Political Pressure to Return:
PUTTING NORTHEAST NIGERIA’S DISPLACED CITIZENS AT RISK

Alexandra Lamarche and Mark Yarnell

March 2018
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY ..............................................................................................................................................................1  
RECOMMENDATIONS ...........................................................................................................................................2  
OVERVIEW ..............................................................................................................................................................4  
  Challenges for the Humanitarian Response .................................................................................................... 5  
    The Conditions of the Displaced in Northeastern Nigeria ........................................................................ 5  
    A Militarized Humanitarian Response ........................................................................................................ 6  
    The Camp Pass System and the Protection of IDPs .................................................................................. 7  
    Strengthening Protection for the Displaced ............................................................................................... 8  
    Dysfunction inside the Nigerian Government ........................................................................................... 9  
Plans for Return ..............................................................................................................................................10  
  Conditions in the Local Government Areas: Bama .....................................................................................10  
  Competing Views inside the Nigerian Government ....................................................................................11  
  Displaced Populations Divided on Returns .................................................................................................12  
  Politics over Planning .................................................................................................................................13  
The Need for a Plan .......................................................................................................................................13  
  Necessary Planning Steps for Returns ........................................................................................................14  
CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................................................15
The crisis in Northeast Nigeria has reached an inflection point. Widespread famine no longer appears imminent, and the Nigerian military has pushed Boko Haram out of a number of cities and towns. However, the humanitarian crisis is far from over, and major challenges remain in responding to the needs of the internally displaced. At the same time, Nigerian officials are pressing for large-scale returns of the displaced to recently liberated areas—often before conditions can legitimately support returns. The Nigerian government should pause organized returns to insecure areas and work with the international community to improve services and protection for the displaced, while setting the stage for sustainable pathways home. In addition, the government must work to support local integration for those who may never return home.

It is important to note that some humanitarian indicators have improved since Refugees International (RI) last visited Nigeria in 2016. A badly needed injection of donor funding in 2017 and an expansion of the response have led to tangible improvements of conditions for the communities and populations affected by the conflict. Hundreds of thousands of Nigerians, if not more, have begun to return home. However, the scale of the challenge remains staggering. More than 1.6 million Nigerians are displaced within the country, and 7.7 million are in urgent need of emergency assistance. Additionally, conflict continues to cause more displacement, and humanitarians estimate that 930,000 Nigerians in need are located in hard-to-reach areas due to ongoing fighting and military restrictions on movements.

The humanitarian response itself still suffers from systemic weaknesses. The United Nations and other international aid organizations have yet to establish robust mechanisms to address protection issues—whether for gathering data, conducting analysis, or implementing a coordinated response. Furthermore, no effective civil-military coordination has been established, and aid agencies are divided on the question of appropriate engagement with the Nigerian army in and around relief efforts. For its part, the Nigerian government is deeply disorganized, with multiple agencies claiming ownership over the same relief and stabilization efforts.

Of greatest concern are recent announcements by senior Nigerian officials that the authorities will encourage and facilitate large-scale returns in the northeastern state of Borno to remote areas recently secured from Boko Haram. Some internally displaced persons (IDPs) have begun returning to their local government areas (LGAs) of origin, but the voluntariness of many of these returns is in question. Further, many IDPs now reside in liberated urban centers in their LGAs and cannot access their home villages due to ongoing insecurity in rural areas. Despite these challenges, the governor of Borno announced at the end of last year that IDPs in the state capital of Maiduguri would return to Bama—a garrison-like town around which the military only maintains security within a 5-kilometer radius. This announcement was followed by the governor’s declaration that the state would close all the IDP camps across Borno by May 2018.

In January 2018, RI conducted a mission to Nigeria to assess both the viability of this return plan and the wider humanitarian response. The RI team traveled to Abuja, Maiduguri, and Bama, and it interviewed a wide range of IDPs, returnees, international aid officials, and representatives of the Nigerian government and military. The team found that
the overall conditions in Bama town are not conducive to sustainable returns at this time, especially on a large scale. Services for returnees are lacking, and the security situation is uncertain. However, political pressure for returns to continue is likely to increase with the approach of the 2019 national elections.

RI believes that the Nigerian government should refrain from carrying out large-scale organized returns to Bama and other LGAs until conditions are conducive to safe and dignified returns. Doing so prematurely would put lives at risk. RI is also concerned that large-scale return programs promoted by the government under current circumstances will inevitably create the likelihood that returns will be less than voluntary. Of course, any individual returns that take place must be voluntary and based on accurate information about security, service availability, and livelihood opportunities. Further, the Nigerian government must establish clear roles and responsibilities among the federal and state agencies that are responding to the IDP crisis. For their part, the United Nations and its partners must improve their protection and assistance of IDPs by developing a deeper understanding of protection trends and establish improved coordination systems.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The Government of Nigeria must:**

- **Refrain from carrying out any immediate plans for premature large-scale returns**—The Nigerian government must ease pressure on IDPs to return, while providing accurate, easy-to-understand information about the security conditions and service availability in home areas. The government must also refrain from encouraging returns and implementing its planned large-scale return programs to home areas until these areas are safe and viable for sustainable returns.

- **Produce clear and coherent plans for voluntary returns**—Before facilitated returns occur, plans must be developed and made public. These plans must be informed by consultations with displaced communities and need to be drafted and monitored with the help of international organizations. The plans must include security monitoring and benchmarks, identify implementing partners, provide timelines, ensure the voluntariness of returns, and provide integration support for those who do not wish to return.

- **Develop a domestic legal framework for the protection and assistance of IDPs**—With the help of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the Nigerian government drafted an IDP policy in 2012, but the document was never adopted by the Nigerian Parliament. Because the displacement crisis shows no signs of waning, the government must adopt and implement a national IDP policy that builds on the 2012 process and takes into account the current displacement context.

- **Provide both clear leadership and unity of effort in the response**—Numerous government bodies claim to be leading the response and are vying for funds and influence. The lack of coherence between federal, state, and local actors must be immediately addressed by the Nigerian authorities. This must be done by clearly defining and communicating the roles, division of labor, and areas of responsibility for each body coordinating and responding to the crisis in the Northeast.
The United Nations and other humanitarian agencies must:

- **Fill critical information gaps on IDPs’ intentions to return**—Although some intention surveys were carried out during 2017, significant information is lacking on the intentions of IDPs in Maiduguri and newly accessible areas. Organizations with the capacity and expertise should carry out, in consultation with the Nigerian government, an in-depth survey of IDPs’ intentions to return in Maiduguri, as well as areas that are newly accessible. This information must be utilized in the development of any plans for returns and local integration.

- **Improve and support the mainstreaming of protection**—In the wake of earlier failures to address extensive protection issues, the UN Humanitarian Country Team recently developed and approved its Centrality of Protection Strategy. All partners must now implement this strategy in order to mainstream protection throughout their programs. A senior protection officer should be appointed by—and report to—the UN’s humanitarian coordinator (HC) to oversee and support the implementation of the strategy.

- **Strengthen civil-military coordination**—The HC, with support from UN headquarters, if necessary, must lead efforts to adopt and implement a policy on civil-military coordination. This will help ensure a coherent, principled approach to engagement with the Nigerian military by humanitarian actors. On the basis of this policy, the HC should develop robust civil-military mechanisms with the Nigerian military to facilitate effective cooperation.

- **Improve analysis of restrictions on freedom of movement**—The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should map all entry/exit pass systems that exist at formal IDP camps to determine if movements are being unjustly restricted. This process should be supported by deploying protection workers at the camp gates to monitor for rights violations.

Donor governments and international financial institutions should:

- **Maintain funding**—Following the significant scaling up of funding last year, donors must continue to provide support for populations in the Northeast. With continued displacement and millions of people still in need of assistance, particularly for food aid and psychosocial support, global attention must be sustained. Donor governments must maintain strong financial support for humanitarian interventions and should fully fund the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan request for $1.05 billion in order to reach the 6.1 million people in need in Northeast Nigeria.

- **Support the provision of national identification cards**—Donor governments should support the UNHCR’s efforts to expand its current program (in cooperation with the Nigerian government) for issuing national identification cards for IDPs. These cards allow IDPs to attend government-run schools and access health services when and where these services are available.

- **Establish safeguards that ensure accountability and transparency**—The World Bank must put in place, through its Multi-Sectoral Crisis Recovery Project for North Eastern Nigeria, protection-specific safeguards to ensure that its contributions to the Nigerian government are not being used to plan, coordinate, or implement potentially harmful policies, such as premature returns.
Nigeria’s conflict with Boko Haram has resulted in the deaths of more than 20,000 civilians and one of the largest humanitarian crises in Africa. As the war enters its ninth year, the Nigerian army has made considerable gains against Boko Haram. Claims of victory over the insurgency, however, are premature. Government forces have recaptured larger towns and cities from Boko Haram factions, but many rural areas still fall under insurgent and vigilante rule. Incidents of violence—including combat operations, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and sectarian clashes—are reported on a daily basis. The vast majority of the casualties are civilian, and the violence continues to force people into displacement—often many times over.

In the worst-affected northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, violence and resource scarcity continue to leave 1.6 million Nigerians internally displaced, have forced more than 214,000 to seek refuge in neighboring countries, and have left 7.7 million in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Early last year, the United Nations warned that Nigeria was facing famine-like conditions due to insecurity triggered by the war. Tragically, Boko Haram continues to attack villages and kidnap residents. On February 19, 2018, the group kidnapped 110 schoolgirls from Dapchi in Yobe State. The situation in northeastern Nigeria is further complicated by the continued forced returns of Nigerian refugees from Cameroon. Since 2015, an estimated 100,000 people have returned, and these numbers continue to increase daily.

The northeastern state of Borno hosts almost 80 percent of the country’s IDPs. The highest concentration of IDPs is in Maiduguri—the state capital and the birthplace of Boko Haram. Conditions for IDPs in Maiduguri and across the Northeast are poor—whether they reside in formal government-run camps, in informal settlements, or within host communities. Many IDP camps and settlements lack access to basic necessities due to a shortage of funding and a lack of effective coordination among humanitarian actors.

As military clearance operations have made more outlying areas accessible, hundreds of thousands of IDPs have left Maiduguri, preferring to return or resettle in other districts of Borno. At its height, the number of displaced across the Northeast was well over 2 million. Estimates in Maiduguri alone have fallen from 445,314 in January 2017 to 259,798 as of February 2018. Departures from Maiduguri have been labeled “voluntary” returns. Indeed, many IDPs are eager to leave, due to the poor conditions in the camps. However, a significant percentage of those who have left Maiduguri are unable to return to their villages of origin due to insecurity. Instead, they remain in the urban centers in their home region—effectively suffering a form of secondary displacement.

Whether returning or resettling, scores have gone to areas that are not yet safe. Some returnees appear to have received false information about the conditions in their home communities. Others appear to have been told that IDP camps would be closing and that they would no longer be able to access aid in Maiduguri.

Against this backdrop, the Nigerian authorities have recently announced plans to stabilize and rebuild some larger towns in the districts outside Maiduguri that are referred to as LGAs and to undertake large-scale returns of IDPs. Varied plans for the town of Bama have been highly publicized. Efforts to return IDPs to the LGAs appear to have taken on added political urgency since announcements that Boko Haram has been defeated and in light of the upcoming national elections, for which political leaders are eager to demonstrate success.

However, it is clear that conditions in Bama and other recently liberated areas in Borno State are far from conducive to safe returns. Some of the LGAs have only recently been liberated from Boko Haram, and the surrounding countryside often remains deeply insecure. Efforts to reconstruct towns like Bama are still in their early stages. Yet, in the face of political pressure and announcements that IDP camps would soon be closed,
it is a cause of concern that there is an absence of coordinated plans, resources, and leadership to facilitate safe, dignified, and voluntary returns.

**In the face of political pressure and announcements that IDP camps would soon be closed, concerns exist that there is an absence of coordinated plans, resources, and leadership.**

Furthermore, the overall response suffers from significant structural weaknesses. Conditions in areas of displacement remain poor, with insufficient service delivery, and IDPs continue to face serious protection risks, with widespread gender-based violence across the region. Additionally, the Nigerian security services restrict the freedom of movement of IDPs, and protection mechanisms are insufficiently robust to prevent or respond to violations and abuse. All these shortcomings would likely be exacerbated by premature and large-scale returns.

**CHALLENGES FOR THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

**The Conditions of the Displaced in Northeast Nigeria**

Since RI’s last mission to northeastern Nigeria in early 2016, humanitarian relief operations have been scaled up significantly. The international response to extreme food scarcity helped to mitigate the risk of famine and provided a much-needed increase in funding and humanitarian aid in 2017. However, northeastern Nigeria still faces food shortages, poor service delivery, and widespread protection concerns. For 2018, the UN’s Humanitarian Response Plan calls for $1.05 billion to provide assistance to the 6.1 million people in need across the states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe. In addition, an estimated 930,000 people are living in hard-to-reach areas in these states. Humanitarian relief workers have yet to access these people, and many are likely in urgent need of assistance.

Daily existence remains difficult for most of the displaced. Conflict, climate change, and displacement have led to the loss of property, farmable land, and access to trade routes. Given that the majority of IDPs were farmers—agricultural or livestock—before their displacement, and that most face extremely limited access to livelihoods, these populations are now heavily reliant on aid to meet their basic needs.

As of February 2018, 60 percent of the IDPs in the Northeast were living within host communities, and 40 percent were living in camps or camp-like settings (both formal camps and informal settlements). Almost all the displaced interviewed by RI in Borno State indicated that they were living in poor conditions, regardless of where they were located. Nearly all of them indicated that they experience food shortages between monthly distributions; this has been corroborated by a recent REACH study of IDPs in Borno, in which 71 percent of those surveyed stated that food and cash distributions were irregular, and 20 percent said they received these distributions on a monthly basis. Moreover, numerous reports detail aid diversion by government bodies, armed forces, and aid organizations.

The national identification cards of many IDPs were lost when their homes were destroyed or when they were forced to flee. These cards allow citizens to obtain birth certificates for their children, attend government-run
schools, and access government-operated health centers. To address this issue, the UNHCR, in cooperation with the Nigerian government, has been issuing cards for IDPs. However, a lack of resources has led to long waits and slow provision of cards. For many women, waiting many hours in line is not feasible, given their familial duties. As a result, they have been unable to obtain their cards. Donor support is required for the UNHCR and the Nigerian government to accelerate and expand their efforts. Moreover, the creation of mobile stations in and around IDP settlements would provide for easier distribution of cards for all.

The need for trauma recovery assistance is staggering, and its provision falls short of the requirements. Many IDPs still struggle with the trauma of being forced from their homes and the horrific violence they have suffered or witnessed. Falmata, a young mother who was held captive by Boko Haram for years until she fled, told RI that she has been unable to receive psychosocial support to help her cope with the suffering she has endured and the atrocities she has witnessed. When asked why, she explained: “People don’t want to associate with us. Camp management decides who gets assistance, and many camp officials hide the truth to make things seem better than they are.”

Moreover, IDP settlements—both formal and informal—have been the targets of person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIEDs) and armed attacks by Boko Haram factions. Given the prevalent threats, regular government forces and the paramilitary Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) oversee a pass system to restrict movements in and out of camps. Although this is meant to ensure the safety of those living in the camps, the process of obtaining permission to leave has become riddled with discrimination and sexual exploitation.

**A Militarized Humanitarian Response**

The Nigerian military plays a major role in the lives of displaced populations. It is the main government actor in areas where aid activities are ongoing in the Northeast. When territory is retaken from Boko Haram, it is the Nigerian military that first encounters previously inaccessible populations, at times delivering aid to those in need. Until recently, several IDP camps in remote areas of Borno were managed entirely by the military. New IDPs arriving in government-controlled towns must pass through military screening centers—meaning, essentially, that they are being held in detention, sometimes for weeks at a time—before starting to reside in formal IDP camps (unless they are sent to prison). The security forces control IDPs’ movements into and out of the camps.

Referring to the role of military, one international aid worker interviewed by RI characterized the situation as “the most unprincipled humanitarian response that I have ever encountered.” Several international aid officials expressed deep concern that relief operations are not rooted in the core principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. They feared that aid organizations are perceived as delivering services that are in line with the military’s priorities rather than on the basis of need. Aid staff expressed distress that this perception has a particularly negative impact on opportunities to negotiate access to populations in areas of the Northeast that are outside government control, thus hampering efforts to expand aid activities into rural and harder-to-reach areas.

In practice, the response of the humanitarian community to the role of the military has varied significantly. Some organizations have chosen to forgo the use of military escorts. Others have built field offices and guest houses outside new UN humanitarian hubs established in the LGAs (these hubs are protected by the Nigerian military). Other aid providers have decided that it is simply not feasible to deliver services in certain locations without operating next to the military. One aid official observed,
“(This is) the most unprincipled humanitarian response that I have ever encountered.”
– International aid worker

For its part, the Nigerian military has put both restrictions and demands on the humanitarian community. Aid workers require military approval to move outside Maiduguri or to access formal IDP camps. Transportation of relief supplies by road to towns like Bama requires a military escort. In one particularly striking example, according to numerous interviewees, the Nigerian army asked a UN aid agency to pay to build a guard tower outside an IDP camp to help protect against external threats. The army contingent in question apparently lacked the financial resources to pay for the tower itself. In this case, the agency agreed to the request in light of the very real security threat to IDPs.

All this has led to tangible tension among members of the humanitarian community that is hindering the response. Further, incidents like the guard tower request represent a breakdown in civil-military coordination. An aid agency should not receive—much less feel compelled to fulfill—a request of this nature from a national military. Last year, a UNOCHA civil-military team called for special guidelines for Nigeria. It also called for a more robust civilian-military coordination mechanism to help the humanitarian community navigate this challenging environment. To date, neither recommendation has been fully carried out. Civil-military guidelines have been drafted but not yet adopted. In a context where aid groups and the military are constantly and necessarily interacting, there need to be clear and established channels for cooperative and principled engagement.

**The Camp Pass System and the Protection of IDPs**

In its current form, the ad-hoc pass system overseen by the Nigerian military to control the movement of IDPs presents significant protection challenges. At government-run IDP camps in Maiduguri and throughout Borno, the army and the paramilitary CJTF issue a limited number of passes for IDPs to exit and enter the camps throughout the day. At some camps, IDPs are instructed to apply to government-appointed camp managers for passes, but the process is opaque. The stated objective of the pass system is to ensure the safety and security of IDPs themselves. Indeed, the security situation at the camps is a major source of concern. Boko Haram has frequently targeted displacement camps with PBIEDs. In January 2018, three large IDP sites in Maiduguri were hit, resulting in at least 17 dead and dozens wounded.

Although the need for security measures is undeniable, the movement restrictions raise protection concerns for IDPs. These restrictions limit IDPs’ opportunities to carry out the activities of daily life—from gathering firewood to going to the market to connecting with family members. As one aid worker in Bama put it, the IDP camp “is like an open prison” for many who reside there.

Furthermore, the pass system—at least in the formal camps visited by RI in Maiduguri and Bama—appears to be both inconsistent and even discriminatory in its application. The number of passes can fluctuate significantly from day to day. At some camps, the security...
forces limit the movement of women more than men. Protection workers told RI that the military often assume that if a female head of household leaves the camp, it is to bring supplies to her Boko Haram–member husband in the bush. The result is that the freedom of movement of female-headed households is often more restricted than that of other IDPs.

The authority to issue passes for IDP movement brings with it an inherent risk of abuse and exploitation—a risk amplified in an environment of widespread gender-based violence. As RI and others have reported, sexual abuse against women and girls is pervasive, not only at the hands of Boko Haram but also at the hands security forces and government officials charged with protecting and assisting them.24 Moreover, as reported by the UN in November 2017, “There are alarming trends of sexual exploitation in affected areas, allegedly being perpetrated by members of the security forces and [the] . . . CJTF as well as by national humanitarian actors. . . . Adolescent girls and women are forced into survival sex in exchange for food, authorization to move in and out of the camps to pursue livelihoods, and other key necessities, including firewood.”25 Aid workers told RI that women and girls face serious risks of abuse and exploitation when they seek a pass to exit the camp.

There is no easy answer to balance security imperatives with ensuring that rights are upheld. To start, the UNHCR should organize and lead a mapping exercise of the various pass systems at formal IDP camps. This will give the aid community a systematic understanding of how the pass system is being implemented and explore opportunities for advocating to the Nigerian government to expand freedom of movement for the IDPs. In addition, the UNHCR should deploy protection workers at the camp gates to spot check for rights violations. At a minimum, passes must not be used as a tool of exploitation. They should be issued on the basis of transparent criteria, with safeguards built in to protect against gender-based violence.

Strengthening Protection for the Displaced

The military pass system is not the only challenge when it comes to the protection of IDPs in Northeast Nigeria. As noted above, protection actors and aid groups have documented many instances in which the Nigerian authorities and others have violated the rights of IDPs. Furthermore, relief organizations briefed RI on cases in which their access or service delivery efforts have been restricted—presumably in retaliation for reporting abuses. On their own, these trends are cause for serious concern. But as political momentum builds for the Nigerian government to realize more returns to the LGAs, there is a very real risk that the protection environment could deteriorate. Systems must be in place to prevent and respond to a growing number of potential rights violations as IDPs come under pressure to return to areas where conditions may not yet be suitable.

The United Nations and the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) protection architecture in Nigeria is insufficiently robust to deal effectively with the current caseload of violations, much less respond to demands of the new push for returns. Steps should be taken to strengthen this system on at least three levels: the Protection Sector Working Group (PSWG), the UN Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), and relations between protection actors and IDPs at the community level—as well with the Nigerian authorities.
First of all, the PSWG is meant to serve as the key coordinating body that convenes international and national aid organizations, as well as Nigerian government agencies, concerned with IDP protection. The working group is co-led by the UNCHR, Nigeria’s National Human Rights Commission, and an international NGO partner. The PSWG’s key tasks are to coordinate the protection response at both national and state levels, to promote the mainstreaming of protection across all humanitarian sectors, and to ensure accountability to affected populations.

Unfortunately, multiple aid workers, donors, and UN officials told RI that the PSWG needs to be strengthened to bring additional value to the response. The staff members of several organizations told RI that though the PSWG serves as a forum for sharing information, there is little in the way of developing shared analyses or strategies and plans for preventing or responding to protection violations. All this needs to happen. The first step is for the PSWG to elaborate terms of reference and a program of action so that the roles and objectives of its leaders and members will be clear.

In addition, the HCT can take steps to improve its impact. In June 2017, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee deployed a support mission to Nigeria to assess the state of humanitarian operations and to make recommendations for improvements. The mission identified the lack of an overall protection strategy as a weakness in the response. The HCT has since drafted its Centrality of Protection Strategy, which includes both a broad protection analysis and strategy. The key now is implementation. The UN’s humanitarian coordinator should consider establishing the position of senior protection officer in his or her office to support the strategy’s implementation and mainstreaming.

Finally, as political pressure for IDP returns ramps up, it is imperative to have a solid and effective humanitarian protection system in place. The international humanitarian community must help ensure that any returns that take place are voluntary and dignified. Beyond conducting intention surveys, this requires protection agencies, like the UNHCR, to reinforce community relations with IDPs in Maiduguri—both inside and outside camps. They should also establish clear lines of communication with the government and military actors that may be tasked with carrying out returns. Finally, protection actors should engage with the highest levels of government to ensure that harmful policies are not launched, including return activities. This advocacy should be coordinated in advance with key donors, so the international community speaks with one voice. This engagement with government actors should also be used to establish mechanisms to address violations as they arise.

**Dysfunction inside the Nigerian Government**

Most important, the Nigerian government has the primary responsibility to assist and protect IDPs in its territory. However, the government is not currently organized for success in fulfilling this responsibility; nor does it have an official IDP policy. One was drafted in 2012 with the help of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, but it was never adopted by the Nigerian Parliament. Various government ministries and agencies at the federal and state levels have attempted to respond to the needs of IDPs, often with international support. However, cooperation between government bodies that are engaged in the response—particularly between the federal and state levels—is limited, and there is a lack of clear identification of roles and reporting lines.
To name just a few of the involved agencies and entities, in 2016, Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari established the Presidential Committee on the North-East Initiative (PCNI) to coordinate and provide oversight to relief and rehabilitation programs in the Northeast region. At the same time, an interministerial task force, led by the Ministry of Budget and National Planning, was established to coordinate humanitarian operations. The task force is supported by the Emergency Coordination Center. There are also the existing national and state emergency management agencies and the strong hand of the governor of Borno, including the state-level Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement (RRR), which is based in Maiduguri. Additionally, the Nigerian Parliament recently established a body known as the North East Development Commission (NEDC) that, on paper, will replace the coordination role of the PCNI and also manage development and reconstruction funds. In practice, however, the NEDC is not yet functional.

The officials of various government agencies told RI they were the ones in charge of humanitarian and development efforts in the Northeast. Interviews with numerous government and UN officials exposed significant tension and mistrust, both among government agencies and between the Nigerian government and the UN. Nigerian officials told RI that they are frustrated by the UN and other actors that, in their view, treat Nigeria like a “failed state” and implement programs without consulting the government. This is a reasonable issue that needs to be addressed. But in turn, the Nigerian government must establish a coherent response in the Northeast, at both the federal and state levels.

Without delay, the Nigerian Parliament should adopt a national IDP policy to guide all actors involved in protecting and assisting IDPs. Additionally, it is incumbent on the president to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and divisions of labor for the government entities involved in the response. If the NEDC is indeed meant to serve as the lead coordination body, its role and mandate must be clarified as soon as possible.

**PLANS FOR RETURN**

In a December 2017 interview, Borno’s governor, Kashim Shettima, announced that the state government intended to return IDPs living in Maiduguri to their LGAs of origin—where they would live in de facto garrison towns. There, former residents of these towns could return to their homes. As for those IDPs from surrounding villages that remain insecure, it is not clear whether they would be integrated into the garrison towns themselves or kept in secondary displacement until they could return to their villages. Five such garrison towns would be developed in Borno State, with the town of Bama serving as the pilot. Bama was once an important business hub and home to more than 250,000 people, but its population largely fled when Boko Haram took over in 2013. Nigerian forces successfully recaptured Bama in 2015, but the majority of those who fled have yet to return.

RI is deeply concerned that the mounting political pressure for displaced populations to go home en masse will result in returns to areas of Borno State before conditions are ready. The potential for forced or coerced returns must be mitigated, particularly given that the 2019 Nigerian election campaign is already in full swing and most political leaders appear intent on demonstrating success in the war against Boko Haram and a return to normalcy as part of their campaign. Returns have been portrayed in the public discourse as a key metric of this success. However, returns in the current environment could be disastrous and will put lives at unnecessary risk.

**Conditions in the Local Government Areas: Bama**

To begin with, conditions in many LGAs in Borno are not yet conducive to safe and dignified returns. Although hundreds of thousands of northeastern refugees and IDPs return to their areas of origin on a yearly basis, these movements have too often been prematurely induced by poor living conditions in areas of displacement and by inaccurate information about the conditions where they are going. These types of hasty returns have often led to similarly poor conditions in areas of return and subsequent displacements.
This will also be the case in Bama if returns are to occur in the coming months. Currently, there is an IDP camp in Bama housing 15,000 IDPs, who are confined to the grounds of a former secondary school, and the number of IDPs in the camp continues to rise. Movement into and out of the camp is heavily restricted and controlled through the pass system. Outside the camp, the city is a ghost town. With the exception of a heavy military presence and reconstruction crews, the streets of Bama are barren and littered with debris. Thousands of homes remain in ruins.

Access to basic services is still limited or entirely nonexistent, and this will remain the case until civil servants return to fill the critical gaps in the provision of services—especially with regard to protection, health care, and education. Many humanitarian actors reported to RI that the government is pressuring them to provide aid for those who return or resettle in these new areas.

Despite the government’s numerous claims that Boko Haram has been defeated, security is precarious, and the militant group still attempts to penetrate the military’s security perimeter around the city. Returnees would face severe restrictions on their movements—much like those living in the IDP camp in Bama—and would be trapped in a garrison-like town. The road from Maiduguri to Bama is repeatedly the scene of armed attacks and explosions of improvised devices. As such, the military often prohibits civilian passage or requires escorts. The dangers are ever-present, and road closures would hinder the economy and complicate the provision of necessities for the population.

It is particularly important that high-ranking Nigerian military officers in Bama candidly told RI that they did not support programs to bring back residents at this stage. “Before returns happen, civil society must return and salaries must be paid,” an officer explained. Multiple officers stressed that returns would complicate the military campaign against Boko Haram and that the military’s secured area within a 5-kilometer radius around Bama is “not ready to be expanded.”

**Competing Views inside the Nigerian Government**

The military officers in Bama were not the only Nigerian officials to offer a contrarian view of intended returns. Indeed, when RI interviewed several federal and state government representatives regarding the plan, much of the internal dysfunction described above was on display.
Most underscored the importance of returns as part of the wider effort to stabilize the region and alleviate pressure on services, infrastructure, and populations in Maiduguri. However, there were significant disagreements among Nigerian officials about the contours and efficacy of plans for returns.

At the state level, representatives of Borno’s Ministry of RRR supported Shettima’s intended plan, underscoring that returns would begin in the coming months and that all residents could return by the end of 2018. As part of this effort, ministry officials claimed to have funded the reconstruction or rehabilitation of 70 percent of the homes in the pilot town of Bama. However, international aid officials in Bama estimate that reconstruction efforts there were closer to 40 percent completed. Over the last six months, Borno State officials have announced multiple dates when these returns would happen, but these dates have come and gone. Although the government has not since offered new timelines for returns, Governor Shettima announced in early March that the state government was in the process of enacting a plan to officially close down all the IDP camps throughout Borno State by May 2018.32 Much like Shettima’s previous announcement, this proclamation was not accompanied by a detailed implementation strategy.

Meanwhile, at the federal level, an official of the PCNI—the body charged with coordinating interventions and recovery efforts in the Northeast—stated in an interview with RI that Governor Shettima’s “statements cannot become policy.” The PCNI has envisioned a different approach to the returns that it intends to lead in Bama. Though the official and his colleagues believed that the return of hundreds of thousands of former residents could be feasible before the end of the year, he indicated that many of the IDPs in Maiduguri had started new lives and would likely not want to return. “People will go back to a terrible situation if they go now,” he said. “People need to know the reality that there is no more food and no more livestock in their home areas. We all know the ramifications of returning people too soon.” Instead, he argued, efforts should be made to integrate IDPs who may not return into their new communities.

Displaced Populations Divided on Returns

Former residents of Bama remain divided on when and if to return. Mustapha, a father of four and former resident of Bama town, fled for safety in 2013 and now lives in a government-managed camp in Maiduguri with his wife and children.33 “Here in the camp, we are so hungry. There is not enough food, and we have to sell part of our food to buy firewood or medicine,” he explained. When asked if these difficult conditions made him contemplate returning, he responded: “Bama is the same. There is no work, there is no safety.” After hearing claims that his house had been rebuilt, he traveled back to Bama with a military convoy to see for himself. When they arrived, he saw that much of the town was still destroyed and that his own home was only partially reconstructed. He said that government announcements on the radio are encouraging people to return, but he does not want to go back yet to “fill their propaganda houses.” A number of the IDPs with whom RI spoke feel that the government is making a hasty decision in announcing returns.

A displaced man said that government announcements on the radio are encouraging people to return, but he does not want to go back yet to “fill their propaganda houses.”

In contrast, others from Bama who are living in Maiduguri are eager to return, saying that they do not want to wait for the government to reconstruct the entire community. They view the government’s promises of returns as empty political proclamations to appease them and worry that the government’s implementation will continue to be postponed. They share Mustapha’s view that the reconstruction had not progressed as the government claims. Mohammed, an IDP who is keen to return, stated that what he saw was “poor, substandard” construction that would not fare well during the upcoming rainy season. But despite these concerns, and Bama’s proximity to the ongoing fighting, these displaced
Residents express their desire to return to their homes in Bama town to participate in the reconstruction and boost the local economy.

Poor service delivery for the displaced can induce premature, although arguably voluntary, returns to areas that are not safe and where access to aid is no better. Though security is repeatedly stated as the main driver of displacement, shelter conditions and access to food also figure prominently in IDPs’ decisions to resettle to a new location or return to their areas of origin.34

The diverging views on returns of the displaced highlight the need for continued and thorough surveying of their intentions. Although actors have partially collected this information before, it is important to have an updated representation of the intentions of the displaced for newly accessible LGAs and Maiduguri. The data are vital in order to apply pressure on the Nigerian government to plan for returning populations and the scores of displaced people who do not intend to return to their areas of origin. For these people, local integration in areas of resettlement must be supported, by both the Government of Nigeria and donors.

Politics over Planning

As next year’s national elections approach, and as political leaders continue to promote a narrative of success in the war against Boko Haram, political pressure for returns is likely to increase. Concerns over premature large-scale returns have particular salience because the Nigerian government has recently moved ahead unilaterally with IDPs’ relocation before conditions were appropriate. Indeed, some returns have taken place in direct contravention of plans that were reached in cooperation with the international community.

In late 2017, schedules were agreed upon by government, military, and humanitarian actors for the gradual relocation of the more than 15,000 IDPs who lived in a hospital in Bama to the new site in the former secondary school. In this case, the Nigerian military disregarded the predetermined timeline—reportedly at the behest of the RRR Ministry—and proceeded to relocate the IDPs ahead of schedule. This was done without warning humanitarian counterparts and before the site was prepared to receive the IDPs. The site lacked adequate shelter, access to water, and sanitation facilities. Moreover, the presence of debris and building material posed a threat to the new residents’ safety. Similar expedited unilateral activity has been reported in Maiduguri with other camp relocations and consolidations.

The Need for a Plan

The trend of the government disregarding agreed-on procedures is worrying. Without a comprehensive and public plan, the Government of Nigeria is not accountable for an agreed-on implementation strategy. If government-orchestrated returns are to take place in the near term, it is imperative for the Nigerian government to produce and widely disseminate a detailed plan. This plan should be prepared and implemented in coordination with international organizations to help ensure the protection of the rights of the displaced. It must identify the Nigerian authorities responsible for the various elements of implementation and provide logistical planning and
a timeline—not imposed deadlines—for the phased relocation.

Concerted efforts must be made to consult with displaced communities across the Northeast, and any plan must detail how the voluntariness of returns will be ensured. The plan must include development and integration efforts for IDPs living in Maiduguri who do not wish to return and for the thousands of people living in the camp inside Bama town who are unlikely to return to their rural villages. Given that many people will seek to integrate in new areas and choose not to return to their properties, housing, land, and property planning must figure in government return initiatives to ensure that housing allocation does not violate the rights of previous occupants.

Any return plan should align with the joint 2017 UNHCR–United Nations Development Program Strategy for protection, return, and recovery in Northeast Nigeria. This strategy, which was developed in close consultation with the Nigerian government, outlines minimum conditions to ensure safe, voluntary, and dignified returns. These include the availability of basic services, restoration of security, and accessibility to populations and humanitarian

### Necessary Planning Steps for Returns

1. **A comprehensive plan that includes:**
   - A list of designated government agencies or ministries that will be responsible for the implementation of each step of the plan
   - A detailed budget indicating which of the many government bodies responding to the crisis would be financially responsible for the many parts of the plan
   - A clear and efficient process for identifying populations who wish to return and those who do not, for the time being or ever:
     - Organize “go and see” visits
     - Guarantee the provision of clear, accurate, and accessible information to displaced populations about the situation in their areas of habitual residence
     - This information should be easy to understand, and be in languages and formats understood by all, including the illiterate
     - A process whereby the displaced can give their consent
   - A relocation plan that includes:
     - A timeline for the phased relocations
     - Logistical planning for selection for each phase
     - Transportation information
   - A detailed process to return civil servants and service provision
   - A list of conditions that must be present in Bama and other towns before government-organized returns begin

2. **International organizations and local and international NGOs must participate in the creation of the plan and monitor its implementation—with a particular focus on establishing security benchmarks and monitoring the safety and security in areas of return.

3. **An updated and thorough intention survey should be conducted and shared with relevant government actors. It should include intentions of those in Maiduguri and all accessible LGAs based on their LGAs of origin.

4. **Donors, especially the World Bank, must make funding for aid, development, and reconstruction conditional on strict adherence to the plan.**
or development actors alike. The strategy also stresses that accurate information about the areas of origin must be provided to the displaced as they make decisions about returns. It calls for the protection of IDPs from coerced returns through the “provision of erroneous information, the denial of basic services, or the closure of IDP camps or facilities.” This document must serve as a road map when generating and implementing plans for returns.

Return strategies must respect commitments made by the Government of Nigeria through its ratification of the African Union Convention for the Assistance and Protection of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, known as the Kampala Convention. Return strategies must also be aligned with the objectives of the Buhari Plan, which serves as the blueprint for relief and stabilization efforts supported by donors like the World Bank. The Bank, through its Multi-Sectoral Crisis Recovery Project for North Eastern Nigeria, has agreed to provide $200 million to relief and recovery efforts in the country. The Bank must incorporate protection-specific safeguards in its agreements that ensure its funds are not used by the Nigerian government to plan, coordinate, or implement potentially harmful policies, such as premature returns.

CONCLUSION

Until the threat of Boko Haram and ongoing military operations cease causing widespread displacement across Northeast Nigeria—and, as a result, complicating aid delivery—the Government of Nigeria and international aid actors must significantly improve their efforts to protect and assist those in need. Poor conditions faced by IDPs and the lack of accurate and impartial information about areas of return are inducing hasty returns and putting people’s safety and lives at risk. Those contributing to the response—the Government of Nigeria, international aid organizations, and donors—must implement more efficient and coordinated strategies to alleviate the needs of Northeast Nigeria’s vulnerable citizens.

Refugees International is alarmed by the growing political pressure for displaced populations to return to unsafe, garrison-like towns during the approach to the 2019 elections. The return campaigns appear to be state-centered, largely disregarding the intentions of IDPs themselves. The absence of coordinated plans, systems of accountability, and implementation monitoring could have disastrous effects on the lives of the displaced. Effective and transparent leadership from the Nigerian government is essential to create the needed conditions for dignified and safe returns. Finally, any efforts to orchestrate premature returns to Bama or other LGAs further hinder the humanitarian response by shifting the focus and limited resources away from the needs of the displaced or weaken the response by spreading it too thin.
Cover photo: Group of boys in the Bama IDP camp.