



RAPPORT ① ② ③

ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXT AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

CONTEXTUAL REPORT

📍 **NIGERIA**

**Innovative technologies
to prevent and combat
conflict-related sexual
violence**

WE ARE
NOT WEAPONS
OF WAR



INTRODUCTION

This document is the first contextual report in a series of three, developed as part of the project "Nigeria: Innovative technologies to prevent and combat conflict-related sexual violence". The project is jointly implemented by the NGOs **We are NOT Weapons of War (WVoW)** and **Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (BSF)** in Borno State, with financial support from the **Crisis and Support Centre** of the **French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE)**.

The purpose of this series of reports is to provide an in-depth analysis of conflict-related sexual violence in North East Nigeria, in order to support the implementation of the project, adapt interventions to the realities on the ground, and inform advocacy efforts as well as the care and support provided to survivors.

This series of reports:

- Presents the political and security environment of North East Nigeria;
- Provides a detailed analysis of the use of sexual violence in the various conflicts affecting the region since the early 2000s;
- Examines the needs and challenges related to the prevention of and response to conflict-related sexual violence.

The project officially began on 1 November 2023 for an initial period of 18 months and has been extended until December 2025. The research and drafting of these reports were carried out by the teams of We are NOT Weapons of War (WVoW), with the support of the **Grassroots Researchers Association (GRA)**, WVoW's local operational partner based in Maiduguri.

SUMMARY

Introduction.....3

List of abbreviations 4

PROJECT CONTEXTUALISATION 6

Partner NGOs involved in the project..... 7

Methodology..... 8

ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA'S INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONING 12

Political and administrative organisation of Nigeria..... 13

Legal pluralism and the criminal justice framework in Nigeria 15

ANALYSIS OF THE SECURITY CONTEXT IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA – FOCUS ON BORNO STATE..... 17

Security developments and conflict dynamics in North East Nigeria 18

The Nigerian military response.....23

Violence against civilian populations25

Legal qualification of the conflicts in North East Nigeria.....26

Bibliography30

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A

ACJA

Administration of Criminal Justice Act

B

BAY

Borno-Adamawa-Yobe

BSF

Bibliothèques Sans Frontières

C

CDCS

Centre de Crise et de Soutien

CEDAW

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

CJTF

Combined Joint Task Force (FMM : Force Multinationale Mixte)

CPA

Criminal Procedure Act

CPC

Criminal Procedure Code

CRSV

conflict-related sexual violence

CSO

Civil Society Organization

G

GBV

Gender-Based Violence

GRA

Grassroots Researchers Association

I

ICC

International Criminal Court

ICL

International Criminal Law

ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross

IDPs

Internally Displaced Persons

IHL

International Humanitarian Law

IHRL

International Human Rights Law

INGO

(International) Non-Governmental Organization

IOM

International Organization for Migration

ISWAP

Islamic State in West Africa Province

J

JAS

Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad

L

LGA

Local Government Area

M

MDM

Médecins du Monde

MEAE

Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères

MSF

Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières)

N

NAPTIP

National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person

NIAC

Non International Armed Conflict

NSAG

Non-State Armed Groups

O

OCHA

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

P

PHC

Primary Health Center

PUI

Première Urgence Internationale

U

UN

United Nations

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

S

SRSO-SVC

Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict

T

TPA

Terrorism Prevention Act

U

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Fund

UNFPA

United Nations Population Fund

V

VAPPA

Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act

W

WWOW

We are NOT Weapons of War

PART 1

PROJECT CONTEXTUALISATION



¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan 2024* (New York: OCHA, 2024), <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/Nigeria/Nigeria-humanitarian-response-plan-2024>, read on October 16, 2025.

² International Crisis Group, *JAS vs. ISWAP: War between Boko Haram splinters* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/Nigeria/b196-jas-vs-iswap-war-boko-haram-splinters>, read on October 16, 2025.

³ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence (S/2024/292)* (New York: United Nations, April 2024), <https://undocs.org/en/S/2024/292>.

⁴ UNIDIR, *Reconsidering Common Conceptions Around Sexual Violence in Conflict Contexts: Evidence from North-West of Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin and Colombia* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2025), https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/UNIDIR_Reconsidering-Common-Conceptions-Around-Sexual-Violence-in-Conflict-Contexts-Evidence-from-North-West-of-Nigeria-the-Lake-Chad-Basin-and-Colombia.pdf, read on October 16, 2025.

Nigeria, the largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, continues to face significant social, economic, and geographic disparities. Persistent security crises undermine the country's stability and hinder access to basic services.

In 2024, approximately **7.9 million people** were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, **86% focus group discussions**—with women and girls alone accounting for **56%** of the affected population¹.

The northeast of the country, particularly **Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States (BAY)**, remains the most affected by conflicts linked to the activities of non-State armed groups, including **Boko Haram** and various affiliated factions. After more than fifteen years of insecurity, the region remains at the heart of a protracted humanitarian crisis².

Sexual violence observed in this context is embedded in complex dynamics of armed conflict and terrorism, where it can be used to control local populations, terrorise communities, or sustain war economies³. Available data indicate persistent underreporting of cases, linked to social stigma and the lack of appropriate reporting mechanisms⁴.

It is in this context that **We are NOT Weapons of War (WWoW)** and **Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (BSF)** are cooperating to deploy technological tools and contextualised content, both online and offline, designed to document conflict-related sexual violence, better identify survivors' needs, and strengthen community awareness, in partnership with local civil society.

1

PARTNER NGOS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT

We are NOT Weapons of War (WWoW) is a French non-governmental organisation based in Paris, dedicated to combating conflict-related sexual violence in the world. Since its creation in 2014, WWoW has promoted a comprehensive and holistic approach to preventing, documenting, and combating the use of rape as a weapon of war. Its work is grounded in innovative methods, combining international advocacy, support to local actors, and the development of adapted technological tools. In particular, the organisation developed **BackUp, a secure web application that enables survivors to report the violence they have suffered** and facilitates their referral to medical, psychosocial, and legal services, through a network of local and international partners.

Bibliothèques Sans Frontières (BSF), founded in 2007 at the initiative of historian Patrick Weil, works to promote universal access to education, culture, and information. The organisation designs and deploys innovative tools to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations and enable them to learn, access information, and empower themselves, including in contexts of crisis or displacement. With a presence in more than 30 countries, BSF has developed programmes in West Africa, Central Africa and the Great Lakes region, the Middle East, and Bangladesh. Its initiatives have received support from partners such as the **Global Partnership for Education, the AFD Innovation and Development Fund, and the Crisis and Support Centre (CdCS) of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE)**.

Grassroots Researchers Association (GRA) is a Nigerian non-profit and non-political organisation, registered in 2016 with the Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria. Based in Abuja and operating regional offices in several States, GRA works to prevent and reduce sexual violence, particularly through research, community awareness, and advocacy. The organisation collaborates with local authorities and civil society actors to promote public policies that ensure justice and support for survivors.

2

METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted for this report is based on a **mixed-methods approach**, combining quantitative and **qualitative** methods to provide a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the situation of conflict-related sexual violence in Borno State.

Quantitative approach

The quantitative approach aimed to identify measurable trends and establish a factual baseline using verified statistical data.

SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION:

- Use of humanitarian databases, particularly those of **sectoral clusters** (protection, health, education) and international organisations such as the UN, IOM, and UNHCR;
- Consultation of survey reports produced by **institutes specialised** in social and humanitarian studies;
- Analysis of **local administrative data**, including reports from relevant authorities and government agencies.

DESCRIPTIVE AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:

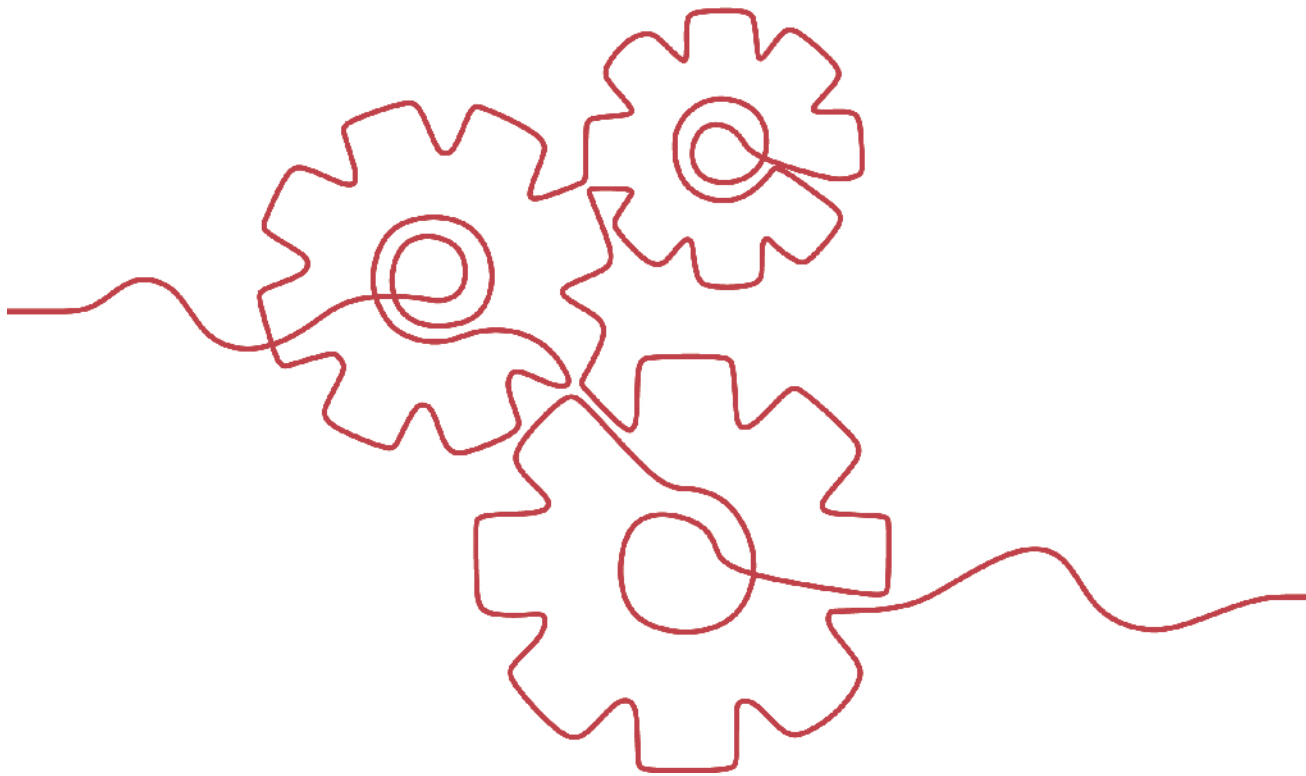
- Compilation of key indicators relating to sexual violence (prevalence, survivor profiles, perpetrator profiles, geographic areas and types of incidents);
- Placing the findings in the context of regional and international trends, in order to situate Borno State within a broader analytical framework.

Qualitative approach

The qualitative approach made it possible to deepen the understanding of contextual factors, community dynamics, and lived experiences.

DOCUMENT RESEARCH:

- Analysis of institutional documents, scientific publications, and policy frameworks related to sexual violence in conflict;
- Review of **national and international legal frameworks** applicable to prevention, protection, and access to justice for survivors.



INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS:

- Conducting semi-structured interviews with representatives of local and international organisations, **community leaders, activists, and humanitarian personnel**;
- Organising **focus group discussions** with members of affected communities (internally displaced persons, former combatants, survivor networks, etc.) to gather diverse perspectives.

The interviews were conducted online and during two field missions to Maiduguri (February and October 2024), led by WWoW teams in collaboration with GRA. The thematic analysis of the discussions identified obstacles, needs, and opportunities related to the prevention of and response to sexual violence.

DATA TRIANGULATION

To strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings, a systematic triangulation of sources was applied:

- Cross-referencing of findings from **quantitative and qualitative** approaches;
- Verification of observed trends in light of secondary data and collected testimonies;
- Continuous reassessment of hypotheses in light of field observations.

Definition of terms used

TERRORISM

There is no universally agreed definition of terrorism in international law, and each State retains a margin of interpretation in its national legislation. However, this report relies on the constituent elements set out in **UN Security Council Resolution 1566** (2004), according to which terrorism involves *“the intimidation or coercion of populations or governments through the threat or perpetration of acts of violence causing death, serious injury, or hostage-taking”*⁵.

In Nigeria, the **Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act of 2022** defines an act of terrorism as *“an act willfully performed with the intention of furthering an ideology, whether political, religious, racial, or ethnic, and which may seriously harm or damage a country or an international organisation”*⁶.

NON-STATE ARMED GROUP (NSAG)

A non-State armed group is an organised entity not affiliated with a government, meeting three cumulative criteria: (i) a sufficient level of internal organisation and a command structure; (ii) the capacity to plan and conduct military operations; (iii) control over a portion of territory⁷.

NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICT (NIAC)

According to **Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions**, a non-international armed conflict refers to an internal conflict occurring in the territory of a State, involving the State's armed forces and one or more non-State armed groups, or between several non-State armed groups. Two cumulative conditions are required: a threshold of intensity of violence and sufficient organisation of the groups involved⁸.

WAR CRIMES

War crimes are serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the context of an armed conflict, entailing individual criminal responsibility. Article 8 of the **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)** distinguishes several categories, including:

- grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions;
- other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict;
- serious violations of Article 3 common applicable in armed conflict not of an international character;
- other serious violations of IHL. Qualifying acts as war crimes include killing, torture, taking of hostages, the use of weapons causing great suffering, rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation, and other severe forms of sexual violence.

5 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1566* (2004), S/RES/1566, October 8, 2004

6 Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022* (Abuja: Government Printer, 2022)

7 International Committee of the Red Cross, *Handbook for Parliamentarians No. 25: International Humanitarian Law*

8 *Ibid.*

- 9 United Nations Department of Peace Operations (DPO), Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (OSRSG-SVC), *Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to conflict-related sexual Violence* (New York: United Nations, 2020), pp. 10-12.
- 10 Rome Statute the ICC, 17 July 1998 (entered into force on 1 July 2002), United Nations document A/CONF.183/g ("Rome Statute"), Articles 7(1)(g), 8(2)(b)(xxii) et 8 (2)(e) (vi).
- 11 United Nations Department of Peace Operations (DPO), Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (OSRSG-SVC), *Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to conflict-related sexual Violence* (New York: United Nations, 2020), pp. 10-12.

CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Article 7 of the Rome Statute defines a crime against humanity as any acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population, with knowledge of the attack. These acts include murder, extermination, enslavement, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, persecution, and enforced disappearance.

GENOCIDE

Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention defines genocide as any acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Such acts include killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm, forcibly transferring children, and measures intended to prevent births within the group.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Gender-based violence refers to any harmful act directed against a person because of their sex or socially constructed gender. It encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm, based on unequal power relations between genders. GBV often aims to maintain or reinforce structures of domination and discrimination.

Gender-based violence can occur in times of peace or armed conflict, in public or private spheres, and disproportionately affects women and girls, while also impacting men, boys, and individuals of diverse gender identities⁹.

CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE (CRSV)

conflict-related sexual violence includes acts of sexual violence directly or indirectly linked to an armed conflict or a situation of comparable tension. This category notably includes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, forced marriage, and other forms of sexual violence of comparable gravity¹⁰.

Such violence may serve strategic or opportunistic purposes—to terrorise populations, forcibly displace communities, punish groups perceived as enemies, or destroy social cohesion—and is recognised as potentially constituting war crimes, crimes against humanity, or, under some conditions, acts of genocide¹¹.

The contextual analysis that follows builds on the methodological approach outlined above. It aims to situate the project within its political, security, and socio-economic environment, in order to assess its feasibility, relevance, and conditions for implementation. In line with the objectives of the project "Nigeria: Innovative technologies to prevent and combat conflict-related sexual violence", this analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics at play in the country and the specificities of the crisis in the northeast.

It is structured around two complementary components: first, a general overview of Nigeria's institutional, security, and legal systems; then, a more in-depth focus on Borno State, the epicentre of the conflict and the project's priority area of intervention. This approach connects national structural factors with local realities and identifies the levers and constraints affecting the implementation of the project carried out by WWoW and BSF with their partners.

PART 2

ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA'S INSTITUTIONAL FUNCTIONING



1

POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANISATION OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is a federation composed of thirty-six States and a Federal Capital Territory (FCT – Abuja), established by the 1999 Constitution. The Constitution provides for a distribution of powers across three levels of government: federal, State, and local¹². This federal structure results in differentiated implementation of public policies across States.

Executive power is vested in the President of the Republic, assisted by a Vice-President and a Council of Ministers, while legislative power is exercised by a bicameral National Assembly comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives. State Governments have a significant degree of autonomy, each led by a governor, a legislative assembly, and its own administration. Each governor acts as a representative of the Federal Government at the State level, while coordinating local policies. Since May 2023, the presidency has been held by **Mr. Bola Ahmed Tinubu**, elected under the banner of the All Progressives Congress (APC). The electoral system—based on the simultaneous organisation of presidential and legislative elections—tends to reinforce political coherence between the executive and the legislative.

The president also holds extensive appointment powers, especially for ministers (one per federated State) and Supreme Court judges, which grants the executive significant influence over the functioning of the judiciary and federal governance. However, **Nigerian federalism is also based on mechanisms of religious and regional balance**: both the Constitution and political practices impose a power-sharing aimed at preserving national cohesion in a country marked by deep religious and ethnic divisions. **The unwritten rule of North–South rotation provides that a president from the Christian South must be paired with a Muslim vice-president from the North (currently Mr. Kashim Shettima, former governor of Borno State), and vice versa.** This principle is also applied at the State level, where a Deputy Governor is selected from a different geographical area than that of the Governor, in order to ensure balanced representation¹³.

This institutional architecture aims to reflect Nigeria's ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, but it also contributes to inequalities in the implementation of public policies. In practice, differences in administrative and financial capacities between States—combined with constraints at the local administration level (Local Government Areas) (LGAs)—produce disparities in access to essential services and protection mechanisms, particularly in the northeast. Nigeria has 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs), which are responsible for implementing local public policies: primary healthcare, basic education, civil registration, market management, infrastructure maintenance, and community security. However, most LGAs depend heavily on federal transfers, which are redistributed by State Governments. This financial dependence limits their effective autonomy and weakens local governance, particularly

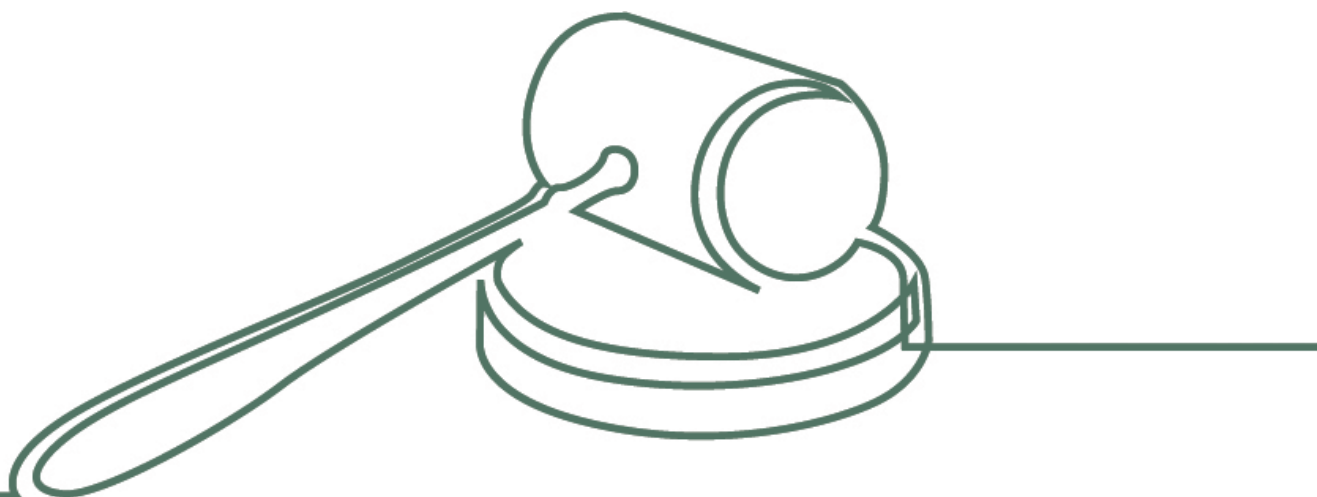
¹² Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Chapter I, Sections 2–3

¹³ Suberu, R. T. (2022). *Ethnic inequality, the federal character principle, and reform of Nigeria's presidential federalism* (Working Paper No. 2022/113). UNU-WIDER.

in rural areas and those affected by protracted insecurity. Recent UN observations highlight that these constraints undermine the continuity of essential services and restrict access to protection mechanisms for women and girls in North East States¹⁴.

This complex federal system—combining political diversity, financial centralisation, and unequal administrative capacities—directly influences the implementation of public programmes and humanitarian projects. The success of the project “Nigeria: Innovative technologies to prevent and combat conflict-related sexual violence” will therefore depend on coordination across federal, State, and local levels: institutional recognition at the federal level, operational commitment from the Borno State Government, and active involvement of local and community authorities in the management and dissemination of the tools developed.

¹⁴ United Nations, CEDAW/C/NGA/IR/1: Rapport sur l'enquête concernant le Nigéria menée en vertu de l'article 8 du Protocole facultatif à la CEDAW (New York: UN, 2025), §15–18



2

LEGAL PLURALISM AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK IN NIGERIA

¹⁵ United Nations, CEDAW/C/NGA/IR/1: Rapport sur l'enquête concernant le Nigéria menée en vertu de l'article 8 du Protocole facultatif à la CEDAW (New York: UN, 2025), §15–18

¹⁶ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Chapter I, Sections 2–3

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UNODC Strategic Vision for Nigeria 2030 (Vienna: UNODC, 2023), p. 11.

¹⁸ United Nations, CEDAW/C/NGA/IR/1: Rapport sur l'enquête concernant le Nigéria menée en vertu de l'article 8 du Protocole facultatif à la CEDAW (New York: UN, 2025), §15–18

¹⁹ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act, 2022* (Abuja: Government Printer, 2022)

²⁰ Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015* (Abuja: Federal Government, 2015)

Nigeria's criminal justice system reflects the country's cultural, religious, and institutional diversity. It is based on **legal pluralism**, combining statutory law inherited from British common law, customary law, and—across twelve northern States—Islamic law (Sharia). This framework aims to reconcile local traditions with rule of law principles¹⁵.

The 1999 Federal Constitution sets out the distribution of powers between the federal level and the 36 States, each with its own legislative and judicial authority. Federal laws apply directly to the Federal Capital Territory and must be adopted or adapted by the States to have effect within their jurisdictions¹⁶.

Historically, **two distinct criminal codes apply**: the **Criminal Code**, used in the southern States and based on the British legal model, and the **Penal Code**, implemented in the northern States, and incorporating provisions inspired by Sharia law. To modernise and harmonise criminal procedure rules, Nigeria adopted the **Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA)** in 2015. This law aims to accelerate trials, limit arbitrary detention, and strengthen the protection of the rights of defendants. However, implementation remains uneven: only eleven of the thirty-six States have effectively incorporated the ACJA into their legislation. The others continue to apply the **Criminal Procedure Code (CPC)** in the North and the **Criminal Procedure Act (CPA)** in the South¹⁷. In Borno State, the justice system operates under a mixed regime, combining elements of the CPC with selected provisions of the ACJA¹⁸.

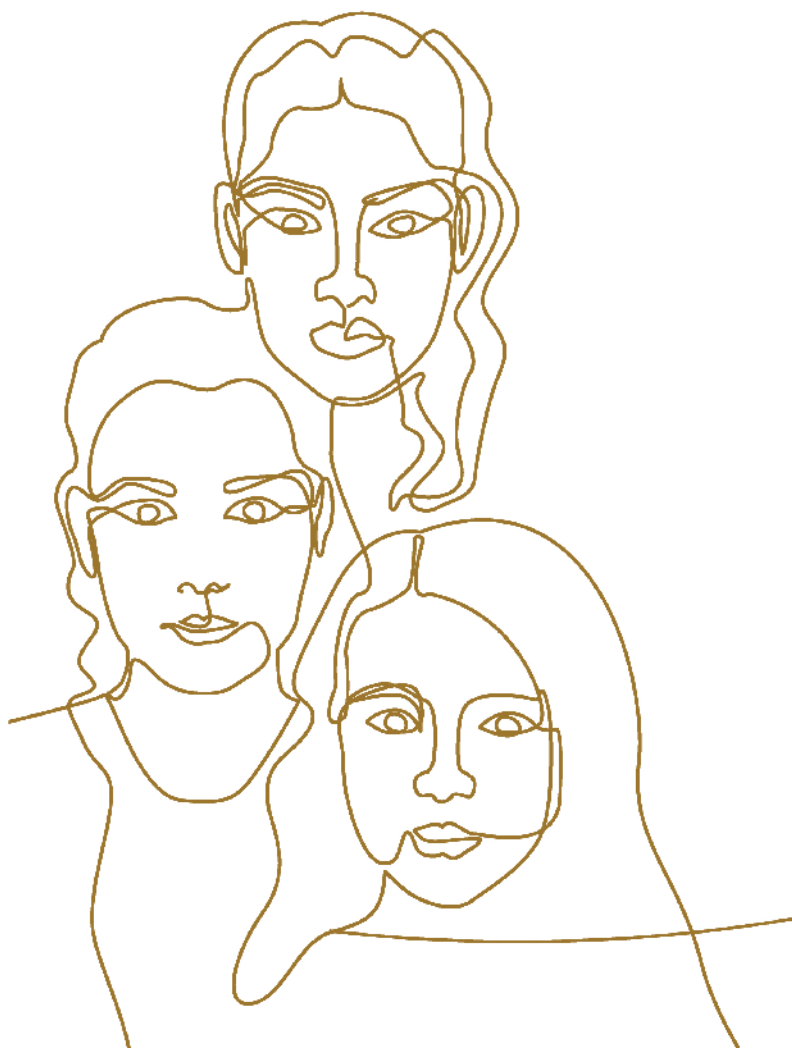
The repression of terrorism is governed by the **Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act** of 2022, which repeals the previous versions of 2011 and 2013 and strengthens the penalties applicable to acts of kidnapping, financing, or participation in extremist groups¹⁹.

Regarding gender-based violence, the main legal framework is the **Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP Act)** of 2015, which criminalises rape, female genital mutilation, domestic violence, forced marriage, and other violations of physical integrity²⁰. Although this federal law has been progressively adopted by the States; its implementation remains incomplete: several jurisdictions—particularly in the North—have not yet transposed it.

According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the functioning of the criminal justice system in the northeast— specifically in Borno State—is severely disrupted by the consequences of the conflict with Boko Haram. Courts face limited resources, overlapping civil, customary, and religious jurisdictions, and persistent extrajudicial practices. These constraints compromise access to justice and the protection of fundamental rights, particularly for survivors of terrorism, sexual violence, and gender-based violence²¹.

²¹ United Nations, CEDAW/C/NGA/IR/1: Rapport sur l'enquête concernant le Nigéria menée en vertu de l'article 8 du Protocole facultatif à la CEDAW (New York: UN, 2025), §15–18

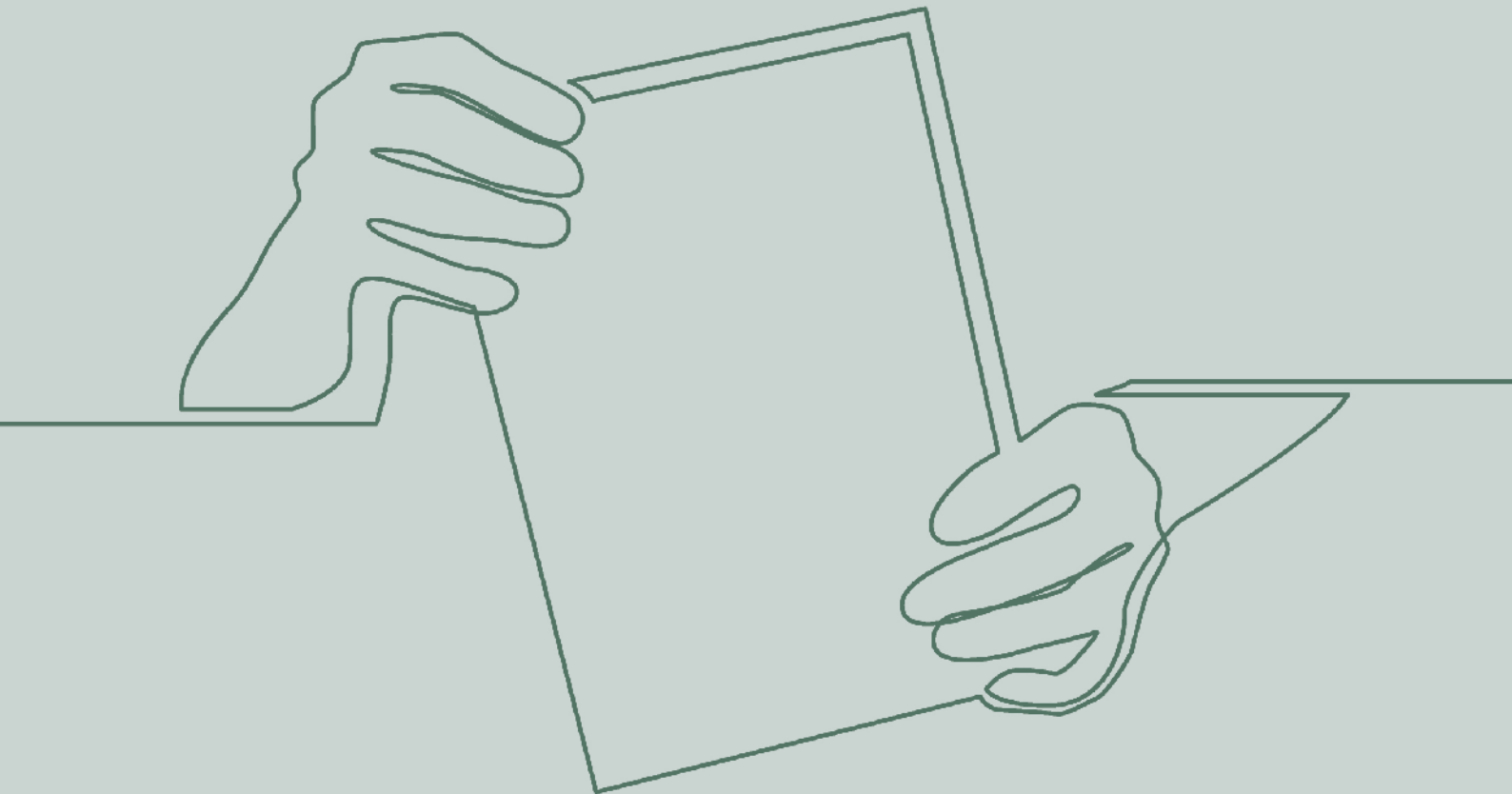
In this fragmented context, the project "*Nigeria: Innovative technologies to prevent and combat conflict-related sexual violence*" serves as a complementary tool for documentation, coordination, and awareness-raising, facilitating the identification of survivors and their referral to available services, while respecting legal pluralism and local governance structures.



PART 3

ANALYSIS OF THE SECURITY CONTEXT IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

FOCUS ON BORNO STATE



1

SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced numerous security and political crises, marked by persistent communal and religious tensions. The Biafran War (1967–1970) left a lasting imprint on national stability, causing the deaths of nearly two million civilians and exposing the country's deep ethnic and confessional fractures.

These fractures are rooted in Nigeria's profoundly heterogeneous composition, which encompasses more than 250 ethnic and linguistic groups. Three of these dominate the political and demographic landscape: the **Hausa-Fulani**, predominantly **Muslim** and settled in the North; the **Yoruba**, divided between Islam and Christianity in the Southwest; and the **Igbo, mostly Catholic Christians** concentrated in the Southeast²². This identity mosaic—inherited from the colonial period—has resulted in persistent rivalries over control of resources and federal State institutions. These ethno-regional and religious cleavages continue to influence political dynamics, the distribution of power, and local tensions across several regions of the country.

Reinforced by economic inequalities and institutional instability, these divisions have fostered the emergence of multiple hotbeds of violence since the 1980s: intercommunity clashes, armed banditry in the Northwest, separatist tensions in the Southeast, and Islamist insurgencies in the Northeast²³. **Since 2009, Borno State has constituted the epicentre of a protracted conflict opposing government forces and non-State armed groups, including several factions that emerged from the Boko Haram movement.** Due to its intensity and duration, this conflict has triggered a major humanitarian crisis in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States²⁴.

Structural marginalisation and vulnerability of Borno State

Borno State, located in the far northeast of Nigeria, shares borders with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, forming a strategic crossroads within the Lake Chad Basin. Historically a hub for trans-Saharan trade, this location has become a source of fragility: porous borders, trafficking networks, and the circulation of small arms complicate State regulation and the security of civilian populations.

²² « *Au Nigéria, la guerre du Biafra tue presque autant que Boko Haram* », *Afrique XXI*, 13 August 2024. ² *Ibid.*, p. 121-124

²³ International Crisis Group, *Violence in Nigéria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*

²⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Nigéria: Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States – Situation Report, May 2025*.

25 Vincent Hiribarren, "L'héritage spatial de l'Indirect Rule au Nigéria", *Hérodote*, n°159, 2015, p. 13–26.

26 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), "The tale of a disappearing lake", February 28, 2018

Geographically distant from the country's political (Abuja) and economic (Lagos) centres, Borno State suffers from chronic underinvestment in public infrastructure and from limited integration into the national oil-dependent economy. This long-standing marginalisation partially stems from British colonial governance based on the system of Indirect Rule, which delegated territorial administration to local customary authorities²⁵. This legacy has resulted in a weak administrative apparatus and fragmented local institutions, which continue to struggle to meet the needs of a State now marked by poverty and precariousness.

Borno's vulnerability is exacerbated by its **marginal integration into the southern oil economy and by the degradation of Lake Chad's resources**. Environmental and UN reports document the significant reduction in the lake's surface area since the 1960s, due to the combined effects of water extraction, recurrent droughts, and climate change. This ecological decline has had direct consequences for fishing, irrigation, and the livelihoods of communities living along the lake. This ecological constraint further reinforces economic vulnerability and local competition for access to scarce resources²⁶.

These structural weaknesses interlink with regional conflict dynamics. Conflicts and organised crime are concentrated differently across Nigeria's regions (Islamist insurgencies in the Northeast, armed banditry in the Northwest, community tensions in the Middle Belt, etc.). Threat mapping based on ACLED data confirms the high density of incidents linked to non-State armed groups in the Northeast—particularly in Borno—which highlights the challenges of achieving sustainable stability in rural areas of the State.

Figure 1:
CESA, (2021),
"Threats to Security
in Nigeria", ACLED
sources.



Evolution and dynamics of the armed conflict in North East Nigeria

Since the early 2000s, North East Nigeria—particularly Borno State—has been at the centre of a protracted conflict opposing government forces and several non-State armed groups. This region alone accounts for more than one-third of all violent incidents recorded in West Africa over the past decade²⁷. These acts of violence occur within a context of historical marginalisation, structural poverty, and institutional weakness, which have facilitated the long-term establishment of insurgent movements.

Origins of the insurgency (2002-2009)

The **Boko Haram** movement emerged in the 2000s in Maiduguri under the leadership of **Mohammed Yusuf**, a preacher from Yobe State. His sermons were based on criticism of the corruption of local elites and social injustice, advocating a return to strict application of Sharia law²⁸. Initially a religious and community-based movement, Boko Haram attracted disaffected and marginalised youth, particularly affected by unemployment and the lack of economic prospects²⁹.

The situation escalated in 2009, when the Nigerian military violently repressed a riot in Maiduguri, killing Yusuf and several of his followers. This turning point marked Boko Haram's transformation into a clandestine armed organisation engaged in open confrontation with the Federal Government³⁰.

Expansion and radicalisation of the conflict (2009-2015)

Under the leadership of **Abubakar Shekau**, Boko Haram rapidly expanded in the northeast, multiplying attacks against security forces, religious leaders, and civilians. Between 2011 and 2014, the organisation seized several towns in Borno State and, in August 2014, declared an "Islamic caliphate" centred around the town of Gwoza³¹.

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report highlights that this expansion can be explained both by the State's weak territorial control and the porous nature of regional borders. The group also exploited the economic and ecological decline of the Lake Chad Basin—including the depletion of fishery resources—to recruit members from marginalised communities³².

In 2015, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), composed of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin, launched a large-scale military offensive. Although the MNJTF succeeded in retaking several urban centres, including Bama and Dikwa, it did not end the insurgency. OECD and OCHA note that these operations contributed to massive population displacement and serious violations of international humanitarian law, including sexual violence and abductions³³.

27 OCDE/SWAC, *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), p. 128.

28 International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency* (Brussels: ICG, 2014)

29 International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency* (Brussels: ICG, 2014)

30 OCDE/SWAC, *The Geography of Conflict in North and West Africa* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), p. 134.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

33 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Nigeria: Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States – Situation Report, May 2025*.

Fragmentation and persistence of the conflict (2016–2025)

In 2016, Boko Haram split into two main factions: **Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati wal-Jihad (JAS)**, led by Abubakar Shekau, and the **Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)**, affiliated with the Islamic State group (ISIS) and headed by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. This division further increased the complexity of the conflict: JAS remained active in the forested areas of southern Borno and around Lake Chad, while ISWAP consolidated its positions in the northern part of the State and along the Cameroon and Nigerien borders.

Figure 2:
Organisational structure of the two main armed groups (JAS and ISWAP) following their split in 2016

Command Structures of JAS and ISWAP

Although both armed factions originally belonged to the same group under the name Boko Haram, they have undergone significant hierarchical changes. ISWAP, due to its affiliation with the Islamic State, has developed a structured hierarchy, whereas JAS, more deeply rooted in local traditions, grants its fighters greater operational autonomy.

2016: Split of the group into two factions,
marking a diversification of command chains.

JAS

Limited connections between fighter cells, which directly share loot among themselves.
Highly flexible hierarchical approach:

- small cells led by local commanders (munzirs)
- few links between cells
- wide operational freedom

ISWAP

A clear, strict, and structured chain of command; all loot is transferred to commanders.

- Highly organized hierarchical approach:
- military branch
- religious branch
- governor (wali)

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Since 2021, the intensity of clashes has fluctuated according to seasonal patterns and supply lines. Competition between factions has contributed to an increase in violence against civilians, particularly in rural areas around Monguno and Kukawa.

In 2025, the security situation remains highly unstable. Several rural and cross-border areas of Borno continue to face attacks and armed incidents. According to the United Nations humanitarian report of May 2025, coordinated assaults attributed to armed groups were recorded in Marte, Dikwa, Kala-Balge, and Nganzai, triggering new internal displacements toward urban centres and disrupting humanitarian operations. At the same time, the Borno State Government has pursued its “resettlement” policy, notably through the progressive closure of the Muna El-Badawy camp and relocations to Ajiri and Koyebe. Humanitarian partners have emphasised the need to ensure safe, dignified, and informed conditions prior to any movement³⁴.

Living conditions for internally displaced persons remain precarious, both in formal sites and in informal settlements surrounding Maiduguri. Recent assessments highlight overcrowding, limited access to water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, as well as heightened protection risks. The CEDAW has noted that some camp closures, carried out without sustainable alternatives, have resulted in secondary displacement and increased exposure of women and girls to sexual and gender-based violence³⁵.

Finally, the persistent combination of insecurity, climatic shocks, and constraints on humanitarian access continues to undermine livelihoods and deepen poverty across Borno State. According to OCHA, these factors perpetuate a cycle of vulnerability and hinder both security stabilisation and economic recovery in the northeast³⁶.

³⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Nigeria: Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States – Situation Report, May 2025*.

³⁵ United Nations, CEDAW/C/NGA/IR/1: Rapport sur l'enquête concernant le Nigéria menée en vertu de l'article 8 du Protocole facultatif à la CEDAW (New York: UN, 2025), §15–18

³⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Nigeria: Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States – Situation Report, May 2025*.

2

THE NIGERIAN MILITARY RESPONSE

Faced with escalating violence in the northeast, the Nigerian government's response has been dominated by a security-oriented and militarised approach. Since 2011, federal authorities have launched several large-scale military operations in Borno State and the border regions of Lake Chad, aimed at weakening Boko Haram and its factions following the 2016 split.

The Expansion of Military Operations (2011–2015)

Beginning in 2011, **several major military operations were deployed** across the BAY States to combat Boko Haram. The first, Operation Restore Order I (ORO I), took place from June 2011 to May 2013 and deployed approximately 4,000 soldiers in Borno State. These forces, together with the police and other security agencies, formed the **Joint Task Force (JTF)**.

In May 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe States³⁷. This decision was accompanied by the massive deployment of troops under **Operation Lafiya Dole**, whose objective was to re-establish State territorial control in areas occupied by Boko Haram³⁸.

Poorly equipped and often underfunded, Nigerian forces struggled to retain durable positions in the face of guerrilla attacks. This period was marked by excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial executions, which further eroded civilian trust in the military³⁹ and contributed to widespread distrust among civilian populations.

Weak logistical oversight and corruption within the military chain of command also limited operational effectiveness⁴⁰. However, the **Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)**, reactivated in 2015 under the auspices of the **Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)**, enabled regional coordination between Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, and Benin. This cooperation facilitated the recapture of key urban centres in Borno—including Bama, Gwoza, and Dikwa—although it did not succeed in sustainably neutralising armed groups⁴¹.

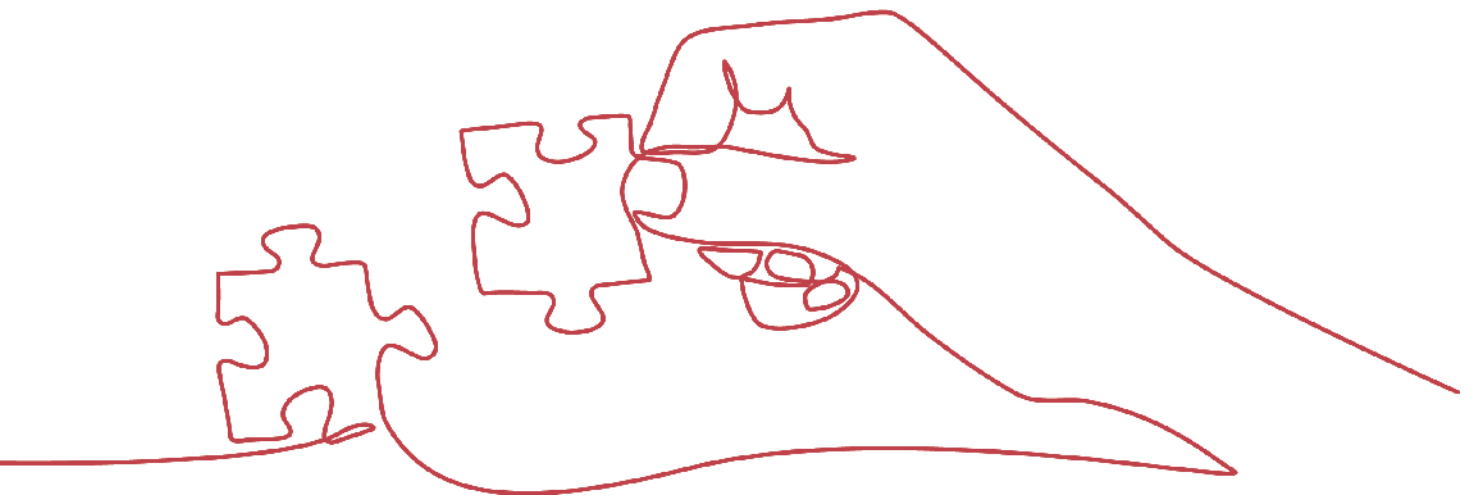
37 International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency* (Brussels: ICG, 2014)

38 International Crisis Group, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*

39 International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, Africa Report No. 273.

40 Transparency International Defence & Security, *Weaponising Transparency: Defence Procurement Reform as a Counterterrorism Strategy in Nigeria* (London: TI, 2020).

41 Amnesty International, *Stars on their shoulders: Blood on their hands: War crimes committed by the Nigerian military*, 3 June 2015



Strategic reorganisation: from Lafiya Dole to Hadin Kai (2016–2024)

In 2021, the Nigerian government replaced Operation Lafiya Dole with **Hadin Kai** (“cooperation” in Hausa), reflecting an intention to better integrate the military response with civilian stabilisation and deradicalisation programmes⁴². This new strategy is based on decentralisation of military commands, strengthened cross-border cooperation, and the integration of **Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF)**—local self-defence militias—into security operations⁴³.

However, the **CJTF** have been both an asset and a source of abuses. Their knowledge of the terrain and their role as community intermediaries facilitated the reconquest of certain rural areas, but several reports have documented human rights violations committed by these groups⁴⁴. Persistent coordination challenges between the regular army, the CJTF, and local authorities continue to hinder the consolidation of so-called “liberated” zones.

Persistent challenges of militarisation and stabilisation

Despite successive operations, the militarisation of the northeast has not fully restored security nor addressed the root causes of the conflict. Structural weaknesses within the Nigerian military system—insufficient training, corruption, poor discipline, and rapid personnel rotations—continue to hinder operational capacities.

Moreover, the concentration of resources on counter-terrorism has often marginalised civilian stabilisation programmes. Humanitarian actors emphasised that the current strategy still relies too heavily on coercion and insufficiently on reconstruction or economic recovery⁴⁵.

⁴² Nigerian Army, *Statement on the Transition from Operation Lafiya Dole to Operation Hadin Kai*, 30 April 2021.

⁴³ Amnesty International, *Stars on their shoulders: Blood on their hands: War crimes committed by the Nigerian military*, 3 June 2015.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Meeting WWoW–GRA, Maiduguri, December 2024.

3

VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIAN POPULATIONS

The Boko Haram insurgency and the Nigerian State's military response have had severe consequences for civilian populations. Since 2009, the conflict has caused the death of more than **40,000 people**⁴⁶ and the displacement of over **3.9 million** individuals in North East Nigeria and neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin⁴⁷.

Civilians have been the primary targets of violence, including killings, looting, attacks with improvised explosive device (IED), abductions, sexual violence, and assaults on humanitarian convoys⁴⁸. Nigerian security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations, have also been accused of committing serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, acts of torture, and sexual violence⁴⁹.

Forced displacement and the militarisation of urban areas have contributed to the depopulation of rural zones, leaving them more exposed to violence and exacerbating food insecurity. In Maiduguri and surrounding Local Government Areas (LGAs), hundreds of thousands of civilians live in makeshift camps.

In 2024, the governor of Borno State, Babagana Umara Zulum, reaffirmed the **policy of gradually closing "formal" internally displaced persons (IDP) camps**, with the stated objective of encouraging returns to areas of origin by 2026. According to data from the **International Organisation for Migration (IOM)**, approximately **370,000 people** were still living in official camps in April 2024, while thousands of others resided in informal sites in Maiduguri, Jere, and Konduga⁵⁰. Living conditions there remain precarious, characterised by overcrowding, limited access to water, health-care, and education, and increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence⁵¹.

The Boko Haram insurgency has profoundly disrupted the lives of thousands of women, men, and children, marked by massive loss of life and serious violations of fundamental rights. Among these abuses, **sexual violence** has emerged as a **deliberate tactic of war**. These crimes, often committed with impunity, leave deep and lasting trauma on survivors and their communities, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis, and hindering reconstruction efforts in the northeast. It is within this context that the project developed by WWoW in partnership with BSF and GRA is crucial.

46 Le Monde, *26 killed in Nigeria as truck drove over explosive device*, 29 April 2025

47 UNHCR, *Nigeria annual results report 2024*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, May 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Nigeria%20ARR%202024.pdf>, read on October 19, 2025.

48 Nigeria Watch, *Index*, 2025

49 ICC, The Office of the Prosecutor, *Report on preliminary examination activities 2019*

50 IOM, *Le dilemme des déplacés dans le nord-est du Nigeria*, 2023

51 Meeting WWoW-GRA, Maiduguri, December 2024.

4

LEGAL QUALIFICATION OF THE CONFLICTS IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

The violence in North East Nigeria, particularly in Borno State, falls within the framework of international humanitarian law (IHL) applicable to non-international armed conflicts (NIACs), complemented by international human rights law (IHRL) and, with regard to individual criminal responsibility, by international criminal law.

The legal classification of a situation as an armed conflict depends on two cumulative criteria: (i) a level of the violence exceeding internal disturbances and tensions, and (ii) the existence of sufficiently organised non-State armed groups (including a command structure and the capacity to carry out sustained military operations)⁵².

Based on these criteria, it appears that several distinct NIACs coexist in North East Nigeria:

- a NIAC between government forces and Boko Haram (JAS)⁵³;
- another NIAC between government forces and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP/EIAO)⁵⁴;
- since 2023, a separate NIAC between JAS and ISWAP, when clashes between these two groups reach the required thresholds of intensity and organisation⁵⁵.

This interpretation does not affect the "internal" nature of the conflicts, even in the presence of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) acting in support of Nigeria in the Lake Chad basin.

In the context of the non-international armed conflicts identified in North East Nigeria, the **minimum rules of international humanitarian law** (IHL) apply as a matter of law, in accordance with **Common Article 3 to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions**. This article requires all parties to the conflict—whether State or non-State—to treat humanely persons who are not or no longer taking a direct part in hostilities. It specifically prohibits murder, torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, hostage-taking, and the passing of sentences without the necessary judicial guarantees⁵⁶.

⁵² ICRC, « *How is the term "armed conflict" defined in international humanitarian law?* » (Opinion Paper), 2008.

⁵³ RULAC, (2023), "Non-International Armed conflicts in Nigéria", read on December 12, 2024

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ ICRC, « *How is the term "armed conflict" defined in international humanitarian law?* » (Opinion Paper), 2008.



These fundamental safeguards are **complemented by Additional Protocol II of 1977**, which applies to non-international armed conflicts between State armed forces and organised armed groups exercising sufficient territorial control to conduct sustained and coordinated military operations. Nigeria is a party to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two 1977 Additional Protocols, thereby binding the State and its armed forces to comply with these instruments. Consequently, units operating under its authority—including the **Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)**—are also required to comply with IHL and may incur individual criminal responsibility for serious violations.

Non-State armed groups such as **Boko Haram (JAS)** and the **Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP/EIAO)** are likewise bound by the provisions of Common Article 3 and by customary rules of IHL. Their degree of organisation, structured command, and effective control over areas of the territory justify the application of these obligations, as recalled by the ICRC and RULAC.

Moreover, **international human rights law (IHRL)** remains applicable at all times, including during armed conflict. The Nigerian State retains a positive obligation to prevent, investigate, and punish human rights violations, particularly sexual violence.

COULD YOU BRIEFLY INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND PRESENT YOUR BACKGROUND⁵⁷?

I am...

... a professional with significant experience in the fields of humanitarian work, development, and peacebuilding, with particular expertise in conflict analysis and research in crisis-affected contexts. I have worked for several years in North East Nigeria, conducting analyses and research on the dynamics of the Boko Haram insurgency.

⁵⁷ Due to the interviewee's current position, this person requested that the interview remain anonymous.

Based on your expertise, could you explain which factions are currently active in Borno State in 2024–2025, and where they operate? What recent changes have you observed (e.g. the JAS/ISWAP split, local alliances, shifts in territorial control)?

After the death of Shekau, the leader of the JAS faction, his group experienced a major setback due to leadership and logistical challenges. These issues led to a wave of surrenders and enrollment into rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Similarly, the ISWAP faction faced comparable leadership and logistical struggles, which weakened their ability to launch effective attacks against government forces. This also resulted in the surrender of a significant number of ISWAP members to the rehabilitation program.

However, this progress was short-lived. Many rehabilitated ex-combatants fled back to the bush to reunite with their comrades, and some resumed intimidating innocent civilians. Recently, instability in the Sahel states has forced fighters—parti-

cularly from the ISWAP faction—who had fled to Niger, Mali, and parts of Burkina Faso to regroup. These include rehabilitated combatants who could not remain in integrated communities and sought renewed strength to strike.

Their recent attacks have focused on mobilizing supplies by targeting and overrunning military bases to seize weapons and ammunition. They have adopted a diversionary strategy that involves attacking civilian communities to provoke a government response, thereby leaving military bases vulnerable to raids and looting.

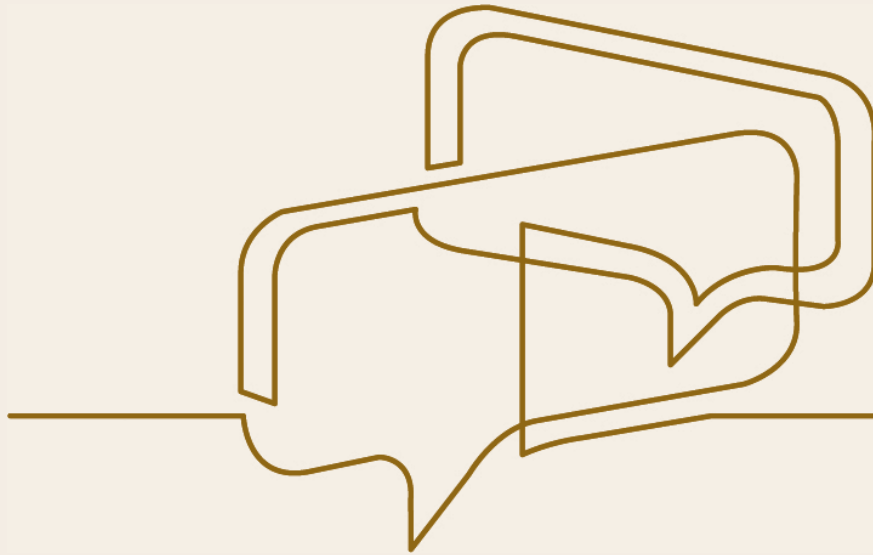
Since 2024, attacks by armed groups have resumed. Based on your experience, what have been the consequences for civilians in Borno State? What types of attacks are most common? Are certain populations particularly targeted? And do you observe similar patterns of violence, including the widespread use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a weapon of war?

Indeed, attacks have surged recently, with military bases being the primary targets. How-

ever, civilian populations are often used as distractions to divert military attention. Similarly, there are growing concerns that are not making headlines, such as abductions for ransom, which are increasingly affecting communities in and around Maiduguri and Jere. This tactic is also being used to mobilise resources to reinforce and empower the fighters.

The consequences for civilians remain severe, including indiscriminate killings, abductions, financial losses, and physical and potential sexual abuse some of which are unreported. Communities that had previously returned are being displaced once again, and new waves of internal displacement are occurring, particularly in the areas of Marte, Magumeri, and Nganaram.

Additionally, some women associated with combatants are willingly returning to the bush to reunite with them, especially those who have experienced stigma within reintegrated communities. The strategy recently adopted by the fighters shows a slight shift from previous patterns; this time, they appear to be mobilising resources



more deliberately, with attacks increasingly focused on military installations.

There is no pronounced use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a weapon of war at present, but there appears to be a rise in sexual exploitation particularly the exchange of sex for resources among the displaced populations.

In your view, how is the Nigerian army adapting its operations to the current tactics of Boko Haram/ISWAP? To what extent do you think civilian security and protection, including the prevention of CRSV, are effectively integrated into their response?

I don't think the military is adapting effectively to this new strategy, as similar attacks should not be occurring repeatedly with the same level of success for the assailant groups. While government forces remain committed to protecting civilians, they appear to be relying on outdated tactics, which continue to place them at a disadvantage.

There is zero to little visible effort aimed at preventing conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) or integrating such concerns into broader security measures. In fact, despite being the primary targets, government forces have not demonstrated an effective defence strategy. Instead, they continue to rely on propaganda, claiming victory, while in reality, more returnee civilians are being displaced time and again.

In your opinion, "Safe Corridor" operations, the Bulumkutu camp, and other similar initiatives aimed at rehabilitation genuinely reduce security risks? Do they facilitate community reconciliation, or do they create new tensions?

No, the operation lacks proper community engagement and involvement in the process, which has undermined its credibility among local communities. Many community members feel that victims are not being adequately supported, while perpetrators appear to receive preferential treatment. There is a widespread perception that ex-combatants are being favoured by the govern-

ment through the Operation Safe Corridor initiative, while communities are being coerced into accepting so-called "repentant" fighters many of whom are believed not to have genuinely renounced violence, especially in light of recent cases where ex-combatants have returned to the bush to rejoin their former groups.

In short, in my opinion, Operation Safe Corridor has failed to facilitate effective community reconciliation.

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