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Nigeria's 'Taliban' plot comeback from hide-outs

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Defeated in the field by a bloody military crackdown, Nigeria's home-grown Islamic insurgency has dispersed amid the dusty back streets of the country's teeming northern cities and is plotting its comeback.

Small numbers of militants—inspired by the example set by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and by Afghan and Palestinian guerrilla fighters—await the moment to re-launch their campaign for a Muslim revolution in Africa's most populous state and main oil exporter.

"Allah, the almighty Lord, has authorised every Muslim to fight to establish an Islamic government over the world. One day it will happen in Nigeria and everywhere," militant leader Aminu "Tashen-Ilimi" said in his first interview with the international press.

Tashen-Ilimi, whose nom de guerre means "new way of knowledge", is described by his supporters as the leader of a small group of mainly middle-class young men which in 2003 launched a violent but short-lived uprising amid the sand dunes and savannah on Nigeria's northern frontier.

The movement—which was dubbed Nigeria's "Taliban" after the Afghan student movement which seized power in Kabul and created an ultra-conservative Islamic government—briefly took control of the village of Kanama on Nigeria's border with Niger.

The group's 200-strong force raided several police stations but was bloodily dispersed by government troops in January 2004. Eight months later, 60 survivors launched a guerrilla attack on a police patrol near Gwoza on the Cameroon border.

A two day battle left 28 "Taliban" dead.

"Those who survived hid in Maiduguri or fled abroad. They are coming back one by one, but are hiding, under pressure from the security services. Tashen-Ilimi is one of the commanders," a militant sympathiser said in Maiduguri, a major city in Nigeria's far northeast.

If Tashen-Ilimi was disappointed at his small band's failure to ignite a revolution among Nigeria's Muslims, who make up around half of the country's 130-million-strong population, he doesn't show it, and he has lost none of his passion for the cause.

"When I repented and discovered the true faith, understood the true words of Allah, I left everything behind: my family, my job, and migrated," he said, his eyes shining under his black and white, Palestinian-style keffiyeh headscarf.

“I’m ready to take up arms. I don’t know who gave us the name Taliban, I prefer ‘mujahideen’; the fighters. I only know the Taliban in Afghanistan, and I respect them and what they did very much,” he said, at a safe-house in central Maiduguri.

“Those who fought in Kanama and Gwoza are only Muslims who performed their holy duty,” he said.

Although short-lived and small-scale, the revolt caused alarm in Nigeria’s capital Abuja and abroad, particularly in the United States, where intelligence agencies fear the badly-governed wastes of west Africa’s Sahel desert could become a new haven for violent Islamists.

But with the militants proving hard to track down in the overcrowded and chaotic cities of the north, the crackdown has focused on the preachers who are suspected of fomenting the unrest.

Mohammed Yusuf, one of Maiduguri’s best known imams, has twice been arrested on suspicion of leading the Taliban, despite his protestations of innocence.

“These youths studied the Koran with me and with others. Afterwards they wanted to leave the town, which they thought impure, and head for the bush, believing that Muslims who do not share their ideology are infidels,” he said.

Yusuf insisted that he urged the young men not to resort to violence, but added that he shared their goal of an Islamic state: “I think that an Islamic system of government should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through dialogue.”

The preacher still teaches “3 000 students”.

Whether Tashen-Ilimi’s depleted band of radicals will be able to revive their armed struggle is unclear. Nigerian security services take the threat seriously and have beefed up forces in Borno, supplying local police with 54 new all terrain vehicles.

Borno state’s spokesperson, Usman Chiroma, dismisses the Taliban as bandits “hiding their criminal activities behind Islam to justify their wrongdoings”.

But the militants are inspired by another small group which made a big name for itself.

“Bin Laden did very good work. He obeys the rules of his God. With attacks, he strikes fear in the enemies of Islam. I may not be ready to do the same now but if I could I would,” Tashen-Ilimi warned. - AFP

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