



Islamist sect may widen attacks

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By Aminu Abubakar

Kano - Nigeria's self-styled Taliban militant Islamist sect, whose short-lived uprising was brutally put down by the security forces last year, has threatened to widen its activities beyond the borders.

"Islam doesn't recognise international boundaries, we will carry out our operations anywhere in the world if we can have the chance," said Musa Tanko, spokesperson of the Boko Haram sect, in a rare interview given to AFP on Sunday.

"The United States is the number one target for its oppression and aggression against Muslim nations particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan and its blind support to Israel in its killings of our Palestinian brethren," Tanko said, adjusting his starched bottle green kaftan.

Thousands of Boko Haram Islamic sect militia launched an armed insurrection in July 2009 from their enclave in the northern city of Maiduguri and several other cities in the region in a doomed bid to establish an Islamic state.

"We will launch fiercer attacks than Iraqi or Afghan Mujahedeen (Islamic fighters) against our enemies throughout the world, particularly the US, if the chance avails itself within the confines of what Islam prescribes but for now our attention is focused on Nigeria which is our starting point," Tanko said, as he placed a black file folder on his lap.

Determined and committed

Slim, dark, chin-bearded and soft-spoken, Tanko, 30, betrayed no emotion as he spoke under a defoliated tree, intermittently wiping sweat off his glistening forehead with a white handkerchief, while his four colleagues nodded in approval between pauses.

The group draws its inspiration from the Afghan Taliban and sees Taliban spiritual leader Mullah Umar and the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, as its champions, Tanko said.

"We see Mullah Umar and Osama bin Laden as the true champions of Islam who are fighting Allah's enemies and our allegiance and support go to them although we don't have any contact with them yet," Tanko said.

Tanko said the group was not daunted by the police's extra-judicial killings of its members by security forces during the July rebellion.

Nigerian police and troops crushed the uprising after a four-day street battle that claimed more than 800 lives, mostly of sect members.

The killings, he said, "have made us more determined and committed in our struggle. We are undeterred",

Tanko said in the local Hausa dialect.

Gruesome killings

Qatar-based Al Jazeera television station aired five minutes of footage in February showing policemen shooting unarmed Boko Haram sect members outside a police headquarters in Maiduguri.

"The gruesome killings of our brothers ...has not in any way dampened our spirit, in fact it has made us more steadfast and determined in our holy struggle to oust the secular regime and entrench a just Islamic government," Tanko said in northern Nigeria's commercial capital Kano.

The interview is the first the group granted since the rebellion was put down, forcing them to go underground.

The video footage drew local and international outcry, forcing Nigeria's Acting President Goodluck Jonathan to order an investigation which led to the arrest of 17 police officers.

Sect leader Muhammad Yusuf was allegedly gunned down by police hours after his capture.

The group, originally called Nigerian Taliban, made its debut in January 2003 when it set up a base in Kanamma village, northeastern Yobe state near the border with Niger. It attacked police stations, killing policemen and carting away ammunition. Scores of militants were killed, some arrested while many went underground.

Divine worship

In September of the same year they regrouped and launched attacks on police stations near the border with Cameroon. Around two dozen were killed in clashes with Nigerian troops, several arrested and the rest disappeared in mountains.

The group, whose name means "Western education is sin" in the local dialect, initially drew its membership mostly from young graduates and university dropouts who reject anything Western.

"We have shown capacity to regroup and re-launch attacks in the face of crackdown and anybody who thinks the last has been heard of us is mistaken.

"We believe what we are doing is divine worship and ideology cannot be defeated through repression," Tanko said.
