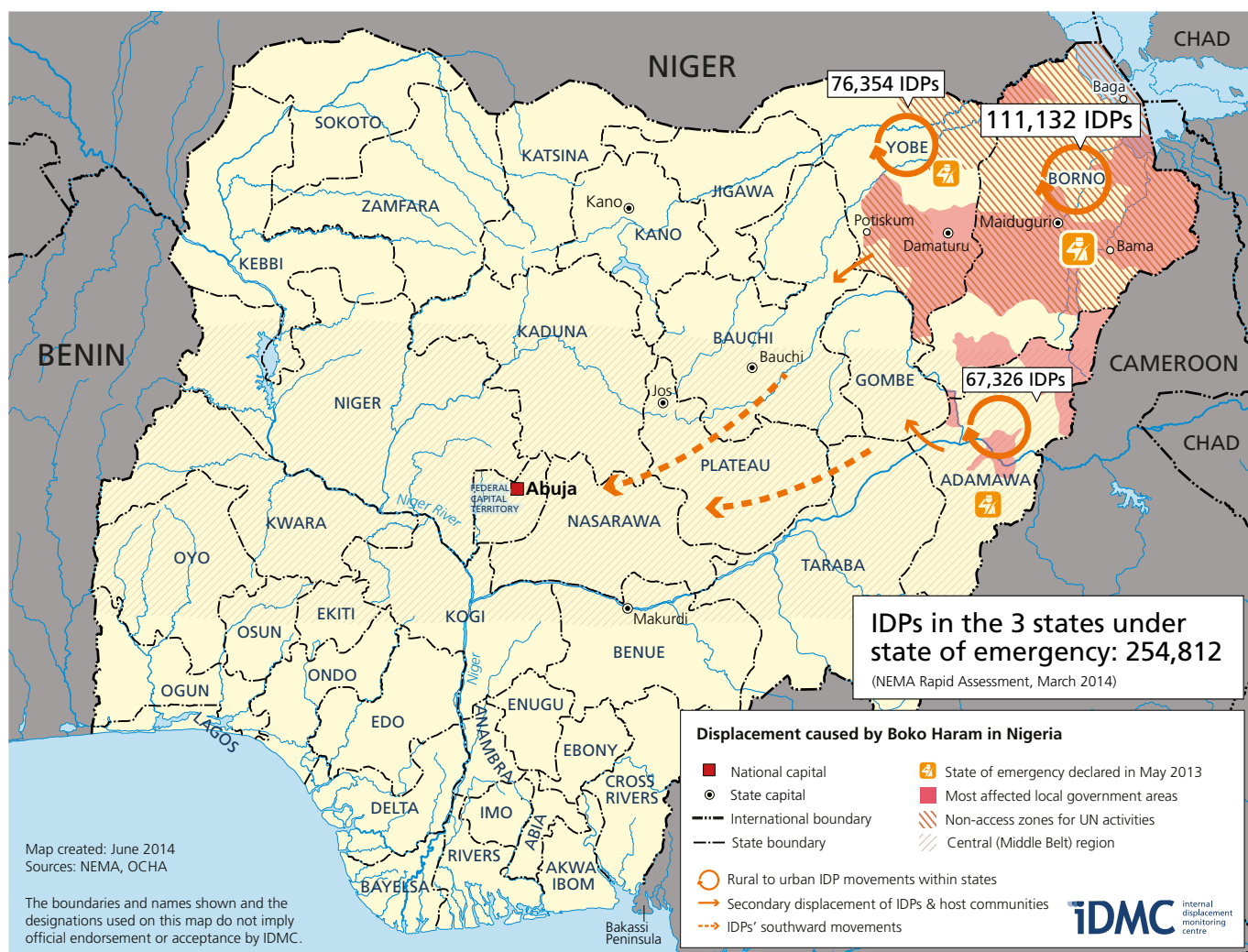
ever, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), NCFR, and international agencies are making increasing amounts of information available.

This has led to a better understanding of displacement patterns, three of which emerge. The first is of internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing to the south of the country in the footsteps of economic migrants. The second is of people fleeing from rural to urban areas within their states, and the third is of the secondary displacement of both IDPs and host communities who move once again when their resources have been depleted.

The level of destruction undermining physical security and livelihoods has instilled deep fears in the affected populations, significantly reducing the possibility of returns. This is likely to lead to protracted displacement, unless people can integrate successfully in their places of displacement or find other safe haven within Nigeria or abroad. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many IDPs aspire to integrate locally in their places of refuge, whether in the north-east or the south.

According to NEMA figures, Boko Haram's recent surge in violent attacks on civilians and the army's response forced at least 25,000 people to flee their homes between May 2013, when the state of emergency was imposed, and March 2014. Borno has been the worst-affected affected state with 111,000 IDPs, followed by Yobe with 76,354 and Adamawa with 67,000.

This is a decrease of 40,000 since the end of 2013, when NEMA reported 290,000 IDPs in this region, but it is believed to be result of secondary displacement to neighbouring states such as Bauchi and Gombe rather than IDPs returning to their homes. Estimates rarely capture secondary displacement and



return movement are equally unaccounted for in the context of scarce data collection on IDPs.

## Suffering amid the violence

There are no agencies on the ground focused on documenting human rights violations in north-eastern Nigeria, but reports have emerged of the killing and maiming of civilians; forced recruitment and abduction; rape and sexual violence; and forced marriage. Many children have been orphaned or separated from their families during displacement. There is a pressing and growing need for systematic protection monitoring and the documentation of such abuses.

Displacement and humanitarian needs are mounting, but assistance is not, leaving both IDPs and their host communities without access to the basic necessities of life. IDPs' access to food in Borno and Yobe states is dire.

As is often the case in situations of widespread insecurity and violence, the displacement caused by Boko Haram and the army's operations against it has reduced people's ability to feed themselves both directly and indirectly. Not only have IDPs exhausted their own supplies, making them dependent on their hosts' resources, but over 60 per cent of the region's farmers have been displaced just before the start of the planting season, making food crops scarcer and setting the scene for protracted shortages. Both IDPs and host families have increasingly resorted to negative and unsustainable coping strategies as a result. Some have reduced their food intake from three meals to one a day, and host communities have resorted to eating grain set aside for sowing.

At least 37 per cent of primary health facilities in areas under the state of emergency have shut as a result of the violence, and in the worst-affected areas none at all are thought to be open. Boko Haram has stolen medical supplies and reportedly displaced, kidnapped and killed health workers. Those facilities still open are overwhelmed, leaving both IDPs and host communities with little or no access to health care. Aside from its impact on physical health, the extreme violence has also taken a heavy psychological toll, leaving many people in need of trauma counselling and psychosocial support.

Populations affected by the conflict lack access to water and sanitation facilities across the north-east, with IDPs living in settlements in Borno and Adamawa, and those sheltering in schools particularly affected.

Property, be it homes, shops, businesses or public infrastructure, has suffered extensive damage and destruction. Many IDPs do not have a home to go back to, and with host communities also hit, spontaneous displacement sites have started to spring up in Adamawa and Borno states. NEMA has set up 11 camps in southern Benue state, but it is unclear if they are hosting people fleeing Boko Haram's violence in the north or those displaced by more local inter-communal violence.

Boko Haram attacks on schools have forced the government to close many institutions and have led to significant reductions in enrolment. The number of classrooms available has reportedly been further reduced as they are occupied by IDPs. Few displaced children attend school, with some being taken out of education to help their families in the struggle to make ends meet.

## Mixed migration and an increasingly divided country

Nigeria is broadly split between its Christian south and Muslim north, separated by a mixed central region known as the Middle Belt. The predominantly Muslim north-eastern states have historically been estranged from the rest of the country and have received little or no government support, leaving them relatively underdeveloped. Scarce resources, energy shortages and desertification have made poverty and exclusion worse still, leading to significant population frustrations and movements southwards.

Many of those fleeing Boko Haram's violence have made for the bustling cities of the south, mirroring the migration of others seeking economic opportunities there. IDPs have joined economic migrants in the slums and satellite towns around large cities, most notably Abuja. As experience elsewhere has shown, IDPs who migrate to large urban centres tend to become invisible and rarely receive support as they struggle to integrate in new and often hostile environments.

The future for Nigeria's IDPs is currently bleak. The country is ever more divided, and there are concerns that increasing violence in the north, much of it targeting Christian civilians, will spread to the Middle Belt and further south. Data is limited, but it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of people have already been displaced in the region over the past 15 years, and an influx of IDPs or the arrival of Boko Haram could set a powder keg alight.

There are also fears that violence will increase in the run-up to presidential elections in February 2015, aggravated by reports that the Nigerian electoral commission is considering suspending the vote in areas under the state of emergency because of insecurity.

In this uncertain and volatile context, Nigeria's IDPs are in urgent need of protection and assistance, the provision of which requires the concerted engagement of both national authorities and the international community. The adoption and implementation of a policy on internal displacement would be a significant step in the right direction, establishing a solid framework for this to take place. It would clearly define roles and responsibilities, and it would provide a degree of predictability for IDPs' who are likely to remain in limbo in a country suffering increasing violence and division. It would also ensure that they remain on the radar as they seek durable solutions to their plight, and it would contribute to preparing for and preventing future displacement.

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