

Boko Haram and Humanitarian Crisis in North-East Nigeria

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Abstract: Boko Haram insurgency forced some Nigerians to take refuge in neighbouring Cameroon. However, from 2015 through 2017, Cameroon forcibly returned 90,925 Nigerian refugees to unsafe zones in north-east Nigeria. This action by Cameroon is at variance with the principle of nonrefoulement as enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol. The aim of this paper is to find and analyse the factors that led Cameroon to take this step. Also, to portray and analyse the possible implications of the action. This paper used the 6 phases of thematic analysis advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyse data collected from documented sources. It is found that economic, security and lack of enforcement are the factors behind Cameroon's action. Consequently, this decision by Cameroon worsen the already worse humanitarian crisis in north-east Nigeria. Second, it could set a bad precedent for other countries to emulate. Lastly, it could also deteriorate the already fragile relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon.

Key words: Boko Haram • Refugee • Humanitarian Crisis • Non-refoulement

INTRODUCTION

Since 2014, Nigerians have been crossing into Cameroon as refugees seeking protection from suffering and death as a result of Boko Haram insurgency and the counter-insurgency by the Nigerian state. The conflict turned north-east Nigeria into a war-like zone, causing the worse humanitarian crisis in the history of Nigeria. More than 1.8 million Nigerians are internally displaced living in temporary camps, while the statistics of those dispersed across various communities in Nigeria is unknown. As of July 2017, more than 200,000 Nigerian refugees are in countries neighbouring Nigeria from the lake chad region (Cameroon, Chad and Niger republics). Cameroon received the lion's share of the Nigerian refugees. However, from 2015 through 2017 Cameroon has been forcibly repatriating those refugees back to unsafe zones in north-east Nigeria [1].

The aim of this paper is to find and analyse the factors that led the Cameroonian authority to forcibly repatriate those refugees. Also, to portray and analyse the possible implications of violating this principle of nonrefoulement, which is a provision of international law

enshrined in the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees (1951) and its 1967 protocol, which Cameroon is a party.

Boko Haram and Humanitarian Crisis: In 2009, a group named *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad* (meaning: People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), commonly known as *Boko Haram*, launched a violent attack on the Nigerian constituted authorities. Boko Haram is a phrase in Hausa language meaning: the western style of education is forbidden [2]. Boko Haram is known for its quest of denouncing the "secular" Nigerian state and to replace it with Islamic law; particularly in the northern part of the country which is dominated by Muslims. In 2015, the leadership of the Islamic State (IS) accepted allegiance of Boko Haram, which made Boko Haram join the web of international terrorist organisations [3].

Since the commencement of the initial wave of attacks by Boko Haram, 20,000 people were killed, many are kidnapped while so many others are turned handicap. Thousands of vulnerable and less privileged class of people mostly women, children and jobless youth were

used by Boko Haram as suicide bombers. More than 1.8 million people became internally displaced living in temporary camps under critical humanitarian condition; while over 200,000 people fled the country and took refuge in the Lake Chad region neighbours of Nigeria (Cameroon, Chad and Niger). This situation has created the worse humanitarian crisis in the history of Nigeria [4].

Different reasons have been given by different researchers to be the motive behind Boko Haram. Some linked it to religious reasons as identified above, others viewed it as entirely economic or political but sugar-coated with religious reasons for legitimacy [5].

Nigeria-Cameroon Relations: Turbulence in the Nigeria-Cameroon relations did not start with the commencement of Boko Haram insurgency. Ironically, Boko Haram insurgency even brought the old foes into an alliance to fight a common enemy, as the insurgents have been launching attacks on some villages in the extreme-northern province of Cameroon.

Historically, Nigeria and Cameroon came from two distinct colonial backgrounds. The former was colonized by Britain while the latter by France. After the scramble of Africa by colonial powers and subsequent independence, many African countries were left with territorial disputes and civil wars. Nigeria and Cameroon were not exceptions. The two countries were left with a territorial dispute over the oil rich Bakassi peninsula. This territorial dispute turned the two neighbours into foes. In 2002, the International Court of justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Cameroon over the territorial dispute. Bearing in mind this historical scar, both countries have not been getting along well.

However, with the coming of Muhammadu Buhari 2015 as the new president of Nigeria amid the Boko Haram insurgency, he tried to bring all countries sharing border with Nigeria to fight a common enemy as the insurgency has spilled to countries bordering Nigeria in the Lake Chad region; except Benin Republic which is bordering Nigeria in the west.

This effort by the new president resulted into the reinvigorated of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2015. MJTF is a rejuvenated military alliance composed of about 10,000 military personnel from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Benin and Niger to counter the security threat posed by Boko Haram [6].

Moreover, in June 2016, the Lake Chad Basin countries which include Cameroon, signed an agreement “the Abuja Action Statement” on how to address a common problem in the region. Among other things, the parties involved stressed on the importance of respecting the principle of nonrefoulement, which they affirmed its

importance in the current humanitarian situation in the region.

Additionally, in March 2017, Nigeria, Cameroon and the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) signed a “tripartite agreement.” The agreement vividly stated that repatriation of Nigerian refugees in Cameroon will solely be voluntary. This means no Nigerian refugee in Cameroon will be forcibly returned to Nigeria.

Methodology: As the phenomenon under study is a recent development, data is purposively sampled and collected from the data base of Daily Trust, which is a Nigerian national newspaper with significant coverage of happenings in northern Nigeria and the humanitarian situation in north-east of the country in particular. “Cameroon repatriated refugees” is used as a search term in the “search-story” bar of the Newspaper. The search generated 11, results of which 3 news articles are considered to be most relevant.

Data has also been collected from news published by KORA, which is UNHCR’s blog dedicated to Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Stateless people in West and Central Africa. “Cameroon, Nigeria refugees” is used as a search term in news search-bar of KORA. The search generated 6 results, of which 3 news articles are considered to be most relevant. Statistical data has also been collected from the UNCHR Operational Portal. The collected data has been analysed using the 6 phases of thematic analysis provided by Braun & Clarke [7].

RESULTS

Statistics of the Returned Refugees;

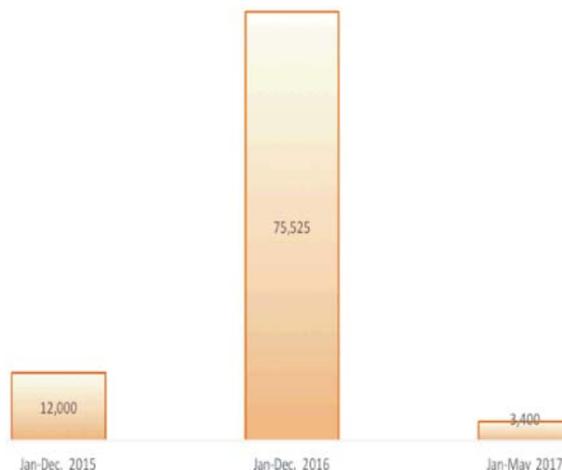


Fig. 1: Trend of Nigerian Refugees Forcibly Returned from Cameroon

Source: Plotted by the researcher; data sourced from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/57381>.

Figure 1 above shows the overall trend of the Nigerian refugees forcibly returned by Cameroon from January 2015 through May 2017. The total number of refugees returned within this range of time is documented to be 90,925. 13.20% of this number were returned in 2015, 83.06% in 2016, while in 2017 3.74% were returned. According to the UN Refugee Agency, as of July 2017, there were still 92,427 Nigerian refugees in Cameroon [8]. Though, a decline in the number of forced repatriation has been recorded, but there is no certainty on the intention and position of Cameroon on the issue, as the country has denied the fact that it has forcibly sent back refugees to Nigeria despite the undeniable evidence. Cameroon has always claimed that the return was voluntary. The decline in the number of forced repatriation could be as a result of the calls made by the UN Refugee Agency on Cameroon to respect international obligation and other regional agreements such as the Yaoundé “Tripartite Agreement” and the “Abuja Action Statement.”

Factors That Led to the Forced Repatriation of Nigerian Refugees from Cameroon

Economic Reason: The population of Cameroon is 23 million as of 2016 with a GDP of USD 24 billion [9]. This is a clear indication of an averagely weak economy. The UNCHR regional representative, Liz Ahua revealed that “[t]he Cameroonian government has severally claimed that the refugees from Nigeria currently taking refuge in Kolofata, Minawawo, Marua and other communities in Cameroon constituted security and economic threats to its corporate existence” [10].

Boko Haram terrorists did not spare Cameroon from their assaults. They usually cross from Nigeria to Cameroon to carry out deadly attacks on the civilian population in the far northern province of the country. Boko Haram conflict has engulfed the lives of more than 1,600 Cameroonians, handicapped many. This has caused a severe humanitarian crisis in the far north of Cameroon which is an already backward and impoverished region in the country. Cameroon is receiving 43,435 returnees in addition to the internally displaced 223,642 Cameroonians. Apart from the 92,882 Nigerian refugees in Cameroon, the country is currently sheltering 259,145 refugees from the Central African Republic. It is further reported that there is an increase of 17% in the number of the internally displaced persons in the Country with a 71% humanitarian funding gap [11].

In sum, the financial burden on the Cameroonian Government to fight Boko Haram and to take care of the

humanitarian needs of the people in her territory is heavy on Governments shoulder considering the country’s economic status. This made the humanitarian needs to be under funded and consider Nigerian refugees as an economic liability. Though international humanitarian actors have stepped in to assist, still, more needs to be done to abate the situation.

Security Reason: In addition to the above economic reason that prompted Cameroonian authorities to turn a blind eye to the international obligation, is the security concern. Cameroon was very sceptical about the flow of Nigerian refugees into her territory; because the refugees are viewed as a Trojan horse in Cameroon.

In the wake of Boko Haram suicide attacks in Cameroon’s Far North Region and with the intensification of the military campaign against Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, Nigerians crossing into Cameroon were considered as suspects and a potential threat to security [12].

Fear was clearly expressed by Cameroon that Boko Haram terrorists could camouflage like refugees to gain access into the country because it will be hard to differentiate who is a refugee and who is a terrorist.

Though, the concern of Cameroon for her security is tangible as Boko Haram terrorists have carried out several attacks in the far north Cameroon. Still, this should not be a reason for violating international obligation and other regional agreements. The problem should be considered as a regional problem, not as a Nigerian problem. As all the countries in the lake chad region are affected by the Boko Haram attacks. Therefore, a concerted effort of the affected countries and the international community is needed to tackle the security and humanitarian problems in the region.

Lack of Enforcement: Lack of effective enforcement of international law made it easy for states to violate it. This lack of enforcement is discovered to be one of the factors that led to the forced repatriation of Nigerian refugees from Cameroon. Concerning this issue of enforcement, the UN Refugee Agency said: “We also hope Cameroonian authorities will take the necessary steps to comply with international standards on the right to asylum and protection from refoulement” [13].

This statement made by the global body overseeing the rights and welfare of refugees has clearly shown that, UNHCR as an agency acting on behalf of the UN can only make “hope”, not action towards ensuring respect for international refugee obligations.

Perhaps one can say international law is enforced when the interest of the powerful actors on the international stage is abridged. In 2003, the US as a powerful and core player on the international system invaded Iraq over the allegation of violating international atomic energy law, despite calls by the UN not to. In 2011 NATO was in Libya for what was called “humanitarian intervention.” But in 1994 no powerful international player took decisive action in Rwanda to stop a Genocide.

This selective approach to enforcing international laws could raise questions about how international are international obligations? are they applicable to countries on the global north? are they beneficial to countries in the global south? Unfortunately, answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper; but can be addressed by further studies.

Implication of the Forced Repatriation of Nigerian Refugees from Cameroon

Aggravation of the humanitarian crisis: The forced repatriated Nigerian refugees from Cameroon have no better alternative than to seek shelter at the internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps in north-east Nigeria. The humanitarian situation in the region is already in a worse state. These camps have already exceeded their capacities. Basic human needs for survival are inadequate, infrastructures and non-food items are overstretched and over used. At this point, the UN Refugee Agency expressed concern by warning that, “[t]he lives of this repatriated Nigerians are at risk as they are presently accommodated at IDP camps in Banki and Gwoza towns in Borno State which are not totally free from Boko Haram attacks”[14]. It is evident that this unexpected and forced repatriation will definitely worsen the already worse humanitarian situation in north-east Nigeria.

The Setting of Bad Precedent: In addition to further deteriorate the humanitarian crisis, this action by Cameroon could be a precedent set for other countries to emulate. At this juncture, Liz Ahua the regional coordinator of the UNCHR expressed fear about the consequences of this action by Cameroon when she said “if Cameroon and Nigeria go ahead with the “forceful” repatriation of the Nigerian refugees, a dangerous precedent may be set where other African countries would ask refugees on their soil to leave”[15].

Deterioration of Nigeria-Cameroon Relations: Again, in addition to above implications, this action by Cameroon could further deteriorate the already sour relation between

the two countries. Considering the historical relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon, more especial the territorial dispute over Bakassi Peninsula, it could be asserted that this infringement of international human right of Nigerian citizens, could make the two countries to part ways again after being in a necessary friendship to fight Boko haram as a common security threat.

Recommendations: After assessing the root cause of Cameroon’s action, it is recommended that a “carrot and stick” approach could be a panacea to the problem. the carrot and stick approach implies that countries hosting refugees should be considered for humanitarian assistance (the carrot) more especially when the country is not economically buoyant. This might help in reducing the burden on the government of the host country. As in the case of Nigeria-Cameroon case, economic reason plays key role in aggravating the situation. Again, on the security problem, international humanitarian actors more especially the UN agencies could be of assistance in the capacity strengthening of the national government in screening who is a legitimate refugee in order to avoid the inflow of unwanted elements so as to ensure the national safety of the host country. However, if after providing the above support but the violation of international obligation is observed, then a process of taking punitive measures (the stick) should be initiated and implemented.

Nonrefoulement is a core provision of the international refugees’ law that prohibits the forcible return of refugees to places where their lives could be in danger, including their country of origin if it is not safe ([16]. Article 33 of the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees (1951) and protocol (1967) stated that:

No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

This principle of international refugees’ law serves as a shield to persons recognised as refugees to be taken where they could be subjected to inhumane treatment based on the attributes stated above by article 33. It implies that states’ discretion of refusing entry into their territory has been temporarily abrogated in this situation [17]. According to the Geneva Convention (1951), a refugee is any person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

As stated earlier, on March 2017, Nigeria and Cameroon signed an agreement under the watch of the UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) to comply with this provision of this international refugee law by not forcibly returning Nigerian refugees, unless the refugees themselves decide to do so voluntarily.

Still, Cameroon did not halt the forced return. The returned refugees to Nigeria have exacerbated the already delicate humanitarian situation at the internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps in north-east Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Boko Haram Insurgency has caused a devastating humanitarian crisis in north-east Nigeria. At the peak of the crisis in 2014, some Nigerians crossed the border into neighbouring countries in search of safety. Cameroon is one of the countries that Nigerian refugees crossed into; but in 2015, Cameroon started forcibly repatriating those refugees into unsafe zones in north-east Nigeria. As of May 2017, a total of 90,925 Nigerian refugees were returned to Nigeria in batches. This action by Cameroon is a clear violation of the principle of nonrefoulement enshrined in the Geneva Convention on the status of refugees (1951) and its (1967) protocol. In addition to this international obligation several other multi and bilateral agreements have been signed towards the protection and welfare of these refugees; still, Cameroon turned a blind eye.

The inquiry here was that: why would Cameroon take such a step? The causal factors are found to be economic, security in addition to lack of enforcing international law. This action by Cameroon is also found to have exacerbated the already worse humanitarian crisis in north-east Nigeria, it could set precedent for other countries to follow and could also create cracks on the fragile relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon. Lastly, the “carrot and stick” approach has been recommended as a panacea to the problem. Finally, this paper could be of significance to policy makers in both Nigeria and

Cameroon, international humanitarian actors and other humanitarian stakeholders.

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