

SPOTLIGHT

Displacement in the LAKE CHAD BASIN

An Islamist insurgency that began in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim northern state of Borno in 2009, Boko Haram, soon sparked a regional crisis that spread into neighbouring countries.⁷⁹ Eight years later, the group is still active despite concerted and often heavy-handed campaigns against it by national militaries and the Multi-national Joint Task Force set up in 2012 and made up of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

Boko Haram's violence continued unabated in 2017, with an increase in the number of attacks recorded in Cameroon and Nigeria.⁸⁰ Counterinsurgency operations have also been stepped up. These have caused internal and cross-border displacement not only of civilians but also insurgents, effectively helping to spread the violence. This impact was felt in Cameroon in 2017, where the group's attacks also fuelled internal displacement. The conflict led to 119,000 new displacements in Cameroon, 279,000 in Nigeria, 40,000 in Niger and 5,800 in Chad. There were more than 2.2 million people living in displacement in the Lake Chad Basin as of the end of 2017.

Despite the increase in Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria, a large number of returns to the north-east of the country were recorded during the year. Nigeria, Cameroon and UNHCR also signed a tripartite agreement for the voluntary repatriation of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon back to areas deemed safe.⁸¹ The agreement and the 1951 Refugee Convention both safeguard against forced returns, but Human Rights Watch and others have documented clear violations, such as Nigerian refugees in Cameroon being forcefully trucked back to Nigeria.⁸² UNHCR also denounced forced returns in June and called on the governments of Cameroon and Nigeria to uphold the agreement to facilitate a voluntary process in line with international standards.⁸³

There have also been waves of what the government calls spontaneous returns to north-eastern Nigeria, meaning people going back voluntarily. Instead of returning, they



have found themselves living in various forms of temporary settlements in their local government areas. The Nigerian military has also sealed off areas it deems to be active conflict zones, preventing civilians from returning. Given these circumstances, many of the movements described as returns might more accurately be defined as failed returns or secondary displacements.

Besides clear physical impediments, returnees face other significant obstacles to achieving durable solutions. Many are pastoralists, farmers and fishermen who previously relied on cross-border trade for their livelihoods, which have been severely affected by their loss of access to land and restrictions on their movement.⁸⁴ The heavy security presence in the region and constraints on activities such as fishing, which the militants are said to have infiltrated, have placed an additional burden on returnees, IDPs and their host communities.⁸⁵ People's inability to sustain their traditional livelihoods has fuelled further displacement toward camps and other areas where humanitarian assistance is available, increasing aid dependency and making durable solutions a distant prospect.

A purely military approach will not defeat Boko Haram or end the region's crisis. It is a region that has long been plagued by lack of investment in basic health and education infrastructure and widespread poverty, inequality and political marginalisation. It has also suffered prolonged droughts which, combined with the overuse of water resources, have caused Lake Chad to shrink to a fraction of its size in 50 years.⁸⁶ All of these elements have coalesced to undermine people's livelihoods, and it is in this environment that Boko Haram emerged and has come to thrive and expand. Those factors will also continue to impede the pursuit of durable solutions, leading to protracted displacement that could in turn fuel further conflict.