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Nigerian Forces Oppose Militant Islamic Sect

Nigerian troops raided the primary base of operations of the militant Islamic sect known as Boko Haram on July 29, in an operation launched in response to a series of clashes that began when militants attacked a police station three days earlier.

AFP cited police sources that said fighting was concentrated in Maiduguri city, the home base of Boko Haram — an Islamic sect loosely modeled on Afghanistan's Taliban movement. The security forces were sent into the area by President Umaru Yar'Adua with orders to crush the movement "once and for all."



"These people have been organized and are penetrating our society and procuring arms and gathering information on how to make explosions and bombs to force their view on the rest of Nigerians," Yar'Adua was quoted by news services.

Fighting was also reported in other areas, including Yobe state where police reported 43 people killed.

"We are carrying out mortar shelling on the positions of these militants," Colonel Ben Ahnatu, the commander of the operation in Maiduguri, told AFP.

"It's time for action, not just talking."

The leader of the sect, Mohammed Yusuf, had not been located on July 29. Witnesses told Reuters news service that security forces were conducting house-to-house searches in Maiduguri looking for Yusuf and other followers of the group. However, a more recent Reuters story reported that Yusuf's bullet-riddled body had been shown to journalists on July 30, just hours after police said they had captured him. Police said he died in a shoot-out following days of fighting and had not been executed, as some human rights campaigners had charged.

Information Minister Dora Akunyili told the BBC that the government "does not condone extra-judicial killings."

Idris Abdullahi, a reporter from the News Agency of Nigeria, said Maiduguri was basically shut down on July 28. In a telephone interview with the *New York Times*, he said that the streets were deserted and that he had seen "100 bodies" of militants at police headquarters. Some other reports put the death toll as high as 260, though the official figures were much lower — 50 militants and five security officers.

"The economy is paralyzed," said Abdullahi. "Everything is closed down. There is no movement — only the military and police."

An AP report on July 29 noted that the Boko Haram sect's compound has been cordoned off for two days by police and soldiers reinforced by elite troops under the command of Maj. Gen Saleh Maina.

On the 28th, Maina launched a mortar attack on the sect's massive compound, which is believed to stretch for about four kilometers (two and a half miles).



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"The shelling of the strongholds of the religious sect, mosques and operational point must be precise and swift to prevent further loss of life and property in this state," Maina said.

As for exactly who Boko Haram are, AP reports that Boko Haram, means "Western education is sin," but that it is also known as Al-Sunna wal Jamma, or "Followers of Mohammed's Teachings."

Though they are often described as Taliban, the group has no known affiliation with Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

A July 29 Reuters News report headlined "[Q+A-Who are the Islamic sect in northern Nigeria?](#)" also sheds much light on the nature of Boko Haram.

The report notes that Mohammed Yusuf, the sect's late leader, was radically opposed to Western education and advocated the adoption of sharia (Islamic law) in all of Nigeria. His followers claim he was educated in Iran. The group is based in Maiduguri, capital of the northeastern state of Borno, and also has followers in other northern states including Kano, Yobe, Sokoto, and Bauchi. The North of Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, while the South is mostly Christian.

The report also notes that President Yar'Adua has said that Nigerian security agencies have been tracking the sect for several years, and has described them as a "potentially dangerous group" that has been gathering weapons and intelligence that they plan to use in spreading their influence on all Nigerians.

Nigeria, which is the most populous nation in Africa with a population of over 148 million, is almost evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. However, notes the Reuters report, Islamic jurisprudence in Nigeria is based on the moderate Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Such moderate Muslims have little use for the extremist, Taliban-style of Islam advocated by Boko Haram.

Perhaps more significant than his assessment of Boko Haram, Reuters reporter Nick Tattersall noted that the main militant threat in the Sahara (which extends into Northern Nigeria) is seen as al Qaeda's North African wing, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. This group, formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), had its origins in Algeria's civil war in the 1990s.

Moderate Sunni Muslims and Christians have traditionally been able to live in harmony and even govern together effectively. If the majority of Nigerians can hold on to this governing coalition and stem any attempts by outside militants to infiltrate the Muslim North, this important nation can continue to play an important role in Africa's and the world's economy. Nigeria is the 12th largest producer and the eighth largest exporter of petroleum in the world, so the maintenance of stability in Nigeria is beneficial to almost everyone.



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