



In Biu, Borno state, Nigeria, a mother and daughter live with six other family members in a one-room hut since they fled their village two years ago. They rarely eat more than one meal a day. Photo: Tom Saater for Mercy Corps

# THE UNTOLD CRISIS OF THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

OCTOBER 2016

## Executive Summary

The Lake Chad Basin is suffering from one of the world's largest overlooked humanitarian crises today.<sup>1</sup> Almost half the population living in areas affected by Boko Haram violence – 9.2 million people - are in need of humanitarian assistance. A staggering 2.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes, at least 65,000 people in the region are experiencing famine-like conditions,<sup>2</sup> and 6.4 million people are facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> As access to previously inaccessible communities increases in the wake of a military campaign to drive back Boko Haram, we are uncovering untold horrors of famine,

<sup>1</sup> The Lake Chad Basin refers to areas of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria bordering Lake Chad.

<sup>2</sup> Joint INGO letter [“Hunger stalks north eastern Nigeria”](#) 23 September 2016,

<sup>3</sup> IOM, [Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\) Round XI Report August 2016](#), Nigeria.

malnutrition, and widespread gender-based violence. While the full scope of exposure to violence is yet unknown, Mercy Corps argues the level of trauma due to exposure to atrocities, rape, and human rights abuses will take years to mend.

Suffering from the conflict has been compounded by numerous other factors: decades of poor governance; extreme poverty; mismanagement of natural resources and climate change. Crucially, it is in the context of weak state legitimacy that Boko Haram was able to exploit governance-related grievances and successfully recruit young people to their cause.<sup>4</sup>

To promote stability in the region and respond to urgent humanitarian needs, we urge regional governments, the international community, donors, and non-governmental agencies to scale up investment in all four countries. This includes:

- Dramatically and urgently increasing humanitarian investments to combat malnutrition and food insecurity, address shelter and protection needs, and ensure safe access to water and sanitation. Increase direct funding to the humanitarian actors best placed to respond effectively.
- Beginning, even in the midst of humanitarian response, to address the root causes of violence and poverty in the region, by increasing long-term investments that promote positive state-citizen relationships, addressing drivers of violence, and building community resilience to violent extremism.
- Paying particular attention to increasing the safety, opportunities, and personal agency of adolescent boys and girls in the region who have grown up in conflict and suffering.



Source: OCHA, September 2016



*Zulyatu, 16, and her younger siblings live in Borno state, in northeast Nigeria, and struggle to find enough to eat. Their father died during a Boko Haram raid, and their mother left a year ago to seek health care in another village.*

Tom Saater for Mercy Corps

<sup>4</sup> ["Motivations and Empty Promises."](#) Mercy Corps, 2016

## A Humanitarian Crisis of Epic Proportions

The Lake Chad Basin is suffering from a complex confluence of threats that have culminated in one of the world's largest overlooked humanitarian crises today.<sup>5</sup> Almost half the population living in areas affected by Boko Haram violence are in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> 2.6 million people are displaced in the region, of which 1.8 million are in northeast Nigeria alone.<sup>7</sup> At least 65,000 people in the region are experiencing famine-like conditions,<sup>8</sup> and 6.4 million people are facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity.<sup>9</sup>

In early 2015, forces from Niger, Chad, and Cameroon joined the Nigerian army's campaign against Boko Haram.<sup>10</sup> It has brought increased access to some areas and the military capacity of Boko Haram inside Nigeria has been substantially diminished. However, as humanitarian organisations and journalists have begun accessing new areas, they are now witnessing the true impact of Boko Haram's insurgency. The existing needs are compounded by the military campaign itself as many tens of thousands of people, notably in the Lac region in western Chad, have been forced to flee, some on the order of the authorities ahead of military operations.

In response to battlefield defeats, Boko Haram has switched to a pattern of hit and run and suicide attacks on soft targets across a widening range of locations. Raids on villages and the use of improvised explosive devices continue to cause devastation, panic and renewed displacement. Suicide attacks are often conducted by children, adolescents and women and target civilians in markets, mosques and, increasingly, IDP (Internally Displaced People) sites.

The conflict and resulting displacement have also stoked tensions and conflict within and between communities. Distrust of refugees, displaced people and communities ethnically affiliated to Boko Haram supporters has led to inter-communal clashes in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Vigilante groups have



*Hussaina, 40, fled her village in Yobe, Nigeria in March 2016. She now lives in a small compound in Funakaye where she and her five children share two rooms with 35 other people. Hunger is a constant presence and food is the chief concern of all who live here.*

Corinna Robbins/Mercy Corps.

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<sup>5</sup> The Lake Chad Basin refers to areas of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria bordering Lake Chad.

<sup>6</sup> Nigeria Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Round XI, Cameroon DTM August 2016, OCHA Nigeria LCB Crisis overview, 20 September 2016, IOM, [Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\) Round XI Report August 2016](#), Nigeria.

<sup>7</sup> IOM, [Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\) Round XI Report August 2016](#), Nigeria. Of the 2.1 million IDPs in northeast Nigeria, 1.9 million are displaced as a result of the insurgency.

<sup>8</sup> Cadre Harmonisé food security assessment in north eastern Nigeria, August 2016. There are 65,000 individuals in different localities in Phase 5 (famine) of the Cadre Harmonisé classification.

<sup>9</sup> OCHA Nigeria Lake Chad Basin Crisis Overview, 20 September 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Other regional military cooperation initiatives include the G5 against armed groups, consisting of Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso, as well as international military assistance from France, the US and other countries.



established themselves, including the 'Civilian Joint Task Force' (CJTF), a group of militias formed in Maiduguri, Nigeria, to oust Boko Haram. Such groups have foiled many Boko Haram attacks, but have also reportedly committed abuses against minorities.

Meanwhile in northeast Nigeria, the relative improvement of security in many areas has made the reintegration of large numbers of armed men from the informal militias of the CJTF and other vigilante groups a more pressing issue. They expect significant compensation for playing their part in defeating the insurgency, not least in the form of reparations to the families of those who died fighting Boko Haram.

Communities already devastated by the conflict face further threats from flooding and disease. National emergency agencies in the area predict there may be significant regional flooding in the last months of 2016,<sup>11</sup> which also increases the risk of a major cholera outbreak, a disease endemic to Nigeria and which frequently recurs in flood-affected areas. Separately, a public health emergency has been declared in all four Lake Chad countries and the Central African Republic in response to an outbreak of polio in Nigeria. Cases of measles and acute watery diarrhoea among IDPs are also increasing.<sup>12</sup>

More positively, regional governments are mobilising around the needs of crisis-affected populations with increased urgency and national coordination. After a slow and inadequate response to the crisis, donors have become more active in the region since early summer 2016 and are on track to roughly double the volume of assistance provided in 2015. However, that still means that less than one third of current UN appeals for the crisis was funded at the time of writing (a shortfall of \$542m) and those best placed to respond, including international NGOs and civil society organisations frequently struggle to access the funding already available.<sup>13</sup>



*Mariam, 40, and her family stand outside their tent in Sabon Gari, Borno State. They arrived one month ago, after three years of living under a Boko Haram siege of their home village. Mariam and her six children hadn't eaten in three days when we met them. She said, "There's no one to beg [from], because everyone else is in the same situation."*

Tom Saater for Mercy Corps

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<sup>11</sup> Relief Web, 'Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Update 7.' September 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lake-chad-basin-crisis-update-7>

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF "Nigeria Humanitarian Situation Report" - September 2016.

<sup>13</sup> OCHA, "Lake Chad Basin Emergency, Revised Requirements and Response Priorities", September-December 2016.



## Background to the Lake Chad Basin Crisis

### Poverty and neglect

The territories of the four countries bordering Lake Chad were all relatively poor and marginalised long before the current insurgency, after decades of neglect and underinvestment by governments. Inequality has grown between the more prosperous southern and western regions of Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria compared with the Lake Chad area, where high birth rates, poverty and low levels of formal education are particularly acute. Literacy in Nigeria's Borno State was 14.5 percent pre-crisis, the lowest in the country, and primary school attendance in the region was already among the lowest levels in the world.<sup>14</sup> According to UNICEF, of the 2.5 million children suffering severe acute malnutrition in Nigeria, the vast majority are in the north.<sup>15</sup>

### Food insecurity and climate change

Subsistence agriculture and livestock farming are the most common livelihoods in the Lake Chad region. Yet agricultural productivity has been declining for decades due to climate change, demographic pressures and mismanagement of scarce water resources. Lake Chad's surface area is barely a tenth of what it was in 1963.<sup>16</sup> As it has shrunk, so have the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of families. Other than migrating out of the region, there are few alternative sources of income as most people in the region lack the education or skills for another sector.<sup>17</sup>

The conflict has compounded these problems, causing an estimated \$3.7 billion in agricultural damage across the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>18</sup> Traditional household and community structures have also been disrupted, with women more frequently becoming heads of households and responsible for securing the family income, or at least enough food.<sup>19</sup>

### Economic destruction

The Lake Chad Basin region has always been underdeveloped both economically and in terms of infrastructure, with most livelihoods heavily dependent on agriculture, livestock and trade. The conflict has inflicted

<sup>14</sup> UNESCO, "Action Plan: Nigeria." UNESCO High level International Round Table on Literacy, September 2012. <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/Nigeria.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> UNICEF media dialogue on Child Nutrition "Good Nutrition - An Investment for the Future" July 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Ayo Obe, "Environmental Degradation, Climate Change and Conflict: The Lake Chad Basin Area," 27 Oct 2015 <https://medium.com/the-future-of-conflict/environmental-degradation-climate-change-and-conflict-the-lake-chad-basin-area-6aec2bd9fa25#.31mogilet>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> FAO, "Food insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin", June 2016. <http://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/420990>

<sup>19</sup> OCHA, Gender and SGBV Analysis, Maiduguri Nigeria, July 2016

huge damage on the already fragile regional economy and wiped out much of the infrastructure that had existed: 80 percent or more of houses in Damboa, south Borno State have been completely destroyed, alongside wells, clinics, schools and roads.

Governments of the region have curtailed economic activities in an effort to cut off Boko Haram's revenue and means of subsistence. For example, production in Niger's Diffa region used to account for 75 percent of the country's pepper production but, along with other agricultural activities, has been forbidden. Governments have shut down markets, restricted the sale of fuel and agricultural fertilisers, and temporarily banned trade of various goods. Motorcycle bans in various rural areas further impact mobility and markets, and have bred local resentment. Cross-border commerce has likely been severely curtailed.<sup>20</sup>

The cost of reconstruction will be vast. The North-East Nigeria Recovery and Peace Building Assessment (RPBA) estimates the cost of recovery and peace building is US\$6.7 billion.<sup>21</sup> The timing could not be worse: collapsing oil prices have pushed Nigeria's economy into recession and the region's population is set to double every 20 years.

## Weak Governance

The region's troubles are also rooted in poor or absent governance. National and state-level corruption and mismanagement has bred profound resentment among large swathes of the population who are not direct beneficiaries of state patronage.<sup>22</sup> It is in this context of weak state legitimacy that Boko Haram was able to successfully recruit youth. As Mercy Corps' April 2016 study of ex-Boko Haram fighters shows, Boko Haram exploited governance-related grievances and frustrations over inequality by providing opportunities for youth to achieve their economic ambitions. They leveraged peer networks to increase recruitment and silenced potential critics through campaigns of intimidation.<sup>23</sup>

Even though the insurgency is on the back foot, particularly in Nigeria, the governments of the region are missing an opportunity to win hearts and minds. Providing humanitarian support to local populations and investing in development should be at the centre of the counter-insurgency strategy but is largely overlooked. This risks exacerbating long-term frustrations over inadequate services, which in turn create instability in the region.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group, "Boko Haram on the Back Foot?" May 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>

<sup>21</sup> North-East Nigeria Recovery and Peace Building Assessment (RPBA), Press Release, May 2016 [http://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20160516-rpba-2-pager-for-public-presentation\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20160516-rpba-2-pager-for-public-presentation_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, "Boko Haram on the Back Foot?" May 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>

<sup>23</sup> Mercy Corps, "Motivations and Empty Promises; Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth", 2016

<sup>24</sup> International Crisis Group, "Boko Haram on the Back Foot?" May 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>

## Recommendations

### 1. SURGE THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Governments, donors and implementing partners must support an adequate and well-coordinated response to meet the needs of those affected by the conflict, including internally displaced and refugees and the communities hosting them, and addressing the needs of young people.<sup>25</sup> The UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Nigeria is only 39 percent funded, and that is without an accurate assessment of needs in the northeast.<sup>26</sup>

Donors should prioritise direct funding to the humanitarian actors best placed to respond. This should include direct and rapid funding to International NGOs and others who have the presence, networks and experience that enables them to respond effectively. Donors should also provide funding to national and local civil society organisations that are unable to access funding from other sources, such as the pooled fund. Strengthened civilian-military relations would help overcome issues around humanitarian access.

Donors must insist on strong and impartial UN leadership and coordination with governments in the region in order to ensure international NGOs have sufficient operational space to deliver effectively.

The most urgent needs include:

- Combating food security and reducing malnutrition; the response should simultaneously provide direct delivery of commodities, cash assistance, and market recovery interventions to address the full scope of market system failure driving starvation and malnutrition.
- Cash grants to address immediate needs and help communities get back on their feet.
- Protection programming to reduce sexual violence and forced recruitment of children.
- Psychosocial support and psychological first aid to help those traumatised by the conflict and violence.
- Provision of shelter to refugees, returnees, IDPs and host communities.
- Infrastructure investments, particularly priority water and sanitation access needs to address the serious threat of disease, in communities hosting IDPs and returnees.

In Nigeria, specifically, we urge that:

- All aid be delivered in a conflict-sensitive manner, and all donors require conflict sensitivity analysis to ensure aid deliveries are not driving grievances.
- The federal Government of Nigeria and the World Bank ensure that funds from the forthcoming stabilisation package are used for direct service delivery to those most in need, and that the package be contracted in order to allow local Nigerian civil society a clear oversight role.
- The international community consider embedding humanitarian response advisers within the Nigerian government to help manage the rapidly increasing caseload.

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<sup>25</sup> OCHA Nigeria Lake Chad Basin Crisis Overview, 20 September 2016.

<sup>26</sup> OCHA [Financial Tracking Service](#), Nigeria 2016, retrieved 23 October 2016.

## 2. BUILD RESILIENCE TO FUTURE CONFLICT AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Unless we increase our efforts to address the root causes of violence and poverty in the region, the Lake Chad Basin Crisis will continue for years to come. In addition to delivering lifesaving assistance and securing long term development, we must therefore invest in understanding the actual grievances fuelling conflict in each context and then provide solutions.

We must:

- Invest in programmes that build community resilience to violent extremism, including those that promote positive state-citizen relationships and build commitment to non-violence within social networks.
- Ensure that all security forces adopt clear protection of civilians mandates and mind-sets, including by creating clear harm mitigation policies, tools, practices, and appropriate standard operating procedures to address how harm will be investigated and responded to when it does occur.
- Drive the return of the rule of law, including by immediately ending state-sponsored counterinsurgency tactics that exacerbate local grievances and push youth to join armed groups.
- Increase local government capacity to meet basic services, including by empowering civil society to productively advocate for service delivery and helping the government to actually deliver.
- Strengthen existing local conflict management mechanisms to prevent conflict from escalating and spilling over into new areas.
- Improve natural resource management, particularly related to land, to alleviate strain caused by desertification and intensive water consumption.
- Reduce resource competitions by helping diversify pastoralists' and farmers' livelihood options. Provide business start-up support and training to facilitate wider market linkages and growth.

In Nigeria, specifically, we urge that:

- The Federal Government of Nigeria engages with the Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF) to negotiate a plan for integration, reintegration, and reconciliation.
- The Federal Government of Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor programme be taken over by civilians seasoned in disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration work so that the programme does not drive more grievances.
- Governors in the Northern Governor's Forum commit to implementing recovery programming in line with the Buhari Plan for northeast Recovery, so that states, the federal government, and the international community are implementing policies and programmes in the same direction.

## 3. PROTECT AND EMPOWER ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS

Improve the safety, employment pathways and agency of adolescents in the region. Evidence shows that the years of adolescence not only inform how people behave socially – they fundamentally alter their attitudes about the use of violence or how to relate to other people. We must capitalise on this brief window of opportunity and support adolescents to make decisions that will positively impact the trajectory of their lives:

- Improve protection for adolescent girls and boys and young men and women, including psychosocial support for adolescents who have been exposed to constant violence.



- Deliver life-skills coaching, mentoring and business opportunities to increase psychosocial resilience and provide support networks for adolescents.
- Provide interventions that strengthen family, community and government structures to help voice the concerns of adolescents and better support youth and their positive development.
- Identify and partner with private sector actors able to provide youth with economic opportunities.



*Zulyatu, 16, in the market with two bags of food she bought using her e-voucher card. She said there was enough rice in the bag to feed her and her younger siblings for a month.*

Tom Saater for Mercy Corps

## **Mercy Corps' Response**

**Northeast Nigeria:** Since mid-2014, Mercy Corps has implemented programmes in northeast Nigeria, providing food security, unconditional cash, WASH, livelihoods interventions and protection support to approximately 1,750 households in Gombe State and Adamawa State, (with an average of seven people per household). We initiated a programme in Borno State for adolescent girls and boys in August 2016 and started food assistance and cash transfers in Southern Borno in October 2016. We are looking to expand operations across Borno State and enter Yobe State as access improves.

**Niger:** Mercy Corps has a well-established programme rooted in food security, economic development and resilience-building interventions. Mercy Corps intends to initiate additional programmes addressing the drivers and root causes of food insecurity in the Diffa region and targeting host communities and refugees/returnees/IDPs alike. Even though the region has been highly food insecure for at least the last five years, almost all funding is short term and does not address long term or even early recovery needs.

**Cameroon and Chad:** Mercy Corps is currently scoping out multi-year funding opportunities and assessing whether to establish a Cameroon country programme focused on the Far North region.

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### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organisation powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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