

# Reaching the most vulnerable?

The Protection Crisis in the Lake Chad Basin

**The Boko Haram insurgency claimed the lives of more than 3,500 civilians in 2015, and displaced approximately 2.6 million people. Actors in the region are unable to sufficiently respond to the needs of people affected by violence, and even less action is taken to prevent further violations. It is imperative that concrete measures are taken to address the protection needs of affected communities in the Lake Chad Basin.**

## Boko Haram: violence against civilians

Since Boko Haram escalated its violent attacks in 2009, at least 20,000 related civilian deaths have been reported. The total scale of the group's violence against civilians is considered among the highest of any armed group in Africa. Despite more than a year of regional military operations against the group, attacks by Boko Haram on civilians continue in the Lake Chad Basin (including north-eastern Nigeria, northern Cameroon and areas around Lake Chad in Niger and Chad). With the Nigerian Army gradually re-gaining control over territories, Boko Haram has shifted its tactics to irregular attacks, including suicide bombings, abductions and assassinations.

Targeting women and girls, Boko Haram is estimated to have abducted more than 2,000 women and girls since 2009, subjecting them to sexual violence, slavery and forced marriages, using them for recruitment and logistics, and as suicide bombers.

Analysis by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) indicates that while Boko Haram has caused extreme harm in terms of civilian deaths, its impact is even greater in terms of causing displacement. Nearly twice as many people will be displaced per reported fatality by Boko Haram compared to what is reported from the Syrian civil war. This disparity between fatalities and scale of displacement results from a combination of people fleeing when they hear of violence rather than when directly exposed, underreporting of fatalities, and the prevalence of attacks leading to a loss of livelihoods, and not necessarily a loss of lives.

## Limitations to humanitarian access

As of February 2016, more than 2.4 million people have been displaced across the Lake Chad Basin due to Boko Haram-related insecurity. The vast majority – 1.9 million – are internally displaced in north east Nigeria,

with the rest seeking refuge in neighbouring Cameroon, Niger and Chad. Actual figures of displacement across the region are likely higher than reported, as most displaced persons either integrated with host communities or settled within remote or insecure areas that are hard to access.

NRC's analysis of the dynamics of displacement in Borno and Yobe States of Nigeria indicates that about 85% of the people displaced by the crisis remain in rural areas and face significant restrictions on access to basic services due to insecurity. The economic situation of the affected households has significantly informed their decisions on where to settle. For instance, relatively wealthier IDP households have largely settled in urban areas such as in Maiduguri, Borno as they are more able to cope with the higher costs of living. The economic status of households has further informed their decisions on whether to settle in camps or outside of camps, with relatively wealthier households venturing outside of IDP or refugee camps.

Across northeast Nigeria, only eight percent of IDPs are estimated to be in formalized settlements. The vast majority of IDPs live in urban host communities, insecure locations or remote and hard-to-access areas.

The humanitarian response in the region has only to a limited degree been informed by such analysis. It has largely focused on IDP settlements in urban centres, with only a limited push to expand operations to rural areas. This has led to gaps in understanding the full scale of the crisis and the risk environment, and affected humanitarian actors' ability to identify and reach the most vulnerable.



Photo: NRC/Ingrid Prestetun

## Refugee and IDP returns

The return of Nigerian refugees from neighbouring countries also raises concern. As of April 2016, an estimated 64,000

refugees have returned to Nigeria from neighbouring countries. Some of the reported returns have raised concerns over their voluntariness, safety and dignity of the returnees, as well as insufficient coordination with humanitarian actors to ensure adequate steps are taken to receive and support the returnees.

Of further concern are the attempts to relocate IDPs and induced IDP returns to areas that are not yet deemed safe. The Nigerian government has consistently announced plans to close existing IDP camps in northeast Nigeria and facilitate IDPs' return to their places of origin. The imbalance between the Government's budget allocations to IDP resettlement compared to the allocations to humanitarian assistance further exemplifies a worrying return agenda.

Rhetoric by senior leadership in Nigeria on the technical defeat of Boko Haram and the return to normalcy in north eastern Nigeria is likely to heighten the Government's urgency to facilitate and encourage IDP returns as an indication of its military success. This is further compounded by a narrow focus on return as the only durable solution within the ongoing humanitarian response.

## Addressing the underlying drivers

The Boko Haram insurgency has deep historical roots and is affecting a traditionally marginalised and underdeveloped region. Acute economic underdevelopment, marginalization, and lack of access to resources in the Lake Chad Basin are known contributors to the insurgency. Further, the water levels of Lake Chad have reportedly dropped by 20% since 1963 due to climate change. This has likely served as an additional conflict driver in the region and a barrier to durable solutions. Humanitarian action provides limited options in addressing such challenges.

According to OECD's overview for 2013-14, only one percent of the nearly \$2.5 billion that Nigeria received in official development assistance was allocated to humanitarian assistance. This indicates that the greatest potential for investment initiatives addressing the underlying factors feeding Boko Haram lies in development funding.

Current humanitarian interventions scarcely address underlying barriers to the realization of human rights within communities and achievement of durable solutions to the displacement crisis. While humanitarian actors can and should do more to ensure the integration of protection as part of humanitarian programmes, development actors focusing on long-term engagement within the Lake Chad Basin should launch transitional initiatives addressing the drivers of conflict.



Construction of temporary shelters in Bakasi camp, Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria.

Photo: NRC/Ingrid Prestetun

## NRC recommendations:

### Responding to imminent protection threats

- The Government of Nigeria at federal and state levels, as well as regional authorities in the Lake Chad Basin, should ensure all returns are voluntary, informed and conducted in adequate consideration of the safety and dignity of displaced populations.
- Humanitarian actors in the Lake Chad Basin should step up efforts to respond to protection issues facing communities in the region, with a special focus on the needs and vulnerabilities of children, women and other vulnerable groups.

### Increased humanitarian access to reach the most vulnerable

- With the support of UN OCHA, humanitarian actors must work to reach areas inaccessible due to insecurity in order to better assess and meet the needs of these communities.
- The humanitarian community through the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) should urgently develop a common position on principled delivery of humanitarian assistance in north east Nigeria.

### Addressing the underlying drivers of the crisis

- Development donors, particularly the World Bank, the US and the UK should allocate a larger share of development assistance to conflict-affected areas and establish stronger links with humanitarian organisations aimed at launching transitional initiatives addressing the drivers of conflict.

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