

Islamist leader Shekau 'hiding in the desert'

AFRICA / 16 JULY 2010, 10:08AM /

A 32-year-old perfume seller is ready for holy war, but he is waiting for orders from his leader, an Islamist believed killed in an uprising in northern Nigeria nearly a year ago.

"What happens in the next few weeks depends on the directives our leaders send to us," Yerima Faltaye said as he sold his goods on the streets in the city of Maiduguri. "Once the directive comes, nothing can stop us."

Late July marks one year since an uprising by an Islamist sect in Nigeria's north that left more than 800 dead and spread across four states, and there are fears the so-called Nigerian Taliban is reforming to strike again.

The uprising shocked the country, where roughly half of the 150-million population is Muslim and a dozen of the nation's 36 states have implemented Islamic sharia law, though it is selectively applied.

As a result, this city, the centre of the uprising, resembles a police state ahead of the July 26 anniversary.

A dozen vans with gun-toting police escorted by a siren-blaring armoured car regularly rumble through the dusty streets.

Tensions have been stoked by the release of video clips of one of the Islamist leaders believed killed, Abubakar Shekau, in which he threatens to "avenge the killings of our brethren."

A message attributed to him was also posted on a website this week, according to a US-based monitoring group, in which he threatens the United States and pays tribute to al-Qaeda leaders in Iraq.

The sect, called Boko Haram ('Western education is sin' in local dialect), launched the insurrection last year from an enclave in Maiduguri in a doomed bid to establish an Islamic state.

Nigerian police and troops crushed the uprising after four days of street battles that left more than 800 dead, mostly sect members, including the group's leader Mohammed Yusuf.

Shekau, the man now appearing on video, was his deputy and had been thought killed, as well. Police still maintain that Shekau is dead and dismiss the video clips as digital mock-ups.

ADVERTISING

In one video clip being circulated on mobile phones, Shekau is clad in military camouflage and wears a white turban. He sits between two AK-47 rifles and claims to be the new sect leader.

The 30-minute long clip shows scores of masked young men conducting military exercises at an undisclosed desert location.

"We will definitely avenge the killings of our brethren, including Mohammed Yusuf. Jihad has just begun in Nigeria," he says in local Hausa dialect in a clip seen by an AFP reporter.

"What happened was only the prelude, the actual show has not started yet."

In another clip, Shekau is flanked by two masked men in military camouflage brandishing Kalashnikov rifles. His speech is interrupted by a ringing cell phone and a wailing baby.

"Most of our fighters escaped the fighting and are still around and are ready to fight as ever," Shekau says.

Borno state police chief Ibrahim Abdu said rumours the sect was readying to mark the rebellion anniversary have pushed security forces "to be on the watch-out for the members of the group".

Hundreds of anti-riot police reinforcements have been deployed in the city, Abdu said, while more intelligence personnel have been called in.

But that has only heightened tension among Maiduguri residents.

"The deployment of more policemen in the city and the daily patrols have only increased residents' apprehension of the possible re-emergence of Boko Haram," Maiduguri resident Mohammed Goni said outside his provision store as the patrol motorcade zoomed past.

Ibrahim Mala, a repentant sect member-turned-grocer at Maiduguri's main market, claims to know where Shekau is hiding.

"He escaped the fighting ... and is now hiding in the desert between Chad and Sudan," Mala said.

Police guard the sect's former headquarters reduced to rubble by Nigerian troops during last year's clashes.

"Two weeks ago a member of the sect came here to pray for the soul of Mohammed Yusuf, who he said was his spiritual leader and a divine fighter," a police officer at the site told AFP, pointing to a heap of rubble that had been the mosque.

But a university lecturer who had contact with the sect's leadership while doing research on the group dismissed Shekau's threats.

"Shekau lacks the power of persuasion, the oratory and maturity which fetched Mohammed Yusuf followers," Ahmad Baba Tela, a linguistics professor at University of Maiduguri, said. - AFP