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Boko Haram closes in on its dream of an African caliphate – and Isis gives its blessing, and advice on strategy

As the world watches the latest atrocities emerging from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, their Nigerian counterparts this weekend took control of several villages to create their own sharia state

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The Boko Haram gunmen who swept into the township of Gulak brought with them a new message. Rather than sowing afresh the terror they have brought to swathes of north-east Nigeria by opening fire, the jihadists insisted they were here to stay and residents would not be harmed.

For Nigerians who have died in their thousands at the hands of Boko Haram's Islamist insurgents, such assurances were always going to be treated as hollow lies. Scores fled and today officials said the reality was that many in Gulak were killed in the weekend attack.

As Michael Kirshinga, a resident of the strategically important settlement, put it: "They assured us that they will not attack us, but people began to run for their lives. Some of us have fled for fear that, after subduing the soldiers, the insurgents will turn their gun barrels on us."

The attack on Gulak may have ultimately conformed to Boko Haram's grimly familiar modus operandi of spreading panic and spilling blood with murderous raids, bombings and beheadings.

In pictures: Nigeria kidnapped schoolgirls

But the attempt to persuade its victims that it meant no harm and the raising of jihadist flags over the township was the latest evidence of a new – and yet more chilling – direction in Boko Haram's five-year campaign to bring havoc to Africa's most populous nation.

The group earlier this year succeeded in monopolising global attention – and outrage – when it kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls from the village of Chibok in April, 200 of whom remain missing.

But while the West has since concentrated its focus on the “caliphate” or religious fiefdom declared by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Isis) in Iraq and Syria, a similar announcement by Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau – and a series of territorial gains – has passed largely unremarked outside Nigeria.

As the insurrection which began in 2009 this weekend seized yet more towns along Nigeria's border with Cameroon and tightened its grip on large parts of its native Borno state, experts said Boko Haram was metamorphosing from a guerrilla movement once confined to the bush and mountain caves into a force capable of holding onto its gains.

When his fighters last month took the town of Gwoza in Borno, murdering inhabitants and again raising its jihadist flags, Shekau released a video in which he declared the area was “now part of the Islamic Caliphate”. He added that Gwoza now had “nothing to do with Nigeria”.

Scholars warned last week that Boko Haram, whose name translates colloquially as “Western education is sin” and which began life in 2002 as a movement to reject concepts such as evolution and big bang theory, was on the verge of ending government control across almost the entire state of Borno and establishing its cherished aim of a caliphate.

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Intelligence agencies are concerned that what were once symbolic links between Isis and Boko Haram have now developed into a practical relationship with the Islamic State offering advice on strategy and tactics.

Emboldened by the success of Isis and now seemingly armed with armoured vehicles and artillery, observers said Boko Haram was beginning to operate more like a conventional army in Borno and the neighbouring north-eastern states of Adamawa and Yobe.

The Nigeria Security Network, a coalition of security experts and academics, said: “Unless swift action is taken, Nigeria could be facing a rapid takeover of a large area of its territory reminiscent of Isis’s lightning advances in Iraq.”

The nature of the threat was further underlined on Monday when a senior politician in Borno admitted that civil life in the state, home to three million people, has all but ground to a halt.

Alhaji Baba Ahmad Jidda, secretary to the Borno state government, said: “At this very moment, most parts of Borno state are being occupied by Boko Haram insurgents. Government presence and administration is minimal or non-existent across many parts of the state, with economic, commercial and social services totally subdued. Schools and clinics remain closed. Most settlements in the affected areas in the state have either been deserted or access to them is practically impossible.”

He added: “The threat to security of lives and property as a result of the criminal activities of the Boko Haram insurgents is everywhere.”

The capture of the strategic Borno town of Bama – since disputed by the Nigerian authorities – has raised concern that the state capital, Maiduguri, where Boko Haram was founded and long one of its key targets, will be next to come under sustained attack.

Soldiers in Nigeria’s beleaguered army this week fought off rebels outside the city and claimed to have secured a significant victory in a village just 25 miles from Maiduguri, where a raid killed dozens of insurgents and reportedly led to the capture of equipment including an armoured personnel carrier. But inside the city residents remain fearful that a fresh assault by Boko Haram, which has succeeded in cutting bridges around the area, is imminent.

Students at Maiduguri University, which sits on a dry river bed used by rebels to attack the city in the past, said they could not concentrate on end-of-term exams because of fear and sporadic gunfire.

Ibrahim Muhammad Idris told *The Independent*: “People are really scared. Prayers is the only thing we can do. We are writing the exams right now. At times if we go to class to read and we hear gunshots or any explosions we end it for the day.”

Asked about insurgents’ attempts to persuade civilians they will not be harmed, he added: “Them saying they won’t attack is just a trick, they want to use people as human shields. They are liars.”

The military successes of Boko Haram will deepen concern that Nigeria’s army, despite the bravery of individual soldiers and units, is unable to stop the rebel force despite pledges of military aid from London and Washington.

Reports are rife of desertions, refusals to fight, malfunctioning equipment and low morale. According to one report, soldiers are sent into battle with just 60 rounds of ammunition against well-equipped Islamists.

The crucial question remains of whether Boko Haram, whose members have previously enforced their idea of sharia law by beheading victims with chainsaws, has the longer-term capacity or will to administer its new gains.

Andrew Noakes, NSN coordinator, said: “At the moment we’re only seeing crude forms of governance – the implementation of sharia law and setting up of check points. They’re not reported to be setting up government departments or running services. It’s unclear whether they have the ability – or desire – to actually govern.”