

Thursday December 8 2011

## Further notes on Nigerian terrorism

By Edwin Madunagu

I HAVE the feeling that I recently irritated some of my young friends with my long introductory "disquisition" when discussing aspects of the Nigerian terrorism (*Reflections on Nigerian terrorism*) in this column on July 14, 21 and 28, 2011. They felt that I should have gone straight to what I wanted to say on an urgent national problem. They are entitled to their views, and I have, with gratitude, taken note of them.

However, I think I still have to give an explanation, even if in this matter, as in many matters, I have to avoid self-defence. All that I had wanted to drive home in my "disquisition" was that to deal effectively with a phenomenon as serious as contemporary Nigerian terrorism, you have to try to apprehend it, investigate its roots, define and characterise it, and - in particular - see what it has in common with other related phenomena and what makes it new or different. We owe the nation and ourselves the duty to continue to do this whatever breakthrough the Nigerian government announces it had recorded in the fight against terrorism in general and the *Boko Haram* insurgency in particular. History teaches us so.

A second clarification, arising also from private criticism, is the admission that in several articles that had appeared in this column I could only accomplish a fraction of what I had listed ought to be done on the subject. Several factors were usually responsible for this. A more or less "permanent" factor is that what I can do is always a subset of what I believe or know should be done. The other factor is a combination of several sub-factors including time constraint, space constraint, sensitivity to the interest and patience of readers and, of course, sensitivity to the need to avoid the abuse of public forum. With these clarifications I can then say that the present discussion aims at extending my earlier article on the subject of Nigerian terrorism (cited above).

We may begin by taking an inventory of representative ideas and bits of knowledge har-

boured by Nigerians about the *Boko Haram* group and its current armed insurgency; and try to telescope, in slow motion, some of the group's most audacious actions and pronouncements - including, in particular, what the group says about itself. Our guide here is that although the group is not likely to be exactly what it says about itself, it would be fatally wrong to ignore its claims and self-projections. And here we necessarily have to exercise caution: the group may be in factions, or harbour several tendencies some of which may possess the capacity to act independently.

In its issue of Thursday, November 17, 2011, *The Nation* Newspaper carried, in pages two and three, six separate reports and three pictures on *Boko Haram*. The two-page section was titled *Boko Haram and National Security*. One of the pictures shows a number of cars being searched (or "frisked") by soldiers at the entrance to the Transcorp Hotel, Abuja; the other two were those of the Inspector-General of the Police (IGP), and the Chief of Army Staff, respectively. The three pictures re-enforce the attitudes indicated by some of the six stories. I have re-arranged the stories in a particular order: from those that express indignation, to those offering suggestions of immediate response and, then, to those describing the *Boko Haram* and prescribing long-term solutions.

In the first story, titled *Senators seek removal of service chiefs*, the paper reported that senators of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, just back from recess, were so angered over the apparent inability of the Federal Government and its security agencies to halt the *Boko Haram* menace, that they threatened to meet President Goodluck Jonathan over the matter and ask him to dismiss his security chiefs. One of the senators, described as "high-ranking," was reported to have said that the feeling in the Senate cut across party lines. "We cannot continue to live in the nation's capital as if we are in a war-torn country," he said. He lamented the "psychological siege" produced by "the way barricades are being mounted in Abuja." A geopolitical segment of the country,

which includes the nation's capital city and seat of power, as well as harbours the cream of its rulership, is currently gripped by fear. This should not be the case, the senator appeared to be saying.

The second story, with the title *Bomb explodes in Maiduguri*, is an account of a bomb explosion in the capital of Borno State. The explosion took place in the early hours of the morning of Wednesday, November 16, 2011. The newspaper's source is reported to have said that "after the explosion, members of the Joint Task Force (JTF), who were on patrol, rushed to the scene and started shooting into the air" (emphasis mine). The State Commissioner of Police confirmed the report of the explosion, affirmed that there was no casualty and blamed the incident on the *Boko Haram* group, which wanted to "establish itself in the state capital." He promised that the security operatives "would not give them the chance to do that." *Boko Haram* was, therefore, "wasting its arsenal." People should go about their normal business, as the sect's "plans and efforts will be in futility," he concluded.

The story of the Police Commissioner's reaction re-enforces the three pictures I mentioned earlier, and also reminds me of the early coup years in Nigeria's modern history: Any time the people heard "No cause for alarm; the situation is under control; go about your normal business" over the radio, they knew it was a statement of exactly the opposite situation and that they had to "talk" to their feet. And the report of security agents shooting into the air after the *Boko Haram* attack would not surprise anyone. It is the usual reaction of Nigeria's security agents: harassing the victims after the criminals had left. It is a reaction, which frequently results in "stray bullets" hitting innocent people already traumatised by attackers. Victims of unprovoked armed attacks by non-state actors also become "collateral damages" in state reactions that are often senseless.

This whole story re-enforces the opinion that there is indeed a limit to what direct armed confrontation can accomplish in protecting the people in an urban guerilla warfare of the

*Boko Haram* variety, and in a situation where the distance of the state from the people is as it is in Nigeria.

In the third news report, two stakeholders - a retired senior police officer and the leader of an industrial security and safety group - spoke with the newspaper. The retired police officer warned that *Boko Haram* was "beginning to constitute a serious threat that is likely to affect our overall economic fabric, including tourism." In his opinion: "We must find out those behind all this and unmask them. *Boko Haram* can't be taken as fighting Western education when all it uses to perpetrate its acts is totally Western. If, indeed, it is fighting everything Western, its members should be living under the trees. So I believe that it has threatened the Nigerian people enough and it is time for us to really find out who is our enemy."

What the law enforcement officer appeared to be saying can be reconstructed as follows: "The *Boko Haram* group is either irrational and confused or is using its name and ideology as a cover to destroy the country. In either case it is dangerous and must be exposed (so as to be easier to discredit and defeat)." Here, the officer may be making a serious mistake, which is not limited to him or to a small number of people. And the mistake is this: forgetting that the name *Boko Haram* (Western education is forbidden, or is sin) must have been originally given to the group - abusively and derogatorily - by outsiders, by non-members; and that their real name which they repeat in every commune is *political* and includes the notion of war.

The fact that the group may now have implicitly accepted the *Boko Haram* name does not answer my conjecture. The serious suggestion I want to make here is that the name *Boko Haram* should not be taken literally, should not be taken to be a description of the organisation, or, worse still, as indicative of its essence.

• To be continued next Thursday.

# Opinion

## Further notes on Nigerian terrorism (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

THE opening segment of these notes ended, two weeks ago, on Thursday, December 8, 2011, with the simple proposition that, in trying to reach a clearer understanding of the *Boko Haram* insurgency, too much weight should not be placed on the literal meaning of the name the armed group has been given by outsiders: *Western education is sin*. The organisation should rather be seen as an armed Islamist political group, probably factionalised, whose main demands - or aggregate demands - are fairly known, and whose main weapon - terror - is also known. Its audacity has also been demonstrated.

This second and final segment of our notes continues with the survey of ideas and opinions begun in the first segment. *The Nation* Newspaper carried six reports and three pictures on pages 2 and 3 of the issue of Thursday, November 17, 2011, collectively titled *Boko Haram and National Security*. We examined the three pictures and three of the stories in the first segment.

The views of a lady, described as a "Port Harcourt - based safety expert," constitute the fourth report. It is titled *Investing in weapons won't curb terrorism*. The summary of the lady's thesis is embodied in the opening sentence: "The only and most effective weapon that can foil a terrorist is a fellow human being. Human failure, not machine or equipment failure is the sole contributor to each and every successful terrorist act from the beginning of time, to this day. If you do not know what to look out for, how do you approach, prevent or avert it?" She used the case of a Nigerian young man who, about two years ago, allegedly almost blew up a plane heading for an American city. The attempt failed not because the Nigerian was detected by security agents at any of the various airports he passed through (at least one of which is in Europe), but because his bomb could not explode - on account of his own error.

The safety expert again drew attention to the fact that "none of the international investigative bodies involved have blamed any country's equipment for failure, Nigerian or Dutch, because it is well acknowledged that a ma-

chine is only as good as its operator." She then concluded: "With the right training, the man on the street is our best bet in the war on terror. Being taught how to handle suspicious vehicles and persons at a distance, handle situations decisively and alert security agents, buy precious extra minutes which translate into saving more lives and averting potential catastrophes." This is a very valuable piece of education.

In the fifth report titled *Most Boko Haram members disowned their parents*, a former senior bureaucrat of the Borno State government and spokesperson of the Borno State Elders Forum, declared: "What we are seeing is not an external attack. It is not engineered by foreign powers and neither is it some form of inter-tribal or religious clash or whatever." So, *Boko Haram* is not "external," although it has al-Qaeda support; and it is not "inter-religious," although it targets Churches. This picture is either incomplete or incorrect. Either this, or we are dealing with more than one group. In any case, it is an opinion on what *Boko Haram* is not. But on what the group is, the respondent became somewhat vague: "It is some sort of reaction to certain issues which are not well managed by our respective authorities. It was because it was mismanaged by the Nigerian press that you now call them *Boko Haram*."

In other words, if we understand the retired public servant, *Boko Haram* arose from the "mishandling" of some social issues. More specifically, the narrative continues, the group was born about 2001 as a socio-political movement against corruption, injustice and abandonment. Their main enemies were the Nigerian state, the ruling classes and Nigeria's educated elite. *Boko Haram*'s original members were young and rebellious and included their late leader, Yusuf Mohammed. They wanted *Sharia* introduced in Borno State, as was the case in Zamfara State.

When the operation of the *Sharia* in Borno State failed to become a continuous state policy, according to the senior bureaucrat, the group migrated out of the state to a location in Yobe State. This movement was accompanied or preceded by the burning of members' certificates - including Masters Degree Cer-

tificates. In their new location they set up a new headquarters and ran their activities "like any other government." But the group was soon dislodged from their new headquarters. They established another headquarters. They were again dislodged - by security forces. This action-and-reaction continued until the group decided to start living among the population, rather than living in physical seclusion. Some of the communities in which they chose to live were in Maiduguri.

The Borno State elder and former bureaucrat ended with this advice: "Now, any government should know that such a group must be handled with caution. Here is a group who does not want to operate or recognize the existing Nigerian government; they don't want to know the Nigerian Constitution and the Nigerian laws. They don't just want anything Nigeria."

A retired officer of the Nigerian Army who was a military governor told the newspaper in the sixth report titled *Government will lose nothing by talking to them*, that "the incessant violent attacks in the north are functions of the economic injustice where more than 80 per cent of the populace are not sure of three meals a day." The gap between the rich and the poor is widening and "unemployed youths have resorted to violence in expressing their grievances." Accusing the political class of not being sensitive to the plight of the people he estimated that "less than 20 per cent of the country's population control the nation's wealth, while the other 80 per cent are wallowing in abject poverty."

To further enrage the poor, the socially-concerned retired soldier lamented, "the few rich flaunt their ill-gotten wealth with impunity. Go to Abuja and see the kind of structures the politicians are putting on ground. What these politicians spend on buildings is enough to set up cottage industries that would create jobs for the unemployed in their various constituencies". He did not need to say more on this national tragedy that waits for mitigation.

On the question of dialogue, the retired army officer said: "I believe we must dialogue with any group of people that have a problem with Nigeria, be it *Boko Haram*, or the Niger Delta

militants, or the people having problem in Plateau State. Government will lose nothing by talking to them. At the end, government may discover that what is tearing the nation apart is a minor issue that could be easily resolved". This is a clear, though limited, statement of principle, a clear position on strategy, it does not explicitly rule out meeting force with force, nor does it state the limit of dialogue. But dialogue should be employed, because this serious problem may turn out to be resolvable by dialogue.

On the question of who is behind the *Boko Haram* insurgency, the retired army officer insisted that "it is wrong of public affairs analysts to jump into conclusion that a group of Northern politicians are sponsoring terrorist groups in order to make the country ungovernable for President Goodluck Jonathan." To strengthen his argument, he reminded readers that Southern politicians were never accused of sponsoring the Niger Delta militants against late President Yar'Adua; and that the *Boko Haram* insurgency actually started during the late president's administration.

I endorse each of the two parts of the army officer's proposition: refutation of the charge that Northern politicians are sponsoring the *Boko Haram* insurgency "to make the country ungovernable for Jonathan" and the strengthening of his refutation with the Yar'Adua experience. But then, suppose the "public analysts" cited by the army officer say they were "misquoted" or "misunderstood" and that what they actually meant was that some Northern politicians are supporting terrorist groups in order to make the country ungovernable. In this revised charge, "President Goodluck Jonathan" has been removed, "sponsoring" has been replaced by "supporting," and some has been inserted. The charge then becomes: "Some Northern politicians are supporting terrorist groups in order to make the country ungovernable." Would the army officer still reject it. Perhaps, I would myself, not embrace it, but I would not dismiss it as a hypothesis. *Concluded.*

• This column is proceeding on a short break.