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No. 180/2013 dated 1 October 2013

Attack on Nigerian College: Boko Haram's War on Western Education?

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Synopsis

The attack on students of an agricultural college in northeastern Nigeria by the militant Boko Haram underscores the group's violent strategy against western education. Security measures by authorities have proved ineffective to curb the violence against state institutions.

Commentary

THE ATTACK on 29 September 2013 by the suspected militant group Boko Haram on a Nigerian agricultural college, killing some 50 students, came as no surprise. The targeting of schools and higher education institutions has been a key modus operandi of the group since early 2012, which sees Western education as a "plot against Islam".

The Nigerian group attacked the agricultural college at night, gunning down dozens of students as they slept in dormitories or taking them outside and executing them. The targeting of state education is in line with the group's ideological goals since it is violently opposed to westernisation, including western culture and what it sees as western education.

Well-crafted strategy

Boko Haram wants to impose an Islamic state in Nigeria ruled by the Sharia. Boko Haram came to global attention when a week of clashes in 2009 between the group and the security forces in four northern states Borno, Yobe, Bauchi, and Kano left more than 800 people dead, including at least 30 police officers.

The poorly-trained police captured and summarily executed Boko Haram's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, along with several dozen of his followers. This was a gross political miscalculation. A year later, in July 2010, Boko Haram launched deadly attacks, including suicide bombings that claimed the lives of hundreds of people. Boko Haram also improved its tactical capabilities.

A significant number of Boko Haram cadres were sent to northern Mali for further training when it was under the control of militant Islamist rebels. There the Nigerians also got a strong dose of so-called Islamist indoctrination at the hands of radical clerics. Back in Nigeria they proceeded to attack churches, police stations, military facilities, banks, and bars, as well as the United Nations building and police headquarters in Abuja, the nation's capital. It actively sought to promote religious tensions between Muslims and Christians in a country that is

almost evenly divided between the two religious groups.

Dismantling Nigeria's secular education

The assault by the group on the educational institutions has focused the attention of outside observers. The name Boko Haram in Hausa means 'western education is forbidden'. Its assaults are also part of an insidious and well-thought strategy to erode the authority and legitimacy of the Nigerian state in the north and force children to drop out of secular schools and attend Islamic schools. Many parents now believe that the safest option is to send their children to Islamic schools, which have seen a rise in enrolment rates over recent months. These are private religious schools which teach an Islamic education, with some English and Mathematics in the curriculum.

Given the massive increase in demand, fees at some Islamic schools have also increased by 300 percent since the beginning of 2013. These schools are not regulated by the government and graduates receive no formal qualifications; they will not prepare their students to enter the modern work force. Instead, they will gravitate towards militant groups such as Boko Haram.

In a video posted online in February 2012, the group's leadership called upon supporters to destroy state schools. Indeed, on 20 February the first three schools were torched. Between 26 and 29 February, four more schools were burned down, and on 1 March, five schools were set ablaze in a series of coordinated attacks. In total, between February and April 2012, Boko Haram burnt down 14 schools in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in northern Nigeria.

This forced 7,000 children out of formal education and resulted in the downward spiral of enrolment in a region already suffering from low rates of literacy and school attendance. School enrolment is already lower in Borno -- 28 percent -- than in any other state in Nigeria.

The authorities responded by pledging to rebuild all state schools that had been destroyed and to provide security around the clock. The Joint Military Task Force deployed to Borno State stepped up patrols around state schools from 2012 onwards. That this has been ineffective is reflected in the continuing attacks on schools and colleges. On 19 June, 2013 gunmen attacked a secondary school in Maiduguri killing four teachers. Many schools in poverty-stricken Yobe state in the north closed after Boko Haram killed 46 students and a teacher, burning some alive in their hostels, at Mamudo on 6 July, 2013.

Government's offensive against Boko Haram

Following that raid the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, called for more attacks against schools, describing western education as a "plot against Islam." Abubakar Shekau said schools would continue to be targeted "until our last breath." He went on to state that teachers who teach western education would be killed:

The government's offensive against Boko Haram launched in mid-May after the declaration of a state of emergency in northern states did not focus on protecting schools or colleges but on going directly after Boko Haram fighters. The goal was to kill as many members of the organisation as possible in the states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The military cut phone services to prevent information about the upcoming plans for offensive operations from filtering out to the militants and their sympathisers.

The offensive action in the north contained the geographical spread of attacks by the group. But in a classic case of displacement Boko Haram decided not to take on the heavily-armed military and security forces but redoubled its efforts on 'soft targets' such as schools and colleges. Another unfortunate fall-out is that the cut-off in phone services meant that people in targeted schools were unable to use their mobiles to call for help.

Unless the Nigerian government finds a solution to the assaults on the primary, secondary and higher education institutions in the northern part of the country, it will see an already ailing and underperforming region fall further and further behind the rest of the country and that may spin out of its control.

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