

Nigerian President Explores Amnesty for Christian Persecutor Boko Haram

A month ago, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan said he would not negotiate with the militant Islamic sect **Boko Haram** because they were “ghosts,” faceless adversaries who would not step forward.

That was then. On Wednesday the president is scheduled to formally inaugurate a committee to explore amnesty for Boko Haram in return for the end of a four-year uprising that has killed thousands of Nigerians.

Suggested by the spiritual leader of Nigeria’s Muslims, studied by a national security panel, and encouraged by the leaders of Nigeria’s ravaged Northern states crucial to the President’s political future, amnesty is now a real prospect for an armed group that has declared its desire to replace the Nigerian state, about to celebrate its 100th anniversary, with one built upon Islamic law.

Reaction to Jonathan’s April 17 decision to put the question into the hands of a Presidential committee has been loud and contentious. Most Christian leaders have denounced the idea as a gross injustice, though some have given a qualified endorsement. Muslim reaction is less than unanimous. Boko Haram itself has rejected the idea. Reaction by government officials is split, and at least two committee appointees have refused to serve. And it has intensified tensions between Christian and Muslim youth who are threatening a new wave of sectarian violence.

The Current Situation

Jonathan’s April 17 announcement made headlines across Nigeria. Leadership Nigeria newspapers, quoting Presidential

spokesman Reuben Abati, spelled out the basic details of the committee's charge:

- "Constructively engage key members of Boko Haram and define a comprehensive and workable framework for resolving the crisis of insecurity in the country," including disarmament within 60 days;
- Establish a "comprehensive victims' support program;"
- Explore "mechanisms to address the underlying causes of insurgencies."

The 26-member committee is made up of government officials, police and military officials, politicians and human-rights activists, according to the Associated Press. Abati said Jonathan would formally inaugurate the committee April 24 at the Presidential Villa in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, according to Leadership Nigeria. It will have 60 days to complete its work.

The AP dryly noted the "ambitious goal" of trying to disarm Boko Haram: "The command-and-control structure of the main extremist network Boko Haram remains unclear. It also has sparked several splinter groups, including those wanting to increasingly target Western interests and who have connections to other al-Qaida-linked groups."

What is clear is that the violence continues. A firefight erupted Friday between Nigerian soldiers and local militants in the northeastern town of Baga, in the heart of the region where Boko Haram was born. By Sunday, nearly half the town had burned to the ground. The UK's *Telegraph* reported that locals claimed 185 people had been killed, though the Army disputed that number and the Red Cross had not yet arrived to confirm the number of fatalities, and by Tuesday the Associated Press had reported that the figure was not being disputed by military officials. There was no public accounting of how many of the dead were civilians, soldiers or rebels.

Background

Nigeria has considered amnesty for insurgent groups before. In 2009, militants in the Nigeria's southern Delta, upset at the exploitation of the region by oil companies, laid down arms in return for a greater share of the wealth being extracted from the oilfields.

The idea of amnesty for Boko Haram gained traction in March, when the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, proposed it at a meeting of Ja'matu Nasril Islam, or JNI, the main Nigerian Muslim umbrella group. Sokoto, in Nigeria's northwest, is a seat of Islamic learning and the Sultan is the country's Muslim spiritual leader. "If amnesty is declared, it will give so many of those young men who have been running and hiding to embrace that amnesty," he was quoted by Vanguard Media as saying on March 16.

Jonathan was quick to refuse, during a March visit to Yobe state in northeast Nigeria. "You cannot declare amnesty for ghosts," he was quoted by Premium Times and other news agencies. "Boko Haram still operates like ghosts. So you can't talk about amnesty for Boko Haram now until you see the people you are discussing with."

Calls for him to reconsider came from within his own People's Democratic Party. "Our people are being killed every day, our economy is crippled. We want the President to make a U-turn, grant them amnesty, protect our lives and address the security challenges in the region," Deputy Senate Leader Abdul Ningi said on behalf of PDP National Assembly members from the northeast, *Premium Times* reported.

Northern governors and traditional leaders pressed the same message during an April 3 meeting with Jonathan, according to Sahara Reporters, a New York-based news service devoted to exposing what it calls "rampant kleptocracy on the continent of Africa." Citing "sources at the Presidential Villa," Sahara Reporters noted that Nigerian military commanders arrived the

next day, spending five hours trying to convince the President that amnesty is a bad idea.

The officers were barely out of the palace before the government “set up a technical committee to advise President Goodluck Jonathan on whether to grant amnesty to Boko Haram,” the Catholic News Service reported.

Sahara Reporters struck a sardonic tone: “Although today he seem[s] highly disposed to the amnesty idea, he is known to change his mind fairly easily.”

As the Amnesty Security Committee began its work, lobbying intensified and the amnesty question began to take on a life of its own. The Northern Traditional Rulers Council, led by the Sultan of Sokoto, presented its position paper and met with Jonathan. Military leaders convened again, this time indicating to the committee they would support amnesty only if soldiers remained deployed in dangerous areas. Meanwhile, Leadership Nigeria newspapers reported that governors of four northern states—Bauchi, Yobe, Borno and Gombe—had, on their own, “initiate[d] talks with members of the Boko Haram sect to embrace the amnesty offered them by the federal government,” even though an amnesty plan has not yet been defined, let alone offered.

Christian Reaction

Christian organizations and leaders have responded almost universally negatively to the idea of amnesty for Boko Haram, whose bloody campaign across the Northern states has killed and injured hundreds of Christians and destroyed numerous Christian churches, schools, homes, businesses and farms. Vanguard Media published a roundup of reaction from the leaders of the Christian Association of Nigeria, or CAN , including:

- Rev. Joshua Ray Mains, Bauchi State Secretary: “Why should they be given amnesty? Are we congratulating them

for the people they have sent to their early graves or are we encouraging them to continue with their acts so that other groups can take advantage of the amnesty and continue to disrupt the peace of the country?"

- Rev. Abare Kallah, Gombe state chairman: "It's not about favoring one side. We are also wounded. If they are thinking that amnesty is going to be given to Boko Haram, I am sure that there is going to be another faction or group that the federal government cannot contend with."

Earlier, Vanguard Media quoted CAN General Secretary Rev. Musa Asake: "By canvassing for amnesty to blood-thirsty, Islamic fundamentalists who have killed without provocation, the JNFI is promoting the culture of crass impunity that desecrates the sanctity of human life." And Christianity Today reports that CAN President Ayo Oritsejafor considers Boko Haram "terrorists that should be crushed by Nigeria's military."

The association's youth wing issued a statement declaring amnesty would amount to "a clarion call to all terrorism in Nigeria" that would "fuel the anger of the Christian youth."

"Mr. President should remember that the amnesty being advocated is for Muslim youths who are the Boko Haram members and who have killed, maimed our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and children and also bombed and burnt our churches without provocation," youth president Simon Dolly is quoted as saying.

Nigeria's Catholic leaders are largely skeptical of amnesty for Boko Haram, though some say they would welcome dialog as a way to stop the violence. Catholic News Service published a roundup of clerical views, in which:

- Archbishop Felix Alaba Job of Ibadan, in Nigeria's south, "questioned why the government should 'grant amnesty to vandals of human souls and bodies.' "

- Retired Bishop Julius Babatunde Adedokun of Oyo, also in the south, “said granting amnesty to Boko Haram was ‘like granting amnesty to terrorists, it is unthinkable.’ “
- Bishop Felix Femi Ajakaye of nearby Ekiti said “‘if the government grants amnesty to Boko Haram, other groups would ask for amnesty, too. And when you go on granting amnesty to this sect, what about the victims of the Boko Haram’s insurgency?’ “

At the same time, Cardinal John Onaiyekan of Abuja said “we have to at least consider the possibility of another way of doing things,” according to the independent, lay-operated Catholic World News.

“The amnesty for Boko Haram must be considered as an option to stop the violence,” Onaiyekan told CWN. “In any war at some point you have to start talking among the contenders and I think that now is the moment. It is better to talk than shoot.” However, Onaiyekan also is quoted as saying any amnesty deal must include reparations for victims and repentance. “Without these two conditions, amnesty cannot be offered,” he said.

The emeritus archbishop of the Lagos archdiocese, Anthony Okogie, offered a similar view. “I am not against considering amnesty if the situation warrants it,” he told Premium Times. But “granting amnesty to a faceless group that consistently fails to dialogue with you is a mockery. How do we compensate all those who have lost their loved ones in the over two years of carnage? These are issues we need to address.”

Even from afar, the prospect of amnesty for Boko Haram is running into strenuous Christian opposition. The New York-based Christian Association of Nigerian-Americans issued a statement April 5, well before Jonathan formed the Amnesty Security Committee, calling the idea “treachery against the wives, children and relatives of the victims of Boko Haram

terrorists.”

Muslim Reaction

Despite the fact that the Sultan of Sokoto placed the prospect of amnesty on the table, Nigeria’s Muslim leaders are not uniformly behind the idea. Sahara Reporters captured several responses:

- “Nigeria is catalytically deteriorating. Today the national discourse is on corruption and amnesty for terrorism,” Sheikh Ahmad Gumi said during a March 26 sermon. Gumi said the cure for Boko Haram’s insurgency ought to involve a Muslim military commander of “special strike squads” that would, with the help of civilian cooperation, extract the militants from Nigerian society “like removing a tumor from the brain.”
- A Nigerian group calling itself Muslims Against Terror called the President’s exploration of amnesty “a disastrous precedence, where people believe they simply need to kill innocent people to get cash from the government.” Instead, the group said, “the government should consider a social welfare scheme for the people of the north because the entire area would hardly recover from the terrorist experience.”
- In Lagos, the director of Muslim Rights Concern, Ishaq Akintola, praised Jonathan’s initiative. “The Nigerian president is now thinking like the President of the whole country. Only by granting amnesty to the Boko Haram group can the President reposition the country for peaceful coexistence,” Akintola said.

Military Reaction

As the AP has noted, “human rights groups and local citizens blame both Boko Haram and security forces for committing violent atrocities against the local civilian population, fueling rage in the region.” Nigeria’s military is walking a fine line. Little has been heard about the commanders’ attitudes toward Jonathan’s amnesty initiative since their

early April meeting at which they lobbied him to drop it.

Among the scraps of evidence to emerge is an April 12 report from Leadership Nigeria that the top brass is expected to endorse amnesty, under the condition that soldiers remain deployed to Nigeria's trouble spots. Citing unnamed sources, Leadership Nigeria said the commanders' position was that "as long as the factor that brought the soldiers onto the streets persists, our soldiers remain on the streets."

Boko Haram Reaction

And what of Boko Haram itself?

"Surprisingly, the Nigerian government is talking about granting us amnesty. What wrong have we done? On the contrary, it is we that should grant you [a] pardon," said Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, according to the BBC, citing an Agence France-Presse transcription of an audio statement issued by the sect's leader. Shekau issued his refusal days before Goodluck Jonathan's April 17 announcement of the creation of the Presidential committee.

Vanguard Media reported that "another factional leader of the sect, Abu Dardam, had spurned the offer by the government, describing it as an insult. He claimed that the group rejected the offer because it did not recognize democracy as a form of government and the Nigerian Constitution."

General Reaction

Reactions from politicians, pundits, interest groups and even victims of Boko Haram have ranged from praise to condemnation to ambivalence. A brief sampling of opinion:

The PDP lined up behind its standard-bearer, proclaiming itself "optimistic that this drive will yield the desired results in the general good and restore the unity of our nation," Sahara Reporters noted.

Club Nigeria Ltd., a British nonprofit devoted to “mak[ing] Nigeria a functional society,” blasted the move. “Your Government shall by so doing have inadvertently entrenched the crime of murder and mass murder as a non-punishable act in Nigeria,” the Club said in a letter to Jonathan.

A group of widows of the victims of Boko Haram killings urged the militants to accept the amnesty, Leadership Nigeria reported. “Women have suffered most in the ongoing Boko Haram crisis; we have lost our husbands, parents, children and even fiancés. We are appealing to the sect to please take advantage of the planned amnesty and initiate talks with the government,” widow Malama Falmata Ibrahim, said.

The Congress for Progressive Change party, which outpolled Jonathan in the north in the 2011 elections, took a skeptical line. “We do not trust this federal government to sincerely bring about an end to the Boko Haram insurgency,” CPC spokesman Rotimi Fashakin told *This Day*. “We have said this before that the PDP-led government is in cahoots with the political Boko Haram and that they have been benefiting from the huge budgetary expenditure for security.”

Alhaji Umar Duhu, chairman of the conservative All Nigeria Peoples Party in the northern Adamawa State, told Leadership Nigeria he supports amnesty but doesn’t think Jonathan will work hard enough for it. “I don’t think there is any political will to push the amnesty proper. Because the way he is going about it gives us doubt, his sincerity towards giving amnesty to Boko Haram is questionable.”

In an editorial, the Nigerian Tribune observed Boko Haram elements had continued murderous attacks since the government’s study of amnesty began in early April. “The question that now arises is: what next – an unconditional surrender to terror and peace at any price?” The Tribune wrote. “Boko Haram is a potent threat to the fabric of Nigeria as a political entity. It is an insurrection that is aimed at

dismantling everything that holds Nigeria together.”

Still others, such as Pentecostal televangelist Chris Okotie, himself a presidential candidate in 2003 and 2007, walked down the middle.

“Amnesty is justifiable under an atmosphere of jaw-jaw or during a carrot and stick situation, not when one side to the conflict is invisible, implacable and unwilling to accept anything but its own terms, which in the case of Boko Haram, cannot stand on any civilized logic,” he said in an April 20 column.

“Nevertheless,” he added, “if the northern leaders strongly believe amnesty is a way out at this stage, it is worth giving a try. However, beyond clamoring for amnesty for the terror group, the (group of traditional leaders in the north) must give some form of assurance that it would actively participate in enforcing the peace we all expect.”

Even in the face of Boko Haram’s campaign of violence and disruption, some are measuring the political stakes bound up in Jonathan’s amnesty overtures. Writing in Vanguard Media, regional editor Soni Daniel observes that President Jonathan, looking ahead to the 2015 elections, has little choice but to accommodate the pro-amnesty voices in the north, where his support is weakest.

The political costs, however, could be significant, said Vanguard Media columnist Jide Ajani. “Mr. President has embarked on a fool’s errand—pure and simple,” he wrote. “In a polity of clashing socio-political, economic and religious interests, throwing the bait of amnesty at a dare-devil group only suggests one thing: A hopeless and helpless leadership.”

Only weeks after dismissing Boko Haram as “ghosts,” Ajani wrote, Jonathan’s exploration of pardon for the sect is evidence of “a massive deficit in statecraft at the highest level.”

Refusing the Appointment

Adding to the uncertainty surrounding Jonathan's amnesty committee is the defection of at least two appointees. Northern civil-rights activist Shehu Sani took his name off the roster partly because he said he wasn't consulted before his name was added.

The larger reason, Sani told *The Gaurdian Nigeria*, is the failure of the government to get Boko Haram buy-in to amnesty privately before going public with the committee. Doing so, he said, would have given the government leverage to hold the militants accountable to amnesty conditions.

The President of the National Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs, Datti Ahmed, also refused his appointment to the amnesty committee, saying it's too tightly linked to Jonathan. The committee chairman, for example, is a Presidential appointee, Minister of Special Duties Alhaji Tanimu Turaki.

Vanguard Media reported Monday that other committee appointees were voicing—anonynously, for now —complaints similar to those from Sani and Ahmed, and that more defections may be forthcoming.

The Reaction From the South

Perhaps more ominous than the intrigue surrounding membership on the amnesty committee are the threats of violence coming from youth-dominated Christian and Muslim groups in the south and north, respectively.

On April 14 a remnant group of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, or MEND, issued a statement that it would begin, May 31, a campaign of bombings of mosques and other Islamic communities, and assassinations of Muslim clerics. The reason: to "protect" Christians from continued attacks by Boko Haram in Nigeria's north.

The 2009 amnesty deal in the Delta region was supposed to disband MEND, but splinter groups, with different loyalties,

remain. They are concern enough that Kingsley Kuku, Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta Affairs, issued a plea to the group that made the threat to settle its grievances with dialog through his office.

Less diplomatic was the Arewa Youth Forum, a unit of the Arewa People's Congress, a militant group defending Muslim members of two large West-African ethnic groups, the Hausa and Fulani. Already on record as a supporter of amnesty for Boko Haram, the youth forum's national president, Alhaji Ibrahim Gambo Gujingu, on April 16 warned MEND that it would meet deadly violence with deadly retaliation, Vanguard Media reported.

The uprising in the Nigerian Delta can't be compared to the Boko Haram insurgency, said Chris Ekiyor, former National President of the Ijaw Youth Council and now Caretaker Chairman of Patani Local Government Council in Delta state. In an interview with Vanguard Media, Ekiyor said the Delta militants had a specific grievance—oil exploration that left the region impoverished—and a desire to preserve Nigeria.

Boko Haram, by contrast, has an opaque agenda, and designs on Sharia. "It is a misplaced national priority to even think about granting amnesty to a bunch of people who, in all their activities, have shown criminality, have shown cold blooded murder and have no focus or issue," he said.

The Delta is watching whether any of the national resources that the 2009 amnesty poured into the Delta region will be diverted to the north, raising the stakes of Goodluck Jonathan's amnesty gamble even higher.