

## International

## Nigeria's troubled exit path for now repentant jihadists

## 'We're trapped', say rehabilitated Boko Haram fighters

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria: Gaunt men sit in the shade sewing hats while women in headscarves cook leaves, watching children play as the dry wind blows through the thatched huts. It's a typical scene in the sprawling camps set up for over two million people who have fled jihadists waging war in northeast Nigeria—and where Aliyu, Abubakar, Muhammad and Mallam now also live.

The United States, European Union and Britain have given millions of dollars to help the program, which is supported by the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) among others.

## 'Mistakenly' detained

Nigeria's armed forces coordinate the scheme, according to official documentation, with support from 17 groups including government departments, UN agencies and NGOs. "Operation Safe Corridor has recorded tremendous successes," its head, Brigadier General Mohammed Maina, said early last month in written responses to AFP's questions.

"Over 800 repentant ex-combatants have been successfully deradicalized, rehabilitated and reintegrated." Many more could soon be eligible. The army said earlier this month that 335 fighters who recently surrendered were "undergoing comprehensive security profiling."

Yet the four men who participated in Operation Safe Corridor and were interviewed by AFP earlier this year gave a stark account of their experiences. Once in custody, they were held without charge in brutal conditions for several years before even reaching the rehabilitation scheme, they said.

And two of them, Abubakar and Mallam, said they were farmers—not former insurgents—who were wrongly detained along with many other civilians, including children. The individual stories of the four men could not be independently verified. But several reports including by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), International Crisis Group and Amnesty International have extensively detailed similar claims based on hundreds of interviews with others who have completed the program and officials.

In a report this year, Crisis Group said it had spoken to 23 people who had been through the scheme. "At most" a quarter of those at the rehabilitation center with them were "low-level but committed jihadist recruits," it said. "Most of the others... are civilians who fled areas controlled by Boko Haram and whom authorities then mistakenly categorized as jihadists and detained before sending them into Safe Corridor," the report said.



MAIDUGURI, Nigeria: In this file photograph taken on March 29, 2021, a woman cooks at Yawuri informal camp on the outskirts of Maiduguri, capital of Borno state. The makeshift camp hosts nearly 2,000 people internally displaced by a decade-long jihadist insurgency in northeast Nigeria. — AFP

Maina denied that civilians were being sucked into the program, saying: "Ex-combatants are chosen after thorough profiling and investigation." Complicating matters further, a source with extensive knowledge of the program who spoke on condition of anonymity said that several dozen disengaged senior insurgents, including commanders, had also passed through the de-radicalization center, under a different scheme.

## 'We were trapped'

Abubakar, 48, said he earned a decent living as a farmer until Boko Haram fighters took control of his village in northeastern Borno state. AFP is not identifying specific locations or dates in this story to protect the participants' identity. All four of their names have also been changed. But, Abubakar said, when the Islamist

extremists arrived, everything changed. "My income started reducing because they would take our crops... even the food we prepared," said the father of three.

"They were watching, monitoring us... we were trapped. There was no other way, they had guns."

Mallam, 52, farmed peas, guinea corn and beans in a different village in Borno. When Boko Haram arrived there too, the men were told to grow beards and women forced to stay indoors. He said he once received 80 lashes because he bought cigarettes. Both farmers decided to escape with their families. "We left in the middle of the night... There were about 100 of us," said Abubakar, who had heard on the radio that the government was urging civilians to leave Boko Haram-occupied areas. Despite fearing capture by the insurgents, they felt they had little choice. — AFP



## De-radicalization program targets the wrong people?

But the desolate site is a far cry from where these four men had expected to end up after completing a government program to de-radicalize and rehabilitate Boko Haram fighters. The years since entering the custody of the authorities—time mostly spent in overcrowded and filthy cells—have been traumatic, the men say.

Now left to live in dusty camps with no jobs in sight, they say the government has not delivered the fresh start promised. The de-radicalization program has also targeted the wrong people, with participants saying that many civilians, rather than fighters, end up in the hands of the military. Over more than a decade, Boko Haram jihadists, along with combatants from dissident offshoot the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have killed at least 40,000 people.

In response, Nigeria has launched military offensives and introduced Operation Safe Corridor in 2016 — a program that would offer an exit route to militants willing to lay down their arms and embrace peace. Fighters officially are first screened and those deemed low risk are transferred to a center in Mallam Sidi, a town in northeastern Gombe state. For six months, they are supposed to undergo vocational training, religious and basic education and receive psychosocial counseling.

## Buhari urges unity after massacres in flashpoint city

LAGOS: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has called for communities to unite to ease tensions after violence in a flashpoint central city killed dozens of people. Jos, in Plateau State, has in the past suffered from clashes between Muslim and Christian communities, although local officials say recent attacks are the work of criminals rather than religious violence.

At least 23 Muslim travellers were killed earlier this month when their bus convoy was attacked outside Jos. Police had blamed a suspected Christian militia. Just over a week later, gunmen descended on a predominantly Christian village on the outskirts of the city, shooting dead at least 18 people and setting homes on fire.

"The Presidency wishes to assure all citizens that as a government, the administration is on top of events and is moving ahead with force to crush the perpetrators," a statement from Buhari's office said late on Sunday. "But to achieve success, our communities must unite against these horrific attacks. Retributive violence is not the answer."

Plateau State officials put Jos city and its surroundings under a 24-hour curfew as a security measure. That was relaxed to a 6pm to 6am curfew on Monday, an AFP reporter in the city said.

Both Fulani Muslim leaders and Christian Irigwe representatives denied their communities were involved in tit-for-tat attacks. Buhari, a former soldier first elected in 2015, is under fire from opponents over a surge in insecurity in Africa's most populous nation.

Nigerian troops are battling a 12-year jihadist insurgency in the northeast that has killed more than 40,000 and forced over 2 million more from their homes. Parts of northwest and central Nigeria have long struggled with clashes between nomadic herders and local farmers over water and land. But violence in those regions has escalated with increasing attacks from heavily armed criminal gangs who raid and ransack villages, loot cattle and kidnap for ransom. This year, the armed gangs known locally as bandits, have targeted schools and colleges for mass abductions for ransom. — AFP

## In US, an effort to commemorate thousands of lynching victims

DECATUR: More than 120 years ago, a black man was accused of raping a white woman in the city of Decatur, Illinois, but before Samuel Bush could be tried, a vicious mob forcibly took him from a local jail, beat him and hung him from a telephone pole. Now, an effort is underway to memorialize the brutal lynching.

"We learn from past mistakes so it doesn't happen again," said Rich Hansen, a local high school history teacher who is campaigning to dedicate a memorial to Bush in the American Midwestern city. "If we as a



NEW YORK: A young boy waves a Palestinian flag as people demonstrate in support of Palestinians inside Grand Central Station in New York Sunday. — AFP

## Abbas meets Zionist defense minister for 'rare talks'

RAMALLAH: Zionist defense minister has met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas for a rare high-level meeting, but a source close to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett insisted yesterday his government had no plans to reboot peace talks. Defense Minister Benny Gantz met Abbas in Ramallah for what were reportedly the first direct talks between a Zionist cabinet member and the 86-year-old Palestinian leader in several years.

The meeting, which Gantz's office said focused on "security policy, civilian and economic issues", came just hours after Bennett returned from Washington where he met US President Joe Biden. Biden said he would urge Bennett to find ways "to advance peace and security and prosperity for Zionists and Palestinians." According to a Jewish defense ministry statement, Gantz told Abbas that Zionists "seek to take measures that will strengthen the PA's economy."

"They also discussed shaping the security and economic situations in the West Bank and in Gaza," and agreed to "continue communicating further," it added. A source close to Bennett said the meeting that he had approved focused on "issues between the defense establishment and the Palestinian Authority." "There is no peace process with the Palestinians nor will there be," under Bennett's leadership, said the source who

nation are going to move past this racial divide, we need to first of all be educated in what came forth and understand why it happened." A year after the killing of George Floyd set off a nationwide wave of mass antiracism protests, activists are mounting a campaign to honor the memory of several thousand African Americans who were lynched throughout the country from the end of the US Civil War through the end of World War II.

But as the United States undergoes a broader national reckoning over racial justice, the effort is facing a backlash in some communities.

## 'A horrible time in our past'

The Equal Justice Initiative, a racial justice advocacy group based in Montgomery, Alabama, has documented more than 4,400 victims of lynchings nationwide from 1877 through 1950. In 2018, it opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, where more than 800 weathered steel columns etched with the names of lynching victims hang from the ceiling. The

requested anonymity. The Gantz-Abbas meeting included the head of the Zionist military branch responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories, Ghasan Alyan, senior PA official Hussein Al Sheikh and Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj.

Gantz's office said he and Abbas had held "a one-on-one meeting" after the broader talks. Al Sheikh confirmed the meeting on Twitter but the PA was not immediately available to comment on its substance.

## Palestinian division

Bennett's government has indicated a desire to boost the PA amid concern over a fresh conflict with Hamas who control Zionist-blockaded Gaza and are rivals of Abbas's Fatah secular Fatah movement. An 11-day conflict in May between Zionist forces and Palestinians in Gaza marked the worst hostilities in the area since 2014 and unrest has persisted despite an Egypt-brokered ceasefire.

Hamas condemned the Abbas-Gantz meeting, charging that it "deepens Palestinian political division". Abbas has tightened his hold over the PA since his election in 2006. He cancelled elections set for May and July that would have been the first Palestinian polls in 15 years. The veteran leader cited Zionists' refusal to allow voting in annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians as their future capital. But some Palestinian experts said Abbas balked when it seemed clear Hamas was poised to rout Fatah at the polls. Abbas's PA has also come under mounting global criticism over an alleged crackdown on internal opposition following the death in Palestinian custody of a prominent activist. The United Nations and European Union last week expressed alarm over a spate of arrests targeting leading critics of Abbas and the PA. — AFP

group also collaborates with local communities to gather soil at lynching sites to be displayed in glass jars with the victims' names, and to erect narrative markers in public locations throughout the country where lynchings took place.

"This was a horrible time in our past, but we need to look at it and we need to learn from it so it never happens again," said Melissa Thiel, a historian who is campaigning to erect a memorial commemorating another brutal lynching that took place in the city of Sherman, Texas. In 1930, as America was going through the Great Depression, a Black day laborer named George Hughes was lynched after he was accused of assaulting the wife of his white boss as he tried to collect \$6 in payment for his work. The lynching led to a rampage, in which Black businesses were burnt to the ground. However, Thiel's efforts have met resistance in a city where a towering stone monument to the pro-slavery Confederacy stands next to the courthouse. Local officials have stonewalled Thiel's plans, saying they don't want to relive a past tragedy. — AFP

## Mexico puts firearm flows high on agenda with US

MEXICO CITY: Long under pressure to curb drug smuggling, Mexico is seeking to hold the United States partly responsible for rampant cartel-related violence by suing US-based gunmakers over illegal firearms trafficking. The lawsuit filed in a Boston court is part of the Latin American nation's efforts to put the issue of cross-border weapons flows at the heart of the diplomatic conversation between the neighbors, experts say. "Mexico is really managing to say that this is a bilateral problem," said Cecilia Farfan, an expert on organized crime and US-Mexico security cooperation at the University of California, San Diego. "In the same way that the United States is saying, 'I need you to do something about illegal drug trafficking,' Mexico is saying, 'I need you to do something about guns,'" she said.

The suit filed in early August accuses major gunmakers including Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Colt, Glock, Century Arms, Ruger and Barrett over firearms trafficking that Mexico blames for fueling cartel-related bloodshed. Between 70 and 90 percent of all weapons recovered from crime scenes in Mexico were smuggled in from the United States, Mexico's foreign ministry says. They include Barrett semi-automatic rifles, Smith & Wesson pistols and Ruger and Colt rifles recovered after an attack on Mexico City police chief Omar Garcia Harfuch in June 2020, according to the lawsuit.

## 'Symbolic and political'

The litigation seeks compensation for the damage caused by the firms' alleged "negligent practices," as well as the implementation of adequate standards to "monitor and discipline" arms dealers. Although it is unclear if the suit will succeed, "the objective is symbolic and political to open the debate," said Romain le Cour, an expert at the consultancy firm Noria Research.

Mexico has seen more than 300,000 murders, most of them blamed on criminal gangs, since the government of then-president Felipe Calderon deployed the military in the war on drugs in 2006.

Many weapons reach Mexico from the United States through small-scale shipments known as "ant trafficking." "They bring them either in parts or whole with contraband merchandise, clothes and various items imported to Ciudad Juarez," said Jorge Nava, a prosecutor in the border state of Chihuahua.

A member of a self-defense group in the violent western state of Michoacan who did not want to be named said their weapons sometimes come from family members living north of the frontier. — AFP



CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico: In this file photo, a man holds a sign reading "No weapons" during the march for peace and against violence in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua state, Mexico. — AFP