

**Nigeria: Boko Haram Attacks Likely Crimes Against Humanity**  
**Huffington Post**  
**10/11/2012**

(Abuja) – Widespread and systematic murder and persecution by Boko Haram, a militant Islamist group in northern Nigeria, likely amount to crimes against humanity, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. Government security forces have also engaged in numerous abuses, including extrajudicial killings, Human Rights Watch said.

The 98-page report, “Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria,” catalogues atrocities for which Boko Haram has claimed responsibility. It also explores the role of Nigeria’s security forces, whose own alleged abuses contravene international human rights law and might also constitute crimes against humanity. The violence, which first erupted in 2009, has claimed more than 2,800 lives.

“The unlawful killing by both Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces only grows worse; both sides need to halt this downward spiral,” said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Nigeria’s government should swiftly bring to justice the Boko Haram members and security agents who have committed these serious crimes.”

The report, which includes a photo essay, is based on field research in Nigeria between July 2010 and July 2012, and the continuous monitoring of media reports of Boko Haram attacks and statements since 2009. Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed 135 people, including 91 witnesses and victims of Boko Haram violence or security forces abuses, as well as lawyers, civil society leaders, government officials, and senior military and police personnel.

Since 2009, hundreds of attacks by suspected Boko Haram members have left more than 1,500 people dead, according to media reports monitored by Human Rights Watch. In the first nine months of 2012 alone, more than 815 people died in some 275 suspected attacks by the group – more than in all of 2010 and 2011 combined.

Boko Haram, which means “Western education is a sin” in the Hausa language of northern Nigeria, seeks to impose a strict form of Sharia, or Islamic law, in northern Nigeria and end government corruption. Widespread poverty, corruption, police abuse, and longstanding impunity for a range of crimes have created a fertile ground for violent militancy in Nigeria, Human Rights Watch said.

Boko Haram’s attacks – centered in northern Nigeria – have primarily targeted police and other government security agents, Christians, and Muslims working for or accused of cooperating with the government. The group has also bombed newspaper offices and the United Nations building in the capital, Abuja; attacked beer halls and robbed banks; and burned down schools.

Five days of clashes between the group and security forces, and brazen execution-style killings by both sides, left more than 800 people dead in July 2009 and precipitated further violence. Security personnel in 2009 arrested and summarily executed the group’s leader, Mohammed Yusuf, along with at least several dozen of his followers, in the northern city of Maiduguri.

When the group reemerged in 2010 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf’s former deputy, it vowed to avenge the killings of its members. Suspected Boko Haram members have since attacked more than 60 police stations in at least 10 northern and central states and bombed the police headquarters in Abuja. According to media reports monitored by Human Rights Watch, at least 211 police officers have been killed in these attacks.

A widow of a police officer killed by Boko Haram said that members of the group attacked a police barracks in the city of Kano in January 2012 while disguised in police uniforms:

I was standing in the doorway.... I saw five men in mobile police uniforms. They had AK-47s. They didn't say anything. One of them shot me in the leg and I fell inside the house. My husband, he was in uniform, came out and saw them. He had no gun. He asked, "Colleagues, why did you shoot my wife?" And then they shot him, bang in the forehead. He fell down [dead].

Police took the woman to the hospital the next morning where doctors amputated her right leg above the knee.

Boko Haram has also claimed responsibility for targeting and killing numerous Christians in northern Nigeria. Suspected members of the group have bombed or opened fire on worshipers in at least 18 churches across eight northern and central states since 2010. In Maiduguri, the group also forced Christian men to convert to Islam on penalty of death, Human Rights Watch found.

Suspected Boko Haram gunmen, often riding motorcycles and carrying AK-47s under their robes, have also gunned down more than a dozen Muslim clerics and assassinated traditional leaders for allegedly speaking out against its tactics or for cooperating with authorities to identify group members. The group also has claimed responsibility for killing northern politicians and civil servants – nearly all Muslims.

"Boko Haram has callously murdered people while they pray at church services in northern Nigeria," Bekele said. "It has also gunned down Muslims who openly oppose the group's horrific violence."

Nigeria's government has responded to Boko Haram with a heavy hand. Security forces have killed hundreds of Boko Haram suspects and other members of the public with no apparent links to the group, in the name of ending the group's threat to the country's citizens. But the authorities have rarely prosecuted those responsible for the Boko Haram violence or security force personnel for their abuses.

During security raids in communities where attacks have occurred, the military have allegedly engaged in excessive use of force and other human rights violations, such as burning homes, physical abuse, and extrajudicial killings, witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

The Nigerian authorities have also arrested hundreds of people in raids across the north. Many of these people have been held incommunicado without charge or trial for months or even years. In some cases they have been detained in inhuman conditions and subject to physical abuse or death. The fate of many of those detained remains unclear.

Boko Haram should immediately cease all attacks, and threats of attacks, that cause loss of life, injury, and destruction of property, Human Rights Watch said. The Nigerian government should take urgent measures to address the human rights abuses that have helped fuel the violent militancy.

"Nigeria's government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from violence, but also to respect international human rights law," Bekele said. "Instead of abusive tactics that only add to the toll, the authorities should prosecute without delay those responsible for such serious crimes."

Copyright Huffington Post