

Nigeria: Security Agents Arrest Suspected Leader of 'Taliban' Group in Borno

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KANO, Nigeria, July 7, 2006 (AFP) - A prominent Islamic cleric has been arrested in northern Nigeria's Borno State for allegedly leading a 'Taliban' group, his aides said Friday.

"Muhammad Yusuf was picked up in the early hours of Thursday in his residence in the northern city of Maiduguri by the State Security Service (SSS) and taken to an unknown destination," Awwal Buba told AFP by telephone.

He was accused of leading a militant group that called itself the Taliban, after the outlawed militia that formerly ruled Afghanistan, he said.

"Six SSS operatives came to his house in the early hours of yesterday and whisked him away and we are yet to find out where they took him to," he added.

Yusuf, known for his fiery preaching, was arrested for a similar reason in 2004 after the group launched a short-lived but bloody rebellion against the government. He was later released and kept under surveillance by the security agency.

"Since the unrest by the so-called Talibans the security agents have been conducting investigations to find out those behind the unfortunate incident and the government has vowed to spare no one found guilty of complicity in the unrest", the state governor's spokesman Usman Chiroma told AFP.

"The SSS knows why they arrested him and I believe they would not arrest Yusuf without a reason," he added.

The Taliban, which drew its inspiration from the Afghan Taliban and comprised mostly university students from wealthy backgrounds, launched a "jihad" (Islamic holy war) against the government in 2004 from Kanamma, a village in neighbouring Yobe State, on the border with Niger.

The 500-strong group had in February 2004 camped outside Kanamma, which it called Afghanistan and launched a revolution to establish a Taliban-style Islamic state in Nigeria, attacking police stations and killing three policemen.

The Nigerian federal government sent soldiers to quell the insurrection in a fierce six-day battle in which scores of the militants were killed and more than 50 arrested while the rest went underground.

The "Taliban" regrouped in September 2004 and launched another attack on a police station in Bama in the state and later hid in the Mambila mountains on the border with Cameroon.

After two days of fighting with the army, scores more of the militants were killed while five who escaped to Cameroon were arrested by that country's authorities and extradited to Nigeria.

Yusuf, who has 3,000 followers, denied in an interview with AFP in February being the leader of the "Taliban" although he admitted that some members of the group were his students.

He also admitted canvassing for an Islamic revolution in Nigeria and the whole world.