



Ethnic cleansing in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria

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Nigeria conflict: Introduction

Nigeria has never been at ease with itself: social unrest has been one of the trademarks of the country. Resource distribution and power allocation among regions and ethnic groups have consistently created havoc that cannot be forgotten. The Biafra War (July 1967 – January 1970) caused by an ethnic and political conflict, left the African continent with a vivid memory of how delicate the boundaries created by the colonial powers really are. The country also suffered successive alleged and actual military coups up until 1999. Corruption, lack of good governance and absence of the rule of law have been the underlying causes of the problems Nigeria has been facing. The current situation in the country, however, is more problematic than in previous years. Yet it was only after Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls that the international community and the mainstream media started giving the attention that the conflict in Nigeria deserves.

In the central part of Nigeria, the Middle Belt, there has been an ongoing conflict with considerable effects on the society that have only sporadically and haphazardly been reported. The conflict that involves Boko Haram, and other radical Islamic groups, has a religious dimension, which makes it more complicated to deal with. The leaders of Boko Haram have repeatedly reiterated that they want to establish a caliphate of their own. However, the ongoing conflicts in northeastern states and the Middle Belt are always characterized differently: the Middle Belt conflict is said to be an issue of social and environmental justice. However, there are no analyses or opinions about the victims of those conflicts, particularly in the Middle Belt region of the country.

Of course it is within the nature of conflicts to confuse, to mislead and at times to lead to an incomplete analysis and hence incomplete ‘solutions’. In today’s world, where political correctness massively affects the way analysts communicate about certain things, the exclusion of very crucial points has become apparent. This is particularly true when it comes to conflict and the religious component of it. The religious aspect of conflicts might be deliberately avoided in order not to further escalate the violence or to offend partners. However, such an approach cannot be a viable option, as solving conflicts demands comprehensive understanding of the causes, the parties and all characteristics of a given conflict.

The conflict in Nigeria has reached a new phase. Some research indicates that there have been at least indications of *ethnic cleansing* being carried out in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. A recent report on [non-Boko Haram violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria](#) unearthed that there is much more going on in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria than is being reported or portrayed by the media. The main purpose of this article is to summarize the facts on the ground to show the ongoing *ethnic cleansing* in the region. Tangentially it also seeks to highlight this recent report that the World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International released in partnership with Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network (NCSAN) that details the complexity and level of atrocity in the region.

Ethnic cleansing

Ethnic cleansing is one of the most recent concepts under international criminal law. At first, the term was mainly used for discussion among academics, not for judgment by courts of law or as a definition by legal instruments/treaties/covenants. During the 1990s, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) made *ethnic cleansing* a central subject of debate.

In addition to being relatively new, *ethnic cleansing* is also a complex concept to deal with. Its complexity partly emerges from the fact that it has elements that can easily be categorized under other crimes, particularly crimes of genocide. [As rightly noted by Andrew Bell-Fialkoff](#): “Ethnic cleansing at one end is virtually indistinguishable from forced emigration and population exchange, while at the other it merges with deportation and genocide. At the most general level, however, ethnic cleansing can be understood as the expulsion of an ‘undesirable’ population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic or ideological considerations, or a combination of these.” According to [a U.N. Commission of Experts](#), *ethnic cleansing* is “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” In its [1992 Resolution](#), the UN General Assembly declared “ethnic cleansing as a form of genocide.” The International Criminal Court Statute incorporates elements of *ethnic cleansing* under genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Put simply, *ethnic cleansing* describes the expulsion of a competitor or those who differ in race, ethnicity or religion from a given area by employing different unlawful means, the known ones being: murder, destruction of property, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, confinement of civilian population in ghetto areas, forcible removal, displacement and deportation of civilian population, extra-judicial executions, rape and deliberate military or other organized attacks, or threats of attacks, on civilians or even genocide. In analyzing the attacks on the Bosnia-Herzegovinian town of Kozarac (in Prosecutor v. Tadic) the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) saw *ethnic cleansing* as the act or the process of “rounding up and driving out of the area on foot the entire non-Serb population. During the course of the *ethnic cleansing* of Kozarac, many more civilians were beaten, robbed and murdered.”

In Prosecutor v. Plasvic, the Court said *ethnic cleansing* could also include “ethnic separation by force.” Furthermore, in Prosecutor v. Krstic, the court said *ethnic cleansing* can be committed by “forcible transfer.”

Boko Haram – An obstruction to understanding the situation in the Middle Belt region

Discussing the conflict in Nigeria without addressing Boko Haram would render the discussion incomplete. According to the US-based Centre for the National Interest, Boko Haram became the [second deadliest terror group on the planet](#) in 2014. As always, there have been different opinions regarding what motivates Boko Haram. Noting this rhetoric, the Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network (NCSAN) reports, “Within public discourse in Nigeria as well as

scholarly circles, Boko Haram is motivated by religious, ideological factors in addition to relative economic deprivation. Thus, anything un-Islamic should be rejected: Western education, women's empowerment, democracy, Judeo-Christian history and traditions upon which Western civilization is allegedly constructed." The group categorically declared Christians *infidels*. According to NCSAN, Boko Haram also thinks that what they are doing is strategically vital "to inspire other Islamic groups and movements to take up arms against Christians" in Nigeria and beyond.

While the debates on what is behind Boko Haram, its motives, and goals are ongoing, the group has created havoc in the northern as well as central parts of Nigeria. According to data from different sources, violence orchestrated by Boko Haram in the North-East led to the death of thousands of civilians. World Watch Research has reason to believe that the majority of them are Christian civilians. This is compounded by the fact that millions of Nigerians were forced to leave their home. According to NCSAN, "about 3.3 million Nigerians [are] driven from their homes." Data from [World Watch List \(WWL\) 2015](#) show that from 1 November 2013 to 31 October 2014, 2,484 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons by Boko Haram and others. Considering reports that more than 10,000 people were killed in Nigeria by Boko Haram in 2014 alone, of which it could be safely assumed that many are Christians, the figure given by WWL is a conservative one.

In a nutshell, according to NCSAN, "The sect has succeeded in establishing a culture of fear, in addition to carrying out unlawful killings, attacks on churches, media houses, schools and the abduction of about 276 female students from Chibok Government Girls Secondary School on April 14, 2014." The report underlines "more than 70% of the girls abducted are Christians." Considering these horrific acts of violence, the focus of the international community and the mainstream media on Boko Haram is justifiable. However, it does not justify ignoring other regions in the country. The Middle Belt region of the country is either overlooked or forgotten.

Middle Belt region - The Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers

In its report [Migration and Violent Conflict in Divided Societies](#), NCSAN presents the results of its fact finding mission into non-Boko Haram violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.

According to NCSAN, "Under the shadow of Boko Haram, a vicious circle of violence in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria [...] has led to the deaths of thousands of Christians, with hundreds of churches targeted or destroyed." The conflict has displaced many thousands of civilians, mainly Christians, from their homes. The fact that the issue of Boko Haram has attained international attention has tempted the public and the media to assume that the most violent conflicts in parts of Nigeria, especially the ones in Northern Nigeria, are mainly linked immediately and directly to the members of Boko Haram.

NCSAN contests this assertion on the basis of the facts on the ground. According to its research, in the Middle Belt Nigeria, Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers have been behind many atrocities that could be equivalent to the violence being orchestrated by Boko Haram. Furthermore, the research unearthed the causes behind the conflict. The findings

contest the most popular belief about the conflict: that it is due to social justice and environmental degradation. It underlines,

“non-Boko Haram violent conflict [Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers], in addition to the issues of contestation over environmental resources in the context of environmental degradation and migration, is intrinsically inspired by radical Islamic ideology both as purported by the expansionist principle of *darul Islam* and by Boko Haram. It is a principle that divides the world into Islamic and non-Islamic, and the obligation to ensure that the non-Islamic world is brought under Islamic rule.”

This has led to a situation whereby Christians are more or less exclusively being driven out of their ancestral homes, and those who refused and stayed were indiscriminately targeted. The vacated lands are being grabbed by those who are responsible for the displacement. This can be discerned by simply looking at what has happened in some regions and seeing who the victims are. As per the findings of the research, in Benue State the percentage of victims of non-Boko Haram violence is 88 percent Christians compared to 2 percent Muslims. In Taraba State, 70 percent of the victims were Christians compared to 7 percent Muslims. In Nasarawa State, these percentages were 75 percent of the victims being Christians compared to 15 percent Muslims.

Conclusion: Ethnic cleansing

The Middle Belt conflict - wrongly characterized as being only an environmental degradation / resource-based conflict - has mainly Christian victims. Considering the goal of Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers together with details concerning the conflict's victims, it is imperative that analysts change the way they analyze and approach the ongoing problems in the region. There have been continuous attacks against Christians in the Middle Belt to force them to leave their ancestral land. As a result, thousands died, many thousands were evicted, and very many properties were destroyed. It can also be discerned that any Muslim casualties can only be a *collateral damage*, and to some extent occurred in the course of Christian self-defense, as the report indicates. These crimes are, at least, *ethnic cleansing*. After all, *ethnic cleansing* is an act of removing/destroying competitors from a given area through unlawful means. That is what is being done by the Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers.

The crimes in many states in the region show patterns rather than random or spontaneous attacks. Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and settlers rely on sophisticated weapons and use systematic tactics. The crimes are being committed with a plan to remove Christians from the region. This can be shown by the fact that attackers are being settled in those areas where Christians have been removed. The report, used as a main reference in this piece, tells compelling stories based on primary information gathered from the field.

Recommendations in relation to the NCSAN report:

1. Urge the government of Nigeria to conduct an in-depth investigation into the Middle Belt conflict, and bring the perpetrators to justice.
2. Urge the international community to focus on the Middle Belt region in addition to the situation of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria.
3. Urge the UN Human Rights Council to send a Commission of Inquiry to the Middle Belt region. If proof can be given of *ethnic cleansing* as defined under the international criminal law, appropriate action should be taken, including bringing the perpetrators to justice.
4. Enterprises who do business with Nigeria should urge the Nigerian government to thoroughly investigate the violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region and bring the perpetrators to justice on time.
5. Urge the government of Nigeria and the international community to step up their efforts to support those who are affected by the violence in the Middle Belt, and in other parts of northern Nigeria.