

# US-backed Nigerian military massacres hundreds in Shia minority

By Thomas Gaist  
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Nigerian government forces massacred civilian members of the Shia religious community in Nigeria's Kaduna State last week, killing more than 1,000 and injuring thousands more in a protracted slaughter that lasted from December 12 to December 14.

Soldiers systematically shot civilians at as many as three different sites, attacking the sect's burial ground, the home of its leader in Gyellesu, and the sect's Hussainiyya Baqiyyatullah religious center, according to witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch

"The Nigerian military's version of events does not stack up. It is almost impossible to see how a roadblock by angry young men could justify the killings of hundreds of people. At best it was a brutal overreaction and at worst it was a planned attack on the minority Shia group," Human Rights Watch's Africa chief Daniel Bekele said.

Dozens of the wounded continued to die in military detention centers without any medical care, Ibrahim Musa, a spokesperson for the Shia sect, said Monday. Nigerian forces buried hundreds of the bodies in mass graves, according to the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC).

The victims were members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, led by a prominent Nigerian cleric named Sheikh El-Zakzaky. Zakzaky was shot four times by Nigerian forces during the December 14 raid. At least one of Zakzaky's sons was also killed during the raid, the fourth of his children to be killed by Nigerian state forces. Three of Zakzaky's sons were killed during a previous raid in July 2014 by the Nigerian military, along with dozens of other members of the IMN.

The Nigerian troops bulldozed buildings used by the IMN, including at least one mosque, according to evidence cited by the Nigerian Human Rights Commission. During a previous crackdown on the IMN in 2007, state forces demolished a large compound run by the group, including a health facility and a school.

The government claims that the raid was carried out after members of the Shia sect blocked a convoy that included the head of the Nigerian army. Western media have promoted a pro-government account of the incident, focusing on the supposed threat that the IMN may emerge as a violent Islamist insurgency in response to the killings.

Analysts cited in African media have rejected these claims, noting that IMN is essentially a dissident faction of the Nigerian elite. "Nigeria's small Shi'ite minority is generally well integrated within Nigerian society" and have "little affinity with Boko Haram's ultraconservative Sunni fighters" strategy analyst Roddy Barclay told Africa Practice.

The raid comes just months after the election of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, who has taken power with the backing of the Obama administration and the US military. Buhari had previously been head of state in Nigeria after leading one of the series of military takeovers of the Nigerian government that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Buhari has come to power promising aggressive measures to "stabilize the system" amid an intensifying social crisis, including growing mass unemployment and shortages of fuel and other basic commodities.

Buhari hailed "strong support from friends abroad" in his inaugural address, in a barely veiled reference to the support extended to his All Progressives Congress party by the consulting firm AKPD, a firm which is owned by President Obama's close advisor David Axelrod. Buhari's first act in office has been to establish a massive new military facility in the northern city of Maiduguri, as part of broader plans to militarize the northern region in the name of fighting Boko Haram.

The US-backed Buhari administration has thus far maintained virtual silence in relation to the military massacre, even as the body count has risen far beyond the government's original claims that only dozens were killed during the raid.

Buhari's return to power has taken place against the backdrop of a growing US military intervention throughout West Africa in particular. The past year has seen an increased buildup of US and NATO forces in the countries surrounding the Lake Chad basin, including the invasion of northern Nigeria earlier this year by a Western-backed multinational army led by Chadian and Cameroonian forces, all justified under the fraudulent banner of the "fight against Boko Haram."

In July 2015, Obama and Buhari met personally to discuss "US-Nigeria cooperation to advance a holistic, regional approach to combating Boko Haram" during an official visit by Buhari to Washington, DC. At the time, Obama praised the

ex-military dictator Buhari for his “reputation for integrity” and for his “very clear agenda to bring safety and security and peace to his country.”

Buhari subsequently met with Vice President Biden to discuss joint policies to “unlock the full potential of the Nigerian economy.”

US Ambassador Entwistle said on Monday that the US government would offer incentives for US firms to invest in Nigeria, according to the *Vanguard*. Entwistle made his remarks during a visit to Nigeria, where he met with GM executives who recently announced hundreds of millions in new investments in Africa’s largest economy.

The US presence in West Africa has increasingly focused on Nigeria, which is the continent’s most populous country, largest economy, and largest oil producer. The US military’s Africa Command (AFRICOM) held naval drills off the coast of Nigeria’s largest city of Lagos in the spring of 2014, drills that were joined by naval units from some 20 NATO and West African governments, including a large contingent of German forces.

In May 2014, Obama administration sent teams of military advisors and covert operatives to Nigeria in the name of retrieving victims of a mass kidnapping by Boko Haram.

Senior Obama administration officials told the *New York Times* that the White House was preparing to launch new military interventions in Nigeria in May of this year. The plans were leaked by the White House staffers to coincide with the inauguration of Buhari as president.

Earlier this month, Pentagon officials told the *Times* that the US plans to build a new large military base designed to support operations throughout the West African region, which will function as a central hub for a web of smaller bases manned by US Special Forces and intelligence operatives. In October, a contingent of some 300 US troops began deploying to reinforce the US presence in Cameroon.

The European powers are piggybacking on the US military drive, seeking to reassert their interests in their former colonies.

The British government is moving forward with plans to double the number of UK military trainers in Nigeria, increasing the total number of British forces to 300, UK Defense Minister Michael Fallon said on Monday, after meeting Nigerian officials for discussions about the fight against Boko Haram and security policy, according to Nigeria’s *Vanguard*.

“Britain and Nigeria are both democracies; we are free peoples, free to choose our governments. These terrorists—ISIS, Boko Haram—they are opposed to us, our ways of life and they need to be defeated. So, we have been discussing today what more Britain can do,” Fallon said.

Over 130 British troops are already inside Nigeria providing training in “infantry skills, civil-military affairs, media operations, command and leadership, and support to Nigerian military training schools,” according to a statement by

Nigeria’s Ministry of Defense. London will also deploy Royal Air Force units to train the Nigerian air force in counterinsurgency methods, Fallon said.

Before last week’s raid, Shia minorities in the north have themselves been subject to attacks by Boko Haram, even as the government has militarized large areas of the country in the name of protecting the population from the militants. These attacks have convinced many Shia that Boko Haram functions largely as a tool of the government.

The killings have already stirred up tensions across a much wider area stretching to the Middle East. An Iranian military blog post vowed revenge against Nigeria’s “puppet government” in response to the massacre, and mass demonstrations were held in Tehran this week protesting the raid.

The supposed struggle against extremism is being employed to legitimize a massive expansion of imperialist military operations throughout the continent. The Western powers are seeking to reimpose direct colonial rule across all of Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. These efforts are enabled by close the collaboration of the national bourgeois elites, their national militaries, and other local proxy forces such as the Islamist militias mobilized by Washington to spearhead the overthrow of the Libya government during the 2011 war.

The total number of operations by AFRICOM grew from 170 in 2008 to 550 by 2013, according to statistics presented by its commander, General David Rodriguez. By 2013, US forces were operating in 49 African countries.

In addition to the massive base at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, US forces operate out of a constantly growing web of bases in Gabon, Kenya, Mali, Morocco, Tunisia, Namibia, Senegal, Uganda and Ethiopia. The US opened new counterterrorism training program in Tunisia in early 2014. In support of French operations during the 2013 Mali war, US Special Forces were dispatched to Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Senegal.

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