

Boko Haram: What Manner of Ceasefire?

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A couple of weeks ago, the mass media – regular and social – were rife with news of a ceasefire agreement between the Nigerian Government and Boko Haram insurgents. According to these reports, the warring factions in the five year old insurgency in the North-East had reached an agreement to cease further hostilities. The purported agreement also included guarantees by the insurgents to release the kidnapped Chibok girls. News of the said truce expectedly elicited mixed reactions from different segments of the global. While some saw the truce as a long overdue development, others were skeptical of an arrangement they saw as a face-saving gambit by the authorities – a desperate attempt by the present administration to control the damage its image had suffered since the onset of the insurgency.

This column questions the authenticity of the much vaunted ceasefire arrangement as unfolding events since the announcement of the agreement have conspired to puncture deep holes in the validity of the said truce with reports of fresh attacks and fighting between the conflicting parties making the rounds every day – a fact that has been practically confirmed by the activities of Nigerian military and intelligence officials who have continued battling with insurgents, despite the existence of a peace agreement. Violence – and fresh kidnappings – has continued unabated since the announcement of the deal, including a triple bombing of a bus station in the Northern city of Gombe on Friday 31 November, 2014 that killed at least eight and injured scores more. On Sunday evening, troops from the 7th Division of the Nigerian Army fought dozens of suspected members of Boko Haram in the town of Damboa in Borno state, witnesses and security sources said. Another attack in the village of Wagga on Saturday saw some 40 women abducted (AFP) – an established Boko Haram tactic in its bloody five-year insurgency. This is coupled with other attacks across the hotbeds of the high intensity war.

In a recently released video, the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau, claimed that the 219 schoolgirls kidnapped from the remote North-East town of Chibok, in Borno state, in April had converted to Islam and been married off. In addition, Shekau said the Islamists were holding as hostage a German national, who was kidnapped in Adamawa state, also North-East Nigeria, in July. Shekau, speaking in Hausa, dressed in military fatigues and boots with a black turban, and flanked by 15 armed fighters, said: "We have not made ceasefire with anyone", describing the Nigerian government claims as a lie and apparently ruling out future talks. "We did not negotiate with anyone... It's a lie. It's a lie. We will not negotiate. What is our business with negotiation? Allah said we should not" (Ibid). The video comes after a surprise Nigerian military and presidency announcement on October 17 that a deal had been reached with the militants to end hostilities.

The clouds of pessimism that have reared their heads consequent to the unfolding events in the North-East have elicited plethora of questions across the globe from stakeholders and concerned observers of events in Nigeria's North-East : what kind of ceasefire agreement did the Nigerian Government and Boko Haram reach? Who brokered this ceasefire? What were the terms of this ceasefire? What is the duration of this ceasefire? What group – was it really Boko Haram or a phantom organization – did the Nigerian Government negotiate with? If the ceasefire is a ruse – an

idea that is currently making the rounds – then who is fooling who? These are just a sprinkling of the pertinent questions the contradictions in the current situation in the North-East has thrown up.

One baffling aspect of the purported ceasefire is the air of mystery surrounding it. The agreement appears to be a phantom arrangement in every sense of the word. For a government that has continually refused to accept a negotiated settlement – preferring a confrontational posture – to end an imbroglio that has festered for over five years to suddenly agree to a peace deal the public was kept in the dark about, until it was announced, lives much to be imagined. Apart from a sprinkling of the muted sounds emanating from Abuja, most Nigerians were at sea as to any concrete attempts by the authorities – apart from its stuttering military campaigns – to peacefully end the fiasco in the North-East.

Another grey point of the ceasefire is the true identity of Danladi Ahmadu, a man who claims to be the group's Chief Security Officer and Senior Advisor, and who is reported to have brokered the deal. One wonders how somebody that has been repeatedly black spotted as an impostor by a group it claims to be representing should be recognized as its chief negotiator by the authorities. Is it not possible that the Federal Government of Nigeria, in its desperate attempts to find quick-fix solutions to this disaster, has fallen prey to a charlatan gold-digger masquerading as a representative of this group? Please, don't bother hazarding any guess.

Again, it should be pointed out that the act of misdirection is a basic strategy of warfare. If there was truly a parley, prior to the said truce, what would have stopped this group from putting out a decoy in the form of this Danladi Ahmadu to fool the authorities into believing it was truly ready to discourse a peace deal? A strategy like this will be of great advantage for a group that has rapidly upped the ante in its bloody exchange with the country's security forces over the years. It could also be a means of bidding for more time to reorganize in order to launch a bloodier campaign of iron and death.

The propagandistic dispositions of the country's leadership and defence chiefs in the handling of the Insurgency in the North-East – which could be said to be partly responsible for the escalation of the conflict – has not helped matters. It is very sad to note that the same set of people who have been constitutionally charged with the task of safeguarding the lives, liberties and properties of fellow Nigerians are the same ones stalling the peace process. The lies that have been repeatedly hauled at Nigerians from Aso Rock are as damning as they are embarrassing. It is the height of irresponsibility and treachery that individuals who claim to bear the popular mandate to run the people's affairs are the same ones shirking their core responsibilities and betraying the trust of the larger body politic.

A ceasefire is an agreement between opposing forces in a conflict to stop hostilities, usually for a limited period during which they will work towards reaching a more permanent peace agreement. It also stands for total cessation of armed hostilities, regulated by the same general principles as those governing an armistice. In contemporary diplomatic usage the term implies that the belligerents are too far apart in their negotiating positions to permit the conclusion of a formal armistice. (Dictionary.com; Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia).

From the ensuing definition, can the chief stakeholders in the war in the North-East be said to have deliberately agreed to mutually sheath their sword momentarily, while working out a more permanent agreement? The facts on the ground point to the contrary. So, it is back to square one for everyone. The stark realities we have to face up to as Nigerians is that the search for positive peace in the North-East is light years away from being achieved. contradictions in what the presidency and defense chiefs would have people believe and the facts on ground points to the need for a more constructive, sincere and focused approach to ameliorating the boiling situation in the North-East. This column has continually, in tandem with voices from across the globe, suggested various strategies that can help bring peace to the North-East; approaches that if followed to the letter, will help in dousing the fiery fire of war in this part of Nigeria.

It is not too late for the Nigerian Government to do a detour and follow the true course that will lead to the achievement of positive peace in the North-East and also build a template that will help in preventing future wars in the country. Stop playing politics with the lives of Nigerians! God bless Nigeria!