



MISSING FAMILY. HUNGRY CHILDREN. UNCERTAIN FUTURE.

Conflict in northern Nigeria:
Voices from the front line



ICRC

The conflict in northern Nigeria has left thousands of people dead and forced more than a million to flee their homes. Many have been kidnapped, including more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok in April, 2014.

The displaced have sought refuge elsewhere in Nigeria and in neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This has become a truly regional crisis.

“The violence in Nigeria is ripping families apart and causing immense suffering,” says the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer. “It is one of the major humanitarian crises in the world today, with regional dimensions. It is vital that the national authorities and the international community do what it takes to feed the hungry, provide shelter for the homeless and give health care to those that need it.”

The ICRC is one of the few international organizations on the ground, providing support in a number of areas. Four issues dominate: food and water, health care, displacement of people and the impact on the region. In this report, local people tell their stories.

Food and water

Many refugees and internally displaced people say that a lack of food is their main concern. Some families have just a tiny bit of rice every day to survive on. With so many people uprooted and gathering in towns like Yola, or Maiduguri in Borno State, the existing infrastructure is struggling to cope.



Happy Yusuf and her children had to hide in the mountains with more than 100 others for three weeks when violence hit their home town of Michika.

“Our needs are many but first of all we need food. Secondly, we need pots with which we can cook our food,” says Hafeesu Adamu.

When violence descended on her home village, **Happy Yusuf**, 39, and her children fled to the mountains. They were safe, but they had no food or clean water.

“The suffering was too much,” she says. “I was exhausted and had to breast feed my little boy.”

After they fled their mountain hideaway, a woman offered Happy and her children a place to stay, food and water. They had spent a month in the village of Kerawa, it too was attacked, and Happy fled to Yola. They are eager to return to their village of Michika.

“The challenge now is that the food they give us is not enough for everyone. There are some people here who have had no food since they came to Yola. We help them by sharing what we have with them,” says Abdul Aziz Muhammed.

ICRC interviews, Yola, Nigeria, March 2015

But their home no longer exists.

“My husband went back to Michika one week ago to rebuild our house. It was bombed during the attack,” she says.

Her husband told her that the landscape in Michika was horrifying. “Our houses, the bank, the shops, the schools, our church and the clinic were destroyed. He told me that it looks like a ghost town.”

Happy was at church in Michika last August when she heard gunshots. She knew she and her family had to run away if they were to survive. They hid in the mountains with about a hundred others.

Today, in Yola, she continues to struggle. The family needs rice, beans, cooking pots and a mattress to sleep on. And she worries her children will catch malaria.

Health care

For people fleeing the violence, and on the move, there are few opportunities for health care. Pregnant women have been forced to give birth in the most difficult of circumstances, sometimes obliged to abandon their newborn babies in order to save their own lives. Surgeons have had to deal with injuries they are not accustomed to such as wounds from bomb blasts.

Most men fled. Still pregnant, Natisa Mohammed, 29, stayed behind with her four children. “I saw a lot of violence,” Natisa recalls of the attack last September in her village of Gulak. “I survived because I was pregnant. I’m still afraid when I remember that moment.”

In February, the violence returned, and Natisa and her children were forced to run. As they travelled the countryside, she prematurely gave birth to her fifth child, a baby boy. A passing man assisted with the birth and put the family in a truck travelling to the refugee centre in. “There was shooting everywhere in the area and bombs were being dropped the day I gave birth,” says Natisa. “I decided then to call my baby Auwel, after the man who saved the life of my baby and myself.”

Today, Natisa says she needs better food for her children and herself. There is no soap to wash the children’s clothes and no money for doctor’s visits. Despite these problems, Natisa feels safe in the camp. “We’re living as brothers and sisters, helping each other, because we’re in the same situation,” she says.

Natisa longs for her previous life selling cosmetics and jewellery at home as her children attended school. But her village has been destroyed. “I just want my previous life back,” she says.



Natisa (right) has been living in an IDP camp in Yola since March 2015 with her sister, brother-in-law, and father, who were also displaced by the conflict. She has not seen her husband since he fled Gulak eight months ago, and he has not yet met their newborn son.

“We were in the church when the men came in. They shot indiscriminately and killed some of us,” says Hafeesu Adamu, a resident of Minchiga, Nigeria, who was also forced to flee. “Amongst us were women and children who died on the way. Some gave birth on the way.”

“Yes! In the forest!” said Ummu Salma, a resident of Mubi (Nigeria) who has had to flee the violence. “I saw someone give birth, cover the baby with leaves and walk away leaving the baby in the forest, to save her own life.”

ICRC interviews, Yola, Nigeria, March 2015

Displacement

When families flee their homes, they can no longer tend their fields. When agricultural production drops, trade falls off; a sweeping, downward economic spiral. And when families flee their homes, they get split up. Many displaced people are hosted in villages and towns. This puts a burden on those communities as well.

During the last six months, Samuel Tizira has opened his house in Yola to 50 people, who are living alongside his wife and six children. His house guests fled violence in Michika, Samuel's hometown, which was attacked last September. Samuel lost eight family members there.

"People in Michika know that I live in Yola and they started to arrive at my place the day after," says Samuel. "They didn't have a place to stay and we're all human beings. We need to help each other in this world."

Samuel, 53, has been working in Yola for 34 years as a cartographer for the government. Most of the people who have stayed with Samuel walked 60 kilometres over three days with little to eat or drink.

"We were worried because the other two children weren't with us. We didn't know where they were," says Maria Sanusi, a mother of five separated from two of her children after gunshots rang out in Gulak, Nigeria, last September.

ICRC interviews, Yola, Nigeria, April 2015



Samuel Tizira has been working in Yola as a civil servant since 1981. In the last six months, he has hosted 50 people who had fled Michika, his hometown. Samuel himself lost eight family members the day the village was attacked in March 2015.

"I was taught to care for human life, whatever problems people have," says Samuel, who spent his own money to make sure his former neighbours had something to eat three times a day. He also bought soap, extra mattresses, drinking water, and mosquito nets.

For Samuel, the disruption at home is nothing compared to what those fleeing have gone through. "They had to escape with the clothes on their backs. There was no time to take even a Kobo (Nigerian coin) or personal documents," he says.

Regional impact

Armed conflict has plagued north-east Nigeria for years. Since the last part of 2014, the violence has increasingly become regional, affecting northern Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This conflict is characterized by extreme violence against the civilian population. Basic rules of international humanitarian law are not being respected.

In Cameroon, Awa and Salamatou Ousmane are trying to figure out how to raise their combined 13 children without a father. Their large family was living peacefully in Madagali, Nigeria, when the father was killed in front of them, during an attack. They quickly shielded the children's eyes and hurried into their home.

A major concern as they fled with their nine boys and four girls was not to stumble into violence as they travelled to their in-laws in neighbouring Cameroon. When asked what the family's needs are, Awa answers in a whisper: "I don't even know where to start... everything is missing."

The children no longer go to school and the chances of their sitting in a classroom any time soon are slim. Setting priorities is a difficult task. The children wear rags for clothes. Some fall sick. There is no money for clothes or medicine.

"I ran away with my children because the suffering was unbearable. We couldn't take it anymore!" says Hafeesa Adamu. "We were just walking from village to village. We walked like this until we got to Mubi. From Mubi, we moved to a town called Maiha. ... From there, we moved to Cameroon – to a village close to the border."

ICRC interviews, Yola, Nigeria, April 2015

"For now we're at least trying to get them a meal once a day," Awa said. "They are aware, even the youngest one, that they can sometimes help by begging in the market. But they know they can't do much."

On top of their physical needs is the psychological trauma of seeing their husband and father killed. The youngest child crawls around on the floor. "Look at her, she was three months old when her father died," Awa says. "What are we going to tell her later on?"



The Sanusi Family had to trek 400 kilometres on foot across mountains with little food or water to reach safety in Cameroon.

How the ICRC is helping

Rice, beans, oil. Pots and pans. These are the items that people need. The ICRC has distributed emergency food and essential household items to nearly 260,000 people in north-east Nigeria and 65,000 people in Niger. We plan to do more.

The ICRC has also:

- Performed three dozen surgical operations in Maiduguri on patients wounded by weapons.
- Built 10 large shelters that can hold up to 50 people each in Yola, Nigeria. We're putting up more than 300 tents, 300 smaller shelters and 150 latrines in Maiduguri.
- Built three water wells in Yola and renovated two others. And delivered water by tanker truck nearly 8,000 people in Maiduguri.
- Donated medical items to 11 hospitals and 14 branches of the Nigerian Red Cross Society.
- Trained nearly 1,400 first-aid volunteers and 164 other people in the proper management of human remains.
- In Niger, distributed food to 21,300 people.
- Sent an ICRC anaesthesiologist and operating theatre nurse to the main hospital in Diffa (Niger).
- Registered 59 children in Chad who have lost track of their parents, in the hope of reuniting them, and facilitated nearly 3,000 telephone calls to help family members reconnect.
- Registered 14 Nigerian children in Cameroon who have become separated from their families. Also in Cameroon, we're training Red Cross personnel in first aid and how to help separated families find one another.
- Been attempting to trace hundreds of separated family members in Nigeria.



Food and other essentials await distribution in Maiduguri, Nigeria. The ICRC has distributed emergency aid to nearly 260,000 people in north-east Nigeria and 65,000 in Niger.

What we want to do next

Due to the severity of the humanitarian situation and because in some locations we are among the very few organizations present in the field, we are asking for extra funds to assist those in need. We are appealing for 60 million Swiss francs (\$65 million) to carry out more work.

- Nearly 500,000 more people will receive food.
- Surgical teams in Maiduguri (Nigeria) and Diffa (Niger) will support the work of regional hospitals.
- We'll help 12 primary health facilities in northern Nigeria.
- We'll help more lost family members find one another.

The Lake Chad crisis has brought immense suffering. The ICRC wants to make sure that the victims of violence receive maximum support, and that their plight is not forgotten.

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