

WHO SELLS THE TRUTH? A CASE STUDY OF REPORTING IN THE BOKO HARAM CONFLICT

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A 2013 clash between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram insurgents in Baga, Borno State, Nigeria, resulted in disparities in media reporting on casualty totals and the extent of infrastructural damage. This paper analyzed online news archives for the period from April to July 2013 to determine the methodology and credibility of reported statistics, which highlighted disputing accounts given by Nigerian public officials, politicians, local residents, and international NGOs. This case of military involvement in creation of media narratives was chosen for the robustness of the media environment in which it took place, the length of the period of time during which reporting of the case unfolded, and the breadth of the incongruities in reported death tolls and building destruction totals. While many of these reported figures were of dubious origin, high-quality data from Human Rights Watch (HRW) suggests that the Nigerian military responded to incentives to downplay its role in causing the casualties and damage. These attempts to deflate casualty totals and deflect blame towards Boko Haram were unsuccessful. Hence, the episode harmed Nigeria's credibility among both Nigerians and the international community and eroded its counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram.

INTRODUCTION

A bloody conflict has been ongoing since 2009 in northeastern Nigeria between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram (officially, “Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād, “Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad”), an insurgent group that claims affiliations with transnational jihadist networks such as Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Boko Haram seeks to establish a draconian and dogmatic form of sharia law across all of Nigeria and to that end has engaged in bombings, kidnappings, and mass killings. Nigeria has responded with the deployment of its troops to the region (in tandem with those of neighbors Chad, Cameroon and others), but its counterinsurgency campaign has been criticized internationally for its inefficacy¹ and heavy-handedness.² The most notable of alleged human rights violations by Nigerian forces occurred in April 2013 in the northeastern town of Baga, on Lake Chad in Borno State, in which anywhere from dozens to hundreds are reported to have been killed. The subsequent war of words in the Nigerian and international press highlighted the dissemination of facts and figures by the Nigerian military in an attempt to provide more palatable information to engaged publics in support of its operations to stabilize the unrest in the northeast. This paper seeks to analyze media reporting of a key event of this crisis, namely an April 2013 clash between Boko Haram and Nigerian

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forces and subsequent allegations of human rights abuses by the Nigerian military, in order to determine the origin and credibility of statistics cited in reporting and how their dissemination may have implications for the conduct of the conflict.

Mastery of the flow of information is an essential element to any counterinsurgency campaign, and Nigeria's campaign against Boko Haram is no exception. In these conflict situations, victory on the battlefield alone is deemed insufficient; a counterinsurgent force must also win the battle of narratives. The influential counterinsurgency theorist Galula's "first law" of counterinsurgency was that the objective is to gain the support of the population rather than control of territory;³ likewise, U.S. policymakers sought to "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghan and Iraqi populations in order to root out adversary forces and stem terrorist recruitment during the wars in those countries. Hence, imparting information that will bolster support for the counterinsurgent force and negate support for the insurgency is central to the success of any campaign. While this may include a variety of elements from manipulation of cyberspace communications to military deception of the enemy, this paper will concentrate on the use of public affairs, defined as "public information, command information, and public engagement activities directed toward both the internal and external publics."⁴ A key conduit for the dissemination of information in the service of a counterinsurgency operation is the press, which may be friendly, neutral or adversary and have a local, national, or international audience. Public interest in the goings-on of military conflict provides an opportunity for actors to strategically spread favorable information to audiences around the globe.

Kilcullen notes the necessity of the "competition to mobilize" in the modern counterinsurgent campaign, noting insurgents "may not seek to seize government, relying instead on their ability to mobilize sympathizers within a global audience and generate local support"; conversely, "the counterinsurgent must mobilize the home population, the host country, the global audience, the populations of allied and neutral countries, and the military and government agencies involved."⁵ When either side has no battlefield success to speak of, it may seek to spread extra-factual information in an attempt to rally potential allies to its cause by smearing its enemy's reputation or downplaying the extent to which it has lost territory or sustained casualties. Battlefield mistakes – such as strategic blunders, excessive collateral damage or atrocities – can be met with counternarratives that seek to revise the facts on the ground, cover up culpability, or establish at least plausible deniability that the event ever occurred in the first place. Even in the absence of such events, there is evidence that actors on the battlefield respond to incentives to invent statistics out of thin air to suit their own purposes.⁶ In the face of allegations of atrocities, the Nigerian military would have ample reason to alter or make up statistics to influence the media narrative and disseminate them through its statements to the press while other actors could have reason to produce contrary statistics of equally dubious origin. This paper hopes to clarify this question through a case study of the events in Baga in mid-April 2013.

METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESIS

This paper will use archival Nigerian and international news sources in order to qualitatively analyze the reporting of the casualties and damage resulting from the events in Baga in mid-April of 2013. As will be detailed below, accounts of the events varied substantially depending on the source, the outlet reporting the events, and the date that the story was reported. Sources examined for analysis included five Nigerian newspapers (*Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, *This Day*, *The Sun*, and *Vanguard*) and major international news sources including the *Associated Press* (AP), *Reuters*, *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), and the *New York Times*. The Nigerian sources have been selected both for their diversity in location, viewpoint, and availability in searchable databases available to the author. The date range examined runs from April 16, 2013 (the earliest day on which military engagement in Baga is said to have started, although reporting did not commence until several days later) until the conclusion of July 2013. Qualitative analysis will focus on the description of the events provided in news stories, the attribution of facts and figures, and the extent to which the information is credible and/or verifiable. Systematically opposite reporting of figures in northern Nigeria vis-à-vis southern Nigeria (or in Nigeria vis-à-vis the rest of the world, etc.) would imply opposing mobilizations to conflict depending on the audience. As an example, wide dissemination of reports of a high civilian death toll might erode support for the Nigerian military internationally, but may draw more local support for Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria if the reports are believed. Since only one death toll can represent the reality of the situation, other accounts may be simply erroneous or the result of extrafactual information introduced to the media environment by an actor or actors.

Nigeria's robust print newspaper industry makes the country a relative anomaly among countries engaged in counterinsurgency at present, and so it presents a strong test case to examine news representation of counterinsurgency among domestic audiences. Most reporting is done in English, making discourse analysis more accessible to Western scholars. Previous scholarly work on media in Nigeria suggests that there are significant differences in reporting across media outlets. The media outlets chosen for study in this paper vary in their orientation and audience, some widely so. Ethnicity pervades reporting, with a Nigerian scholar calling the editorial positions of newspapers as "more or less ethnic jingoist."⁷ *Daily Trust* and *Leadership* are both based in the capital city of Abuja in central Nigeria; the former is the most widely-circulated newspaper in the country's northern region. *Vanguard* is reputed for its south-oriented editorial viewpoints⁸ and often displays a pro-government slant;⁹ *The Sun* is chaired by a member of the PDP,¹⁰ the party of President Goodluck Jonathan, while *Thisday* is regarded as having a pro-police and pro-military slant.¹¹ The latter three are based in Lagos, the economic center and a major media hub. Moreover, the administration of President Jonathan, who hails from the southern state of Bayelsa and who draws much of his popularity from southern regions of Nigeria,¹² is alleged to have attempted to muzzle journalists and media critical

of his policies via judicial and extrajudicial means.¹³ As it pertains to Boko Haram, initial scholarship by Okoro and Odemelam suggests that the framing used by Nigerian media has tended to cast the government in a positive light and highlight ethnic differences.¹⁴

All this is not to imply that Nigerian sources should be disregarded as inferior to international ones; Western journalists may be unable to deploy to the scene in a timely manner, especially in a rural conflict environment. A lack of local expertise may hinder fact-finding. They may simply parrot erroneous reporting produced by local media; southern outlets project a negative, backwards image of northern Nigeria which often influences Western interpretations of Nigerian events.¹⁵ The susceptibility of all journalists to faulty work and external influence is exactly what merits further study of how they have responded in this context. In the case of Baga, whether Nigerian military forces sought to influence the narrative is not in question; they released statements on the affair as the news media took interest in it. Instead, the plausibility, credibility, and verifiability of their statements relative to accounts by others and the distribution thereof are at stake here, with the results having substantial implications for the success of their counterinsurgency efforts. I hypothesize that there will be strong evidence that Nigerian military accounts of the events at Baga will be viewed by international media as less plausible, less credible and will have not been independently verified or be unverifiable, making it more likely that their accounts are deliberately extrafactual. Additionally, I expect to find that the figures released by the Nigerian military to be several times smaller than figures released by other sources; such a demonstrably large difference being able to raise questions about which figures are accurate irrespective of the methodology used to obtain the figures. Nonetheless, I expect to find that these figures will be treated as more credible and plausible in southern-based media outlets and be reported with a higher relative frequency in these sources.

OVERVIEW OF MEDIA REPORTING IN THE WAKE OF BAGA

Although the first reports of a skirmish between military forces and Boko Haram insurgents at Baga put the date as April 18, news of a clash was not widely reported until April 22. Interestingly, international sources circulated initial reports before the Nigerian sources, with *Vanguard* the only source to publish an article on that date. The AP reported a figure of 185 dead, attributing the figure to Lawan Kole, a local government official, while offering the caveat later in the article that casualty figures in Nigeria can be inflated by local officials and residents with their own agendas. However, the article noted the commander of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (though it did not identify him as such) Brig. Gen. Austin Edokpaye did not dispute the figures. Edokpaye claimed Boko Haram used human shields, inflating the death toll, and possessed rocket-propelled grenades and other weaponry that could produce large fires. Residents who spoke to an AP journalist, however, claimed Nigerian soldiers deliberately set fire to swaths of Baga.¹⁶ Contrary

to these reports, AFP was much more skeptical of Kole's figure of 185.¹⁷ It said that a spokesman for the armed forces in Borno state, Lt. Col. Sagir Musa, had disputed the toll of 185, saying that "there could have been some casualties, but it is unthinkable to say that 185 people died." It also offered the disclaimer about the trend towards inflated casualty tolls in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the *Vanguard* released only a very short article that did reiterate the figure of 185 deaths, but also squarely blamed Boko Haram, citing the statement by Edokpaye.¹⁸

It was not until the following day, April 23, that there was widespread reportage on Baga in the Nigerian press, while international coverage continued to proliferate. Prominent news sources like the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*,¹⁹ among others, reported on the events for the first time. Some of these cited the figure of 185 deaths, while others cited a Red Cross official who said 187 had been killed – notwithstanding the Red Cross's own statements to media that they had not yet visited the town and could not at the present time. In Nigeria, a number of casualty totals were reported, with some news outlets even contradicting themselves in different articles. As an example, *Thisday* ran articles with headlines "Boko Haram - MTF Confirms 30 Insurgents, 6 Civilians Killed" (MTF referring to the multinational task force formed to combat Boko Haram soldiers from Nigeria and other countries) and "191 Killed in Multinational Task Force, Boko Haram Clash"²⁰ on the same day. The latter article cited Nigeria's Defense Headquarters as saying there were 26 total casualties (25 Boko Haram and one Nigerian soldier) and a local senator as saying there were 172 deaths. Clearly, there was some disagreement as to what were the actual events that took place. *Vanguard*, however, stuck to the figure of 185 – in three articles it ran on the 23rd, it quoted locals who spoke of widespread devastation,²¹ highlighted criticism of the MTF by opposition party ACN,²² and covered the Nigerian Senate's intention to launch an investigation into the events.²³ The most seemingly sensationalist stories came from the *Daily Trust* – which printed an article titled "How Soldiers Sacked Baga" and said in another that the death toll could be as high as 300, although it did matter-of-factly note the military's rebuttal of the figures.²⁴

In the subsequent days, various officials would dispute the death toll, although 185 remained the most frequently used figure in media both in Nigeria and abroad. A senator whose constituency includes Baga, Maina Maaji Lawan, said he counted 228 casualties, which was reported as a story in itself in *Vanguard*, *Thisday* and *Daily Trust*,²⁵ and later cited contextually in international media. Sen. Lawan seems to have arrived at this number by counting the number of fresh graves himself in his survey of the town. He also estimated there were 4000 houses damaged by fire. A report on BBC's Hausa-language radio service featured a Baga resident as saying, "Anybody who says the number of the dead is not up to 300 then he is not a resident of Baga."²⁶ The MTF revised its figure upwards to 36 in a report, simultaneously blaming politicians from Borno for distorting the truth and inflating the casualty totals. They said only 30 houses with thatched roofs had been destroyed

and attributed the damage to Boko Haram. However, whereas the governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, had previously given the death toll as 185 based on information provided by local officials, he seemed to cautiously revise the total to a vague “over 100.”²⁷ A *Daily Trust* opinion piece said figures as high as 700 had been reported, and even surmised that a military operation in Baga had long been in the works rather than a response to a Boko Haram offensive.²⁸ *Thisday* sidestepped the issue in one article by giving a rather imprecise figure of “between 36 and 190” deaths.²⁹ On April 29, the *New York Times* quoted an aid worker who said that “many more than 200” had perished, but that the worker could not be identified by name for fear of retribution.³⁰ On the next day, the public news network NTA TV reported that the government had found 32 graves as well as recovered six bodies from Lake Chad, which lies a few kilometers from Baga.³¹ The question of graves would become a central element in the dispute – the Nigerian military defended its low figures by saying that no mass graves had been uncovered. Yet residents replied that Muslim custom is to bury each body individually, rather than en masse; presumably, these residents would have been responsible for the burial process (as opposed to Nigerian forces). This indicates that mass killings may have occurred even in the absence of mass graves as evidence.

The matter of the magnitude of the damage was to some extent clarified on May 1, nearly two weeks after the conclusion of the alleged killings, by satellite data released by the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW). Their analysis of images obtained before and after the incident showed an estimated 2,275 buildings destroyed by fires over a large swath of the town.³² HRW also said that evidence from the destruction showed the fires were unlikely to have been caused by arms fire and were more likely to have been intentionally set; the group also estimated a total of 183 casualties based on interviews with local residents. The release of their assessment drew wide coverage both in Nigeria and internationally – with more coverage appearing at this point than any other save the initial reporting. The main effect was to draw the discrepancies in accounts of the events into focus, and most reporting thereafter highlighted the opposing narratives and statistics together. Most media sources converged on 185 as the death toll they would report, usually attributing it to local residents but often not including a source at all, while the figure of 36 dead (or 37, including a lone Nigerian soldier) was always accompanied by a reference to the Nigerian military, a clarification suggesting that their accounts were viewed as far from authoritative.

Likewise, a number of facts emerged in reporting that highlighted the complications of sourcing accurate reporting from Baga. Firstly, a contingent of Nigerian soldiers controlled all access to Baga in the wake of the battle. As of April 24, more than a week after the earliest date HRW claimed its satellite data detected fires burning in Baga, the Red Cross said it had still not been allowed into the town to provide relief – though that did not prevent the agency from releasing its own estimation of the death toll. Neither was the Nigerian Emergency Management

Agency (NEMA) able to enter Baga, despite government orders to administer aid to affected areas. The Nigerian military claimed at the time that it could not guarantee security to relief workers,³³ but allegations were made that the military was attempting to cover up evidence that soldiers had committed mass killings.³⁴ Although international news agencies apparently spoke with Baga residents, it seems they must have done so either via internet or in person outside of Baga as residents fled into the bush following the attacks. (Cellphone communication had previously been shut down in the area as the Nigerian government sought to limit its use by Boko Haram to coordinate attacks.) British newspaper *The Guardian* claimed to be the first to send a Western journalist to Baga in an article that was published on May 10 – three weeks after the violence. The incredibly slow pace of reporting fueled critiques of media reports by supporters of the military; one *Vanguard* piece argued that “the extraordinary thing about Friday’s bloody clash at the remote Borno Village of Baga is that most of the news got out to the media only from Sunday, more than 24 hours after the violence began.” These supporters reasoned that if journalists could not be found in Baga at the time of the fracas, their reports ought to be considered less credible than the military forces that were present. Nigeria’s High Military Command itself said that the media had erroneously reported “late” figures, but did not clarify how figures might have been corrupted (as opposed to verified) in the timespan between the attacks and the reporting thereof.³⁵

The political implications of the attack in Baga were tremendous; it led the government to impose a state of emergency in three northern states and even resulted in calls for the involvement of the International Criminal Court to prosecute those responsible for atrocities.³⁶ Despite the high stakes involved, the Jonathan administration did not seem to conclusively take sides with regards to the casualty count. Instead, it said that would launch an investigation into the attacks, as did the country’s Senate. The results were wildly varied. The Senate’s report, released in the beginning of June, said it only found evidence of nine deaths, a figure it arrived at by counting grave sites in Baga. This raised the ire of some of the Senate’s own members, who noted that only one of the committee’s 13 members even traveled to Baga, and one senator lamented that the committee “had come under intense pressure not to indict the military even in the face of glaring evidence of mass murder and massacre.”³⁷ The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report also raised questions about the casualty count, as it did not arrive at a conclusive figure, stating only that the process of interviewing residents would take months.³⁸ Instead, it focused on culpability for the attack, saying it had evidence that Nigerian military committed atrocities, irrespective of how many had actually died. By this time, the international media had lost interest in Baga, and the findings were reported on a much larger scale in the Nigerian press. Notably, *Thisday* did not present any of the criticisms of senators when discussing the Senate report,³⁹ while *Daily Trust* covered them extensively;⁴⁰ likewise, only *Thisday* mounted criticism of the NHRC report.⁴¹

Of more interest were the political ramifications that had already taken

hold. A state of emergency was imposed in three northeastern states, including Borno, with a 24-hour curfew in place at one point. Nigerian troops were deployed in greater numbers in May 2013, and the state of emergency has remained in place ever since. Also in May, a video of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau decrying the attacks surfaced, drawing attention from media both in Nigeria and abroad.⁴² In the video, he contends that Nigerian troops killed townspeople of Baga at will long after their initial confrontation with Boko Haram forces ended, a narrative that aligns with those suggesting three-digit casualty tolls. Regardless of the correctness of his statements, it is clear that Boko Haram attempted to leverage the allegations against Nigerian forces, and implicitly the credibility thereof, as a recruiting tool for their cause.

REPUTABILITY OF FACTS AND FIGURES PRESENTED IN BAGA REPORTING

With such a wide range of facts being reported, it is plainly evident that some must be false. While an analysis of news media may not conclusively establish what has happened, it can help determine which facts are more likely to be true given the evidence that has been presented. The methodologies involved in fact-finding are essential for establishing the plausibility and credibility of their results.⁴³ This presents problems for journalists, who often need to protect their sources in order to continue the flow of information; note that aid workers and locals in Baga insisted on anonymity for fear of being targeted by the authorities. Nonetheless, a version of events that approximates or nears the truth can be gleaned from a close appraisal of the facts and the information behind them.

Casualty totals are difficult to establish, and methodological choices shape ways in which they are over- or under-counted.⁴⁴ The news sources reporting on the number of victims in Baga have sometimes named the origins of the figures announced, but have much less commonly provided information on how those figures were derived. The Nigerian Senate investigators, and its legislator for Borno North, Sen. Lawan, both opted to count graves as a way of determining the death toll. Several factors call into question the accuracy of these figures. First of all, there is no agreement on the number of burial areas that needed to be surveyed in the first place – Sen. Lawan counted graves in four areas, while the Senate investigation only counted one location. Furthermore, given that there may have been bodies found in Lake Chad, or survivors that may have succumbed to their injuries after fleeing to the surrounding bush, or corpses that may have been burned completely to ash, it is likely that such a count might be incomplete. In addition, each has an incentive to over- or under-represent the total of deaths. Politicians from regions affected by Boko Haram are reputed to inflate casualty totals in order to sow resentment of the Nigerian military response to Boko Haram in the region; this case would fit strongly with that pattern, especially considering that Sen. Lawan is a member of the opposition. Similarly, the Senate in 2013 was controlled by the party of President Jonathan, the PDP, so it would be unsurprising if they sought to deflate the death toll in a way

that would be more favorable to the Jonathan administration. Obviously, the Nigerian military would also have the same incentives to downplay the number of casualties in order to preserve a favorable perception of itself among the Nigerian public and international community, so its lower casualty toll is also wholly unsurprising. However, the discord between the Nigerian military and Senate's statistics suggest a less-than-systematic approach to distorting the narrative and might suggest that the Nigerian Senate's shoddy methodology may be more to blame for its rather low casualty total.

When quoting figures provided by Baga locals, be they officials or ordinary residents, news reporting provided even less information on how the sources arrived at those figures. Neither did the Nigerian military, which broke down its casualty totals by actor (26 Boko Haram, 10 civilians, and a lone Nigerian soldier) but did not say how it derived those figures. One might presume that the convergence of figures by several sources in the 180-190 range makes it more likely that this total was closest to the actual total of the various totals cited by news media. NGOs such as the Red Cross and HRW are commonly thought to have fewer incentives than actors embroiled in the conflict and hence provide a more credibly accurate representation of the total. However, the former did not say how it arrived at its total of 187 and the latter said only that it reached a conclusion of 183 deaths after interviews with local residents. While interviews can produce a credible estimate of the casualty toll, it is impossible to judge if HRW's count has done so given the absence of information about the size or representativeness of the sample of interview subjects HRW chose.

There is also the issue of "anchoring", a cognitive phenomenon that describes how humans use the first statistic they hear as a baseline for future estimates even when that number is arbitrarily chosen.⁴⁵ This effect could very well explain how the estimates of different organization converged towards a very small range. Local residents may have heard the total of 185 put forth by local officials and repeated it to investigators from the Red Cross and HRW. The investigators themselves may have viewed 185 as the most likely total and decided to discard outliers that may have called that number into question. With the information given, it is impossible to determine if these numbers were in fact accurate as they are not verifiable. It may be most correct to say that based on available information, *every* actor that reported a figure introduced extra-factual information into the media environment, regardless of whether they intended for their estimate to be perceived as factual.

The reporting of the number of buildings damaged contrasted strongly with the number left dead in the wake of the fighting at Baga. HRW's estimate of 2,275 buildings damaged effectively laid to rest the issue of the extent of the damage. Its figure was cited widely in media, even in articles that reported death tolls that contrasted strongly with HRW's count. On its website, the group published a detailed sourcing of its count, citing a review of satellite imagery (which it repub-

lished online), satellite-based sensors that detected heat signatures from Baga from April 16-18, and descriptors of photographic evidence for the extent of the fire's damage. While HRW acknowledged that its count could not be counted as definitive for a number of reasons (for example, buildings may have been obscured under tree cover), the group employed a rigorous methodology and disseminated it publicly. Given this evidence, it can be concluded that the assertion by President Jonathan that Baga had fewer than 1,000 buildings can be considered implausible – the satellite imagery clearly shows that there are several thousand buildings in the town.⁴⁶ This evidence suggests that the Nigerian military did attempt to introduce extra-factual information into the information environment in order to support its claims that the extent of the damage caused in Baga by Nigerian forces was limited.

Is there a link between the sources' level of accuracy in calculating the two figures? While HRW might certainly benefit from being perceived as more authoritative and thorough in its investigation of casualty totals given that it has produced substantial evidence in support of its estimate of the number of damaged structures, one should not assume that it has equal capacity to provide accurate totals in both instances as the methodologies associated with each task vary greatly. However, given that the evidence is clear that the Nigerian military at least downplayed the number of houses damaged in the incident, there is reason to suspect it of having tried to lower the number of reported casualties as well in order to create a more coherent narrative of events. It would be difficult to create a convincing narrative that a fire that caused the destruction of 2,000 buildings conveniently killed many more members of Boko Haram than civilians even as Boko Haram insurgents purportedly attempted to use bystanders as human shields. Given that local officials seem to have somewhat underestimated the number of buildings damaged, one might infer that they did not attempt to inflate the number of dead either. However, that does not necessarily mean that its figure of 185 is accurate – merely that it is more likely to be closer to the real figure, given that the evidence that is available (albeit from a single data point) suggests that the Nigerian military has responded to its incentives to deflate the casualty and damage totals and local officials have not responded to their incentives to inflate the casualty and damage totals.⁴⁷ On the whole, actors with more credibility reported a death toll at or near 185, while the less credible Nigerian defense establishment was the sole main promulgator of a substantially lower death toll of approximately 36.

CONCLUSIONS

This review of the news reporting on the April 2013 events in Baga demonstrates that the Nigerian military has attempted to introduce extra-factual information into the media environment in order to create a more favorable narrative of events and ultimately retain the support of the population in areas affected by Boko Haram activities, Nigeria generally, and among international audiences. These attempts seem to have been unsuccessful. Despite attempts to control the flow of

information in and out of Baga, international reports surfaced anyways. The gulf between the Nigerian military's version of events and reports by other actors seems to have been so large that news sources writing on Baga simply stopped treating the military's version as credible. Claims by the Nigerian defense establishment have done little to scuttle negative opinion among the international community of their actions to combat Boko Haram.⁴⁸ Despite perception of media outlets based in southern Nigeria as pro-military, these sources did not seem to treat official figures with substantially more credibility, although the tone of opinion pieces in these sources was somewhat softer. Whether the conduct of Nigerian soldiers was reprehensible as claimed by some is not as relevant to the success of the counterinsurgency against Boko Haram as the extent to which people believed that the military is capable of and likely to commit atrocities such as those alleged at Baga. As the latter increases, so does the level of popular support for (or tolerance of) Boko Haram and the likelihood that ordinary Nigerians might take up the fight against their own government, a lesson mostly unlearned thus far by Nigerian authorities.

If extra-factual information is to be wielded as a weapon on the battlefield, it is most effective when none other than the disseminator would believe it to be anything other than true. Unfortunately, the Nigerian military faces issues such as corruption and a history of rights abuses that have caused virtually all information it releases to be viewed with suspicion, regardless of its veracity. Its reputation was drastically tarnished by the events at Baga such that the country's own human rights commission blamed military soldiers for the destruction of the skirmish and Boko Haram attempted to use the episode as a rallying point. Nonetheless, there are a few steps that the Nigerian military may have taken to produce a more successful outcome, notwithstanding the more obvious and larger problem of preventing its rank-and-file from committing atrocities – or being accused of them, both of which are tremendously detrimental to the counterinsurgency effort. A different version of events might have been more believable for their intended audience – asserting that Boko Haram simply torched the town themselves, or releasing a casualty count that more closely resembled the figures reported in international media. Attempting to manipulate figures in similar future instances can only improve the standing of the Nigerian military – whose reputation has by the time of the writing of this paper deteriorated so far that it is hard to imagine further attempts at deception as anything other than a low-risk proposition. However, given that international NGOs such as HRW have strong verification mechanisms in place to deter cover-ups of any atrocities or other misconduct that may occur, the Nigerian military may conclude the best way to establish its credibility (insofar as it is interested in doing so) is to promulgate statistics that are relatively accurate, regardless of the veracity of the narrative it intends to put forth.

NOTES

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11. Portia Roelofs, "Framing and Blaming: Discourse Analysis of the Boko Haram Uprising, July 2009," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden, Netherlands: African Studies Centre (ASC), 2014), 123, 126.
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