

Child Alert

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00:01 GMT 13 APRIL



Missing Childhoods

The impact of armed conflict
on children in Nigeria and beyond

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Child Alert is a briefing series that presents the core challenges for children in a given crisis location at a given time. This issue focuses on Nigeria, a country that has just made history with its recent peaceful elections, but also a country where brutal acts of violence – many of them targeting women and children – are often in the headlines. As the country starts a new chapter in its history, UNICEF urges the new authorities to put children and their safety at the heart of the national agenda.

Throughout northeast Nigeria and across the border regions in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, children are in critical danger. Insecurity caused by the conflict between the armed group *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad*, commonly known as 'Boko Haram', military forces and civilian self-defence groups in northeast Nigeria has escalated into a worsening humanitarian crisis.

The conflict has forced thousands of people from their homes. Countless numbers of children, women and men have been abducted, abused and forcibly recruited, and women and girls have been targeted for particularly horrific abuse, including sexual enslavement. Villages and towns have been looted and destroyed. Schools have been attacked. The conflict is exacting a heavy toll on children, affecting not just their well-being and their safety but also their access to basic health, education and social services.

Forced to run for their lives

More than 1.5 million people have fled their homes due to the violence. This includes 1.2 million displaced inside Nigeria and around 200,000 who have crossed into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger after their villages were attacked or threatened.

The number of children forced from their homes has more than doubled in the past year, reaching 800,000 children.

The vast majority of the displaced – more than 880,000 – are staying with host communities with little access to humanitarian support, putting additional strains on already stretched health, education and social services.



Refugees and internally displaced populations

Nigeria: 1,235,294

Niger: 100,000

Chad: 41,300

Cameroon: 146,000



Rose (right) watched while members of Boko Haram attacked her village and began killing the men who lived there, including her husband. As she fled into the bush with her nine children, she caught sight of her home being set ablaze. “We didn’t bring anything with us. We just ran,” she said. Her 2-year-old son passed away while they were in hiding. “He died from the stress,” Rose explained. Now she and her children are living in a camp for internally displaced people in Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. Even though she knows she has lost her home and cattle, Rose longs to go home. “I want to go home and harvest so we can eat.”

Children targets and weapons of war

Since 2009, when the Boko Haram group made a marked turn towards violence, at least 15,000 people have been killed, with more than 7300 killed in 2014 alone. In recent months, Boko Haram attacks have increased in frequency and brutality, killing more than 1,000 civilians since the beginning of the year.

Children have become deliberate targets, often subjected to extreme violence – from sexual abuse and forced marriage to kidnappings and brutal killings.

Children have also become weapons, made to fight alongside armed groups and at times used as human bombs, including a case of young girl sent to her death with a bomb strapped to her chest in Maiduguri.



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Education under attack

According to statistics from UNESCO, the number of children of primary age not attending school in Nigeria has increased from 8 million in 2007 to 10.5 million— the highest figure in the world. Nearly 60 per cent of these children are in the north of the country. As the conflict continues, this staggering number is likely to increase further.

The conflict has made it extremely difficult for many children in Nigeria and the region to access school.

In northeast Nigeria, students and teachers have been deliberately targeted. More than 300 schools have been severely damaged or destroyed and at least 196 teachers and 314 school children were killed in the period between January 2012 and December 2014.

In communities that are hosting displaced or refugee populations in Nigeria and surrounding countries, schools are overcrowded and struggle to accommodate the large influx of newcomers.

Above: When members of Boko Haram attacked 13-year-old Aisha's hometown in Borno State, they killed her father and abducted her mother. She fled with an older sister to the Damare camp for internally displaced people in Yola, where she goes to school and receives counselling. "I enjoy the school here," she said, but I still want to go back to my village."

Grave violations against children

The abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, a rural town in Borno State, on 14 April 2014, captured the world's attention. A year later, more than 200 of these girls remain in captivity. Scores of other girls and boys have gone missing – abducted, recruited by armed groups, forced to flee violence.

Children as young as four years old are being used within the ranks of Boko Haram – as cooks, porters and look-outs. According to accounts by escapees, young women and girls who have been abducted have been subjected to forced marriage, forcible religious conversion, physical and psychological abuse, forced labour and rape. In addition, children have reportedly been recruited by vigilante groups fighting against Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria.

As people flee their homes, a large and growing number of children have been separated from their parents. An assessment conducted in 33 locations in Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria found nearly 2,400 separated and unaccompanied children among a population of nearly 150,000 displaced persons.

“I ran away, alone, when I saw people in my community being slayed; this is what scared me most – not the shooting,” said a 15-year-old boy who sought refuge in Chad. “I am worried about my parents, I was told my family was killed, but I don’t think that they all died; I think some of them may still be alive.”





Emotional distress

Children are experiencing immense suffering. Many have seen parents, siblings, relatives or neighbours killed, tortured or abducted. Many have had to run for their lives and walk for days to reach safety. Others have been exposed to extreme violence and abuse.

“Some children are very shy,” said Marzia Vigliaroni from COOPI, a UNICEF partner in charge of managing a child-friendly space in Diffa, Niger. “They won’t speak or participate in our activities; they need psycho-social support. We ask them to make drawings of their experience during the attack. They draw people with slit throats and people drowning in the river. This shows us how deeply affected children are. We work with them individually; we try to help them forget the traumatizing events they have experienced and continue their lives like other children and forget what they had to live through.”

Rita, 14, lives with her father, mother and younger sister in Dar es Salaam refugee camp in Chad. They fled after their home in Baga, Nigeria, was attacked by Boko Haram in January 2015. Her drawing (left) features all her brothers and sisters; she misses them and doesn’t know whether they are alive or dead.

“Even though in our family we all have our differences, if one needs help family will be always there for you. No one else will help you, but your family will. And when you have your mother around, you do not [need to be] worried about anything. But if she is missing... you are worried the whole time,” says Rita.



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Threats of disease outbreaks

In the areas worst affected by the violence in northeast Nigeria, less than 40 per cent of health facilities remain operational. Health workers have fled, leaving families with limited access to health services such as routine immunization and maternal and child care, and increasing the risk of malaria, measles and diarrhoea.

Water supplies have been damaged and contaminated as a result of attacks on villages. Among the displaced and host families, access to safe water and latrines is limited and hygiene conditions are precarious.

The Lake Chad region is prone to cholera outbreaks. In 2014, some 37,000 cholera cases were registered in Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria, resulting in 760 deaths. The threat of a cholera epidemic this year is real, especially during the rainy season starting in June.

In Nigeria, where polio is still endemic – although there have been no new cases since July 2014 – the number of children missing out on polio vaccination because of insecurity increased from 778,000 in November 2014 to more than 1.1 million in January 2015.

Malnutrition a constant danger

Northern Nigeria accounts for half of the malnourished children under five across the entire Sahel region – 2.1 million children out of 5.8 million.

Alarming rates of malnutrition have been observed in the areas worst affected by the crisis, such as northeast Nigeria, Diffa in Niger and Minawoa in Cameroon. In some refugee camps, screenings among newly arrived children reveal global acute malnutrition rates of 18 per cent, which is above the emergency threshold of 15 per cent.



Scaling up life-saving support

Across the Lake Chad region, UNICEF has stepped up its humanitarian assistance to children and their families who have been displaced by the crisis. This includes providing clean water and life-saving health services, restoring access to education by creating temporary learning spaces, delivering therapeutic treatment to malnourished children and providing children with psychological support.

Provision of assistance to populations affected by the conflict – especially children, who are the most vulnerable – depends on humanitarian aid agencies having safe unrestricted access to affected areas, and on civilian populations being able to safely access that assistance.

Call to action

Insecurity and lack of funding are constraining UNICEF's ability to reach affected children. UNICEF appeals to parties to the conflict to allow humanitarian access. UNICEF also urges the international community to increase its support to aid agencies working to alleviate the suffering of civilian populations.

Children need to be kept out of harm's way. All parties to the conflict need to uphold their obligations under international law. This means stopping attacks on schools and returning abducted children to their families. Children used in the fighting need also to be demobilized and transferred to the care of child protection services so they can be reunited with their relatives.

After peaceful elections, and as Nigeria enters the next phase of its history, it is crucial that the new authorities place the safety of children at the heart of the national agenda.

UNICEF has received only 15 per cent of the US\$26.5 million required for its humanitarian response in Nigeria for 2015.

In the neighbouring countries:

- UNICEF has received 17 per cent of its overall humanitarian funding needs in Cameroon (out of US\$40.2 million)
- 2 per cent of its overall humanitarian funding needs in Niger (out of US\$42.5 million)
- 1 per cent of its overall humanitarian funding needs for Chad (out of US\$63.1 million)

UNICEF Response

Child protection:

So far, over 60,000 children have received psychological support in the four countries affected by the conflict – to help them cope with their experiences. This includes 45,000 in Nigeria, more than 4,500 in Cameroon, nearly 10,000 in Niger and over 700 in Chad.

Education:

Since the beginning of 2015, UNICEF has helped more than 40,000 refugee and displaced children access education.

In Chad, UNICEF is supporting the opening of schools in the Dar Es Salaam Refugee camp. Nearly 2,000 children now have the access to 12 temporary learning spaces created by UNICEF in the camp, with recreational, teaching and learning materials.

In Niger, about 14 semi-permanent classrooms are being built to strengthen the capacities of 10 schools integrating more than 3,000 displaced children, as well as children from communities that are hosting families who have been forced to flee their homes.

In Cameroon, about 5,000 refugee children have been integrated in local schools. In the Minawao camp, UNICEF provided 7,000 school kits and 70 recreational kits. Learning and teaching materials were provided to cover the needs of 10,000 children in schools hosting internally displaced children.

Nutrition:

About 8,000 malnourished children under 5 have received treatment and therapeutic food that was provided by UNICEF in northeast Nigeria and in Niger.

Vaccination:

In March, 200,000 volunteers and partners joined efforts with UNICEF to vaccinate some 59 million children against polio and provide other health interventions, with a special focus on displaced children in the states of Borno and Yobe.

So far, nearly 900,000 children have been vaccinated against measles in Northeast Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon and almost 1.8 million children against polio in North East Nigeria, Cameroon and Niger.



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Nigeria, 2015

On 17 March, Alia, 10, covers her face with a folder while standing in front of a wall mural of an aeroplane, in a camp for internally displaced people, in Yola, the capital of Adamawa, a state in the country's northeast.

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April 2015