



TO DEFEND OR HARM?

Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria

RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

T +1 202 558 6958
E comms@civiliansinconflict.org
civiliansinconflict.org

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Cover *Members of the Civilian Joint Task Force,
Nigerian Police Force and Nigerian Army who
protect Bakassi IDP camp in Maiduguri
Metropolitan Council, December 2019.*

The Walking Paradox

Report designed by Dena Verdesca.

ABOUT CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians caught in conflict. CIVIC's mission is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm. Our vision is a world where parties to armed conflict recognize the dignity and rights of civilians, prevent civilian harm, protect civilians caught in conflict, and amend harm.

CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Building on her extraordinary legacy, CIVIC now operates in conflict zones throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and South Asia to advance a higher standard of protection for civilians.

At CIVIC, we believe that parties to armed conflict have a responsibility to prevent and address civilian harm. To accomplish this, we assess the causes of civilian harm in particular conflicts, craft practical solutions to address that harm, and advocate for the adoption of new policies and practices that lead to the improved well-being of civilians caught in conflict. Recognizing the power of collaboration, we engage with civilians, governments, militaries, and international and regional institutions to identify and institutionalize strengthened protections for civilians in conflict.

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Members of the yan gora (Civilian Joint Task Force) in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council, December 2019.

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ACRONYMS

AOG	Armed Opposition Group
BOYES	Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme
CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province (Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah)
JASDJ	Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad
LGA	Local Government Area
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
VGN	Vigilante Group of Nigeria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than 36,000 people have lost their lives to the violent conflict in northeast Nigeria.¹ Owing to the initial absence of state security forces, communities turned to existing community militias and formed new groups to protect themselves.² Over the last decade, community militias have played key roles in the conflict, protecting civilians from a range of threats including attacks, abduction, sexual and gender-based violence, and extortion. At the same time, these groups have been responsible for harm against civilians. This report takes an in-depth look at the role of community militias in the conflict in northeast Nigeria, capping off research CIVIC has been conducting since 2016 and building on knowledge CIVIC has developed through engaging with community militias on civilian protection and civilian harm mitigation across Borno state.³

Despite their size and contributions, little is known about community militias and their operations, particularly outside Maiduguri, the Borno state capital. There are a number of community militia groups operating in Borno state, including the hunters (kungiyar maharba), yan бага (vigilantes), and kesh kesh (Shuwa vigilante), which date back to two or three generations ago. Unlike these groups, the yan gora, or Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), emerged in Maiduguri in mid-2013 as a direct result of the violent conflict in northeast Nigeria. These groups have followed different trajectories, have different motivations, act in different ways towards civilians, and have different compositions, including the degree to which they include women and give them meaningful roles. Yet, they have all taken significant actions to protect civilians from harm and have been instrumental in enabling a more stable environment in some parts of Borno state.

Civilians credit community militias for improving connections with security forces, preventing attacks by armed opposition groups (AOGs), dispensing justice, and allowing civilians to go about their essential activities, like collecting firewood or tending to agricultural land. The groups that have incorporated and empowered female members have been able to respond even more

effectively, as they are able to share and glean information from women, and conduct body scans – which is important for protection given that women are often used as suicide bombers. While civilians are appreciative of community militias’ efforts to protect them, they also pointed to ways in which community militias have harmed civilians – particularly the yan gora, who have been accused of assaulting and killing civilians suspected of being associated with AOGs. Members have detained individuals without trial; restricted freedom of movement, ostensibly for security reasons; engaged in sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse; intimidated and physically harmed civilians; and committed extortion and theft, including of humanitarian aid. They have also employed punitive justice measures and have been used to settle personal scores. Despite their proactive defense of communities, the reputation of the yan gora has declined relative to other community militia groups.

When civilians have grievances about harm perpetrated by community militias, the barriers for them to seek redress are high. Several of these groups have internal disciplinary measures to improve accountability; however, these processes are uneven and do not function as well as they could. Through training, CIVIC has seen members reflect on the harm they committed in the past and agree that certain behavior should not be permitted. Efforts taken by communities to control and restrain the actions of these groups have also contributed to community militias increasingly abiding by international humanitarian law (IHL) and domestic and international human rights law, as well as improved protection from attacks by AOGs.

Civilians living in northeast Nigeria express concern over the future of community militia members if the government does not support their reintegration into society, including through education and/or sustainable livelihoods. Due to their sheer volume and experience in the security realm, their future, if not properly handled by the government with donor support, could foment further instability.

1 Nigeria Security Tracker, available at <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>, last visited 10 February 2020.
2 Community militias are defined as armed groups that operate alongside state security forces or work independently of the state to protect local populations from other armed groups Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, ‘Militias in Civil Wars,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 59(5) 755-769.
3 Chitra Nagarajan, ‘Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora in Borno State, Nigeria,’ (CIVIC, 2018).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate harm to civilians in the present and encourage the successful reintegration and social cohesion of community militia members, federal and state governments, donors, and NGOs engaging in conflict mitigation, development, protection, and peacebuilding should take the following actions:⁴

Augment Accountability

- 1. Provide additional training on IHL, domestic and international human rights law, protection of civilians, civilian harm mitigation, community engagement, and peacebuilding to those still engaged in community militias. Integrate and standardize these aspects into training already provided, for example by the Vigilante Group of Nigeria to its members. Document and develop lessons learned papers to share with other organizations with the aim of scaling up similar interventions.
- 2. Engage with community militias to develop and implement codes of conduct and rules of engagement that are in line with IHL, domestic and international human rights law, and best practices in civilian protection and harm mitigation. These codes of conduct and rules of engagement should build on mechanisms that already exist, for example the oaths incoming kungiyar maharba members take, with a process that binds all members (prospective and current) to the principles enshrined in them. These resources should be translated into local languages, and into pictorial forms that are accessible to those with low literacy, and include details of local reporting mechanisms. These codes of conduct and rules of engagement should be distributed not only to community militias but also to civilians at large so they can hold members accountable to abiding by them.

- 3. Develop and implement zero tolerance policies for sexual harassment, exploitation, abuse and violence, which includes: integration into training, orientation, and oath-taking; action to change social norms; communications campaigns around the seriousness of these crimes and the existence of accountability mechanisms and punishment; and how to detect and act if sexual violence is taking place.
- 4. Require community militias to implement these codes of conduct and rules of engagement as a pre-condition for security agencies and government ministries, departments, and agencies to work with them.
- 5. Put in place proper oversight and accountability mechanisms at community, local government areas (LGAs) and state levels that involve security agents, government officials, representatives from civil society, community-based organizations working on human rights and civilian protection, and people with influence in the community such as community leaders. Members of this mechanism should include women, young men, people with disabilities, representatives of different geographical communities of the area, and representatives of minority religious, ethno-linguistic, and other groups that are often marginalized from decision-making processes but may experience more harm. Actors involved in this mechanism should be trained in IHL, IHRL, responding to gender based violence (GBV), protection of civilians, survivor-centered approaches, community engagement, and peacebuilding; engage in ongoing training and mentoring of community militia leaders and members; and advise community militias on their disciplinary procedures. They should develop referral mechanisms and links with services providing care to survivors of human rights or IHL violations, including GBV, and reach out to

4 These recommendations build on those developed by the Northeast Peace and Security Network (NEPSN), a group of civil society actors, in 2018. Many NEPSN members engage with community militias in Borno, and the group developed shared analysis and recommendations around community militias to ensure common understanding of solutions required and draw on expertise across the network. CIVIC has since expanded on and added more recommendations based on the analysis contained in this report.

civilians of all ages, genders, geographical backgrounds, religions, and ethno-linguistic groups to encourage reporting of human rights violations and other instances of civilian harm and set in place procedures to ensure investigation in accordance with due process, the rule of law, and Chapter 4 of the Nigerian Constitution.

6. Call on all political parties and aspirants to ensure their candidates and supporters refrain from using community militias in future election campaigning and impose sanctions for those who do not comply.

Ensure Inclusive and Balanced Engagement

1. Institute balanced programs that benefit communities alongside community militia members so as not to incentivize membership in these groups. Ensure the inclusion of family members of community militia personnel who die or are injured into livelihood, education, and other interventions.
2. Mitigate tensions between community militias by focusing interventions on members of all community militias, not just the yan gora, and engaging in conflict mitigation or peacebuilding interventions between groups.⁵
3. Widen engagement with community militias beyond discussions with leaders to members across the board, particularly women, young men, those outside Maiduguri, and people with disabilities, to seek their input into and co-create programs and policies for their benefit.

Establish Off-Ramps

1. Establish processes for the profiling and documentation of community militia members, ensuring female members are included in the database, to provide a comprehensive list for future programmatic interventions. Increase transparency, triangulation, and mitigation of efforts of elites to leverage these groups by using a number of data sources, including community-based approaches which are separate from militia command, data from community militia leaders, secondary data (e.g., from GSM providers), and instant bio-data capture. This database should include details of family members to facilitate support for them in the event of a member’s death.
2. Conduct surveys of community militia members to discern future plans and interests, including regularizing into security forces or demobilizing and pursuing livelihoods and educational opportunities. Recruit those capable and willing into security forces, and integrate others involved in community militias into community policing. Where regularization is not possible or desired, support demobilization and transition through livelihood and educational activities.
4. Provide healthcare, rehabilitation, and assistance in finding new or adapting existing livelihood strategies to community militia personnel who are injured or become disabled; in doing so, ensure balanced interventions that are open to civilians with similar needs.
5. Accompany interventions with a communications campaign that recognizes community militia members for their service and bravery while noting that some members have engaged in civilian harm. Communications strategies should outline the policies and programs that will be put in place and stress that interventions will benefit community militia members and communities alike.



Enhance Coordination and Civil Society Input

1. Regularly meet Borno-based peace and security organizations to seek input on the development, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning of policies and programs pertaining to community militias.
2. Facilitate exchanges between community militias to compile best practices and lessons learned on topics such as civilian protection and civilian harm mitigation, responsiveness to security concerns of women and girls, and accountability and disciplinary measures to scale up across locations.

Civilian Joint Task Force members in Gwoza, May 2019.
CIVIC

5 Ensure all interventions are sensitive to age, disability, and gender, as girls, women, boys and men, with and without disabilities, have different experiences and needs.

INTRODUCTION

2019 marked ten years of violent conflict in northeast Nigeria. All parties to the conflict, which has engulfed nearby Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, have harmed civilians. According to academic sources, over 36,000 people have been killed.⁶ Across the Lake Chad region, 2.5 million people are displaced, an estimated 10.7 million people need humanitarian assistance, 5 million people are acutely food insecure, and 490,000 children are severely malnourished.⁷ In response to the conflict, Nigerian government security forces, especially in the early days of the conflict, struggled to protect civilians and contend with armed opposition groups (AOGs), commonly known as Boko Haram.⁸ As in other contexts around the globe, community militias formed to fill gaps left by state security actors and fight against AOGs.⁹ Defined as armed groups that operate alongside state security forces or work independently of the state to protect local populations from other armed groups, these groups arose from a history of communities mobilizing to provide their own security.¹⁰

Community militias form one of the most important, yet often misunderstood, security actors in northeast Nigeria. While donors and government actors tend to focus their engagement on the military, countering AOGs, and addressing the humanitarian and development impacts of violence, interventions to address community militias are few and tend to be at a small scale. CIVIC’s research has shown that these groups – numbering in the tens of thousands of members in Borno state alone – both protect and harm civilians. Civilians credit community militias for a number of protection actions, including chasing AOGs

from the state capital of Maiduguri in the early days of the conflict. The groups also provide critical local security functions, including protecting IDP camps and screening entries to towns. However, community militias have also harmed civilians, some of which constitutes human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations. Civilians living in the northeast express concern over the future of group members if the government does not support their reintegration into society, including through education and/or sustainable livelihoods. Due to their sheer volume and experience in the security realm, their future, if not properly handled by the government with donor support, could foment further instability in the northeast.

In 2018, CIVIC published research on civilian perceptions of the yan gora (Civilian Joint Task Force) – one of the major community militias operating in Borno state – based on a literature review, data collection in December 2017, and CIVIC’s work in northeast Nigeria between November 2016 and March 2017. This report builds on our earlier study and presents further research on community militias that deepens CIVIC’s previous analysis. In the interests of cohesion and comprehensiveness, it will include both sets of findings from CIVIC’s research and engagement with the groups over the last three and a half years. This report offers potential future trajectories for community militia groups, as well as recommendations to address the opportunities and challenges posed by these groups and near-term thoughts on how to improve their engagement with civilians.

6 Nigeria Security Tracker, available at <https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>, last visited 10 February 2020.
7 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, ‘Lake Chad Basin Crisis Overview,’ (UNOCHA, 2019).
8 Please note that in the interests of conflict sensitivity and accuracy, this report will use the exact names of the groups involved where relevant and the term ‘armed opposition groups’ to refer to all those active in the northeast (as opposed to using the blanket term ‘Boko Haram’ which, rather than being the name of the groups themselves, is one given to them by the media, serves to simplify their message and aims, and implies there is one cohesive group rather than multiple factions now in existence).
9 Nearly two thirds of all civil wars fought between 1989 and 2010 have involved militias: Jessica Stanton, ‘Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 59(5) 755-769, 899-923.
10 Corinna Jentsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, ‘Militias in Civil Wars,’ *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 59(5) 755-769.

METHODOLOGY

CIVIC utilized a robust qualitative methodology to analyze the data for this report, including symbolic interactionist methodology and the grounded theory analytical model.¹¹ This report broadens the earlier study’s respondents and examines all community militias operating in Borno, captures perspectives from group members as well as civilians, and expands the geographical scope of data collection across Borno state. CIVIC collected data from areas in Bama, Biu, Damboa, Dikwa, Hawul, Kaga, Konduga, Jere, Monguno, and Maiduguri Metropolitan Center (MMC) local government areas (LGAs) in Borno state (See Figure 1).

The findings for this report draw on data collected during 49 in-depth interviews with 22 civilians (14 women and 8 men) and 27 militia members (8 women and 19 men).¹² The interviews were augmented by community observation and workshops CIVIC conducted with community militia members, soldiers, police, and civilians between January 2018 and June 2019. As a qualitative study, CIVIC did not aim for representativeness in respondents, but instead chose those who could help develop a comprehensive picture of community militias from a variety of viewpoints. Respondent selection reflected gender parity, age diversity, and a range of ethno-linguistic and religious backgrounds.

All quotes are from respondents interviewed by CIVIC save those which are from other written sources where citations are provided. Information collected from respondents was triangulated and its veracity confirmed by two or more separate sources. This report clearly states where doing so was not possible.

CIVIC’s data collection followed key principles of conflict sensitivity, gender, social inclusion, ethics, and safety and security of both the researcher as well as the participants. Interviews were conducted in English, Hausa, Kanuri, or a mix of these languages, at the discretion of the respondent. Researchers used a semi-structured interview guide, using appreciative inquiry methods and conflict sensitive approaches and integrating questions on gender and social inclusion.¹³ Women took active roles as researchers and respondents. Interviews were transcribed and transcripts analyzed using grounded theory, which informed codes and themes that emerged from the data.

Systems were put in place to ensure adherence to the highest ethical standards at all times. This approach included ensuring respondents were clear about research aims, risks, and benefits, before providing informed consent. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and safe space to ensure privacy, safety, and security. CIVIC established referral pathways to other organizations in the event that they were needed. Information was treated sensitively and confidentially, with anonymity preserved. Owing to concerns about anonymity, conflict sensitivity, and the security and safety of respondents, this paper does not always provide information regarding location when it was assessed this information could heighten risks to either community members or respondents.

11 Symbolic interactionism is an approach which centers the viewpoint of those who participate in the research whereas grounded theory is a process whereby the data gathered is used as the basis for theoretical concepts that are subsequently developed.
12 Given men make up the majority of community militia members, in addition to proactively seeking to interview women members, the research team also interviewed more civilian women than men to ensure gender balance.
13 This approach focuses on the positive, valuing what currently exists and envisioning what might be. One way in which the research study followed this was to start and end interviews by asking respondent to reflect on different positive aspects of their lives and communities.

Figure 1: Map of Borno state



CONTEXT

In July 2009, Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of a movement that called for a more Islamic way of life and protested corruption, inequality, and immorality, was killed by state security forces along with hundreds of his followers. Those that remained re-formed as Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad (JASDJ), which translates to “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet’s teachings and jihad,” and is commonly known as Boko Haram. JASDJ initially focused on targeting security forces and government officials. However, over time the group started attacking entire communities, carrying out mass killings, abductions, forced recruitment, and sexual enslavement of women and girls. JASDJ successfully captured the majority of Borno state, significant parts of neighboring Adamawa and Yobe states, and declared the establishment of their caliphate. Meanwhile, the military, particularly in the early days of the conflict, was unable or unwilling to protect communities from violence. The military also harmed civilians during operations and carried out unlawful detention, harassment, destruction of property, forced displacement, and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). In addition, they profiled groups such as young men and used excessive force, including torture.¹⁴

In part due to the absence of or ineffective internal security response, community militias formed to both

protect communities and counter JASDJ. Together with government security forces, community militias were instrumental in supporting the Nigerian state to recover territory in 2014 and 2015. In 2016, a few months after JASDJ pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, the competing factions split into distinct groups. While JASDJ continued its indiscriminate violence and wanton targeting of civilians, Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyyah (translated as Islamic State West Africa Province or ISWAP) focused its efforts on targeting security agents and those, like community militias, that supported them. From mid-2018 onwards, ISWAP launched attacks against military bases. ISWAP has tried to create strategic relationships with civilians and recruit people to join its efforts. Today, ISWAP controls significant territory, particularly in northern Borno state. At the time of writing, clear distinctions between the two groups in terms of their tactics vis-à-vis attacking civilians and security forces were blurring. Both JASDJ and ISWAP had factions and commanders operating independently, with weakening of command and control from the center and new groups operating in the region.¹⁵ The Nigerian state is currently re-strategizing how to respond to changing dynamics, including through the use of existing militia groups and the creation of new ones.

¹⁴ Kyle Dietrich, “When We Can’t See the Enemy, Civilians Become the Enemy”: Living Through Nigeria’s Six Year Insurgency,” (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2015).

¹⁵ According to analysts interviewed.

HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

Community militias in Borno both protect and harm civilians. Their genesis and evolution help to explain their current dynamics and roles, give insight into potential future trajectories, and uncover possible entry points for government and donor interventions. Community militia groups are not monolithic – the groups are a function of the specific local security and context dynamics from where they arose. There are, in fact, significant variations between groups dependent on the LGAs in which they operate.

There are a few community militia groups operating in Borno state at present and many communities are home to more than one group. This phenomenon is attributable to civilians taking remarkable actions to protect themselves and their communities. For example, civilians have formed or adapted existing organizations to fend for their own security and in response to particular events, such as cases where women hid men in their homes or smuggled them to safety as AOGs were killing all men and adolescent boys. Borno has a number of groups, some of which are armed, perform community defense functions, and/or are violent. Figure 2 provides an overview of the main community militias operating in Borno and how they are named in different languages. This report will generally use Hausa terms, except when quoting directly from respondents who use different terms.

Kungiyar maharba (Hunters)

The kungiyar maharba, also known as hunters, karwina, or altarmana in English, Kanuri, and Shuwa respectively, are the community militia group with the longest history in Borno state. In some locations, the group’s efforts to protect civilians stretches over decades, including combating banditry, theft, and other types of criminality, and their more contemporary role in countering AOGs.

The kungiyar maharba are embedded within communities, often wear uniforms, and are organized in a tiered hierarchy linked to community leadership systems. The length of time any given group has been present in a community varies based on local historical factors. However, most respondents, regardless of

“Other than going to hunt and sell meat, when there were rumors of robbery on the road, maybe from this village to the next village during market days, they would be sent to clear the road or maybe to pursue or to run after the robbers.”

– Civilian man talking about kungiyar maharba in Monguno some 30 years ago

age, did not recall a time when the group did not exist. In many communities, it is likely they emerged at least two or three generations ago or around the time in which a given area was settled. A kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Biu said, “From ancient days, this is how it has been, that every leader or either king or emir, or whatsoever you call it then, has his followers and he has his local guards and these local guards are involved in protecting the territory border and also involved in going to hunt for meat for the king, for the emir.” Members form a distinct livelihood group which hunts animals for consumption and sale. Concurrently, they also hold informal protective and defensive roles to secure communities from attacks, owing to skills in shooting arrows, and in more modern times, guns. Moreover, the colonial state relied upon and appointed local leaders to mobilize labor, collect taxes, and suppress dissent, including through the use of local forces not linked to colonial security structures.¹⁶ As levels of threat and criminality have waxed and waned, the roles of the kungiyar maharba have evolved. Respondents talked of members chasing robbers, accompanying villagers to markets with goods, and running patrols along roads on market days.

Figure 2: The main community militias operating in Borno

Hausa	English	Kanuri	Shuwa
kungiyar maharba	hunters	karwina	altarmana
yan banga	vigilante	banga’a	altarmana
—	Shuwa vigilante	—	kesh kesh
yan gora	Civilian Joint Task Force	tadaaka am ka’a	siyadal asa

Across the state, members of kungiyar maharba include women and men of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, though their composition varies owing to the demographics of communities. For example, in communities where Kanuri people form the majority, groups are likely to follow the same demographic composition. Membership and leadership are often passed down family lineages – a female leader in Bama who led her village group said she inherited this position from her mother and had worked alongside her for years. A male leader in Biu said leadership passed from his father to his elder brother to him. As a result of family ties, members can join at a young age and grow up in the group. People without relevant family history can also join through declaring interest to leaders who investigate their character before offering them a spot. While some kungiyar maharba have members of all ages, in other communities most members are now older men above 40 years, as younger people have not joined in large numbers.

In many communities, particularly in southern Borno, there is a strong history of women’s active involvement in the group. Though women’s roles vary by location, female members in certain areas play the same roles as men. For example, women may go to hunt, defend the community, make indigenous medicines and protective charms, and resolve disputes. In some areas, women’s roles have transitioned from hunting in the bush to resolving disputes. In other communities, while women were active in the kungiyar maharba previously, no younger women have joined of late due to changing

cultural norms and restrictions on women’s movement and behavior in the last two or three decades. In some communities, cultural norms have changed to the extent that people now say women are incapable of joining the group. For example, a civilian woman interviewed in Kaga LGA said: “Women are not strong enough to participate in such activities.” In other communities, women stopped being part of this group but have recently started to join. Despite these variations, female members still play significant roles in the kungiyar maharba of many communities and lead groups, including of men, which fight AOGs.

Prospective members pass through initiation ceremonies which include swearing oaths to abide by the rules, which bring with them the risk of punishment if broken. Rules generally include the need to share animals killed with all who hunt together and a ban on stealing, taking drugs, and using guns for violence against people. Some groups also have a prohibition on marrying wives of other members and engaging in leisure activities while wearing uniform. If these rules are broken, not only will the member be expelled, but they face other consequences. A kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Kaga LGA spoke of using a wild antelope horn, a snake’s head, and a thorn during initiation to symbolize the risks of breaking rules – the antelope chases the wrongdoer, the snake bites them, and the thorn pricks them. Breaking this oath would also cause members to fail during hunting and other pursuits. This traditional practice is important for both accountability and professionalism.

16 International Crisis Group, ‘The Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram,’ *Africa Report No 244*, 23 February 2017.

Yan banga (Vigilante)

The term yan banga (vigilante) describes a second collection of community militia groups in Borno state. Similar to the kungiyar maharba, they have played crucial roles in defending communities from AOG attacks. In many communities, such as Biu, there is little distinction between this group and the kungiyar maharba as they are under common leadership, even though members may assume different roles and responsibilities. For example, a kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Maiduguri said: “Karwina and banga are the same organization. Karwina are the people who go to the bush to hunt and banga are those who stay in the community and protect. They are the same people but called different things. It depends on what work they do.” Other communities have groups with separate leaders and uniforms although the yan banga and kungiyar maharba often work together in practice.

In some communities, particularly in rural areas without police presence, the yan banga grew out of the kungiyar maharba as some members began defending communities. In the 1980s, poverty, inequality, insecurity, and crime rose as a result of an economic downturn linked to budgeting issues, desertification and drought in the Sahel, population growth, and changes in climate and rainfall patterns.¹⁷ Many rural communities created or re-energized community security mechanisms, often due to the absence of state security forces, by asking the kungiyar maharba to take on this role. They started patrolling roads to markets on market days and streets at night to deter thieves, and eventually became known as yan banga.

At the start of the conflict in 2009, the yan banga were not present in all communities across Borno. Some communities formed yan banga due to security threats, while others were protected by yan banga from other locations who provide patrols or security during market days. In locations where the yan banga were present, people joined the group to protect communities during times of heightened insecurity. In a community in Hawul LGA, a retired police officer formed a yan banga group inspired by the actions of people in neighboring Biu. The officer spoke with community and religious leaders, called for volunteers to join from a local church and mosque after having them swear oaths on the Bible and Quran, and sought permission from the sarkin baka

“There was no soldier, no police, no mobile police, so [community leaders] asked us to do security work in the community... This is about 30 years [ago]... Then there were criminal activities in the community... So, that was why the community decided to use us as security.”

—*Yan banga man interviewed in Konduga LGA*

(the head of the kungiyar maharba and yan banga) of Biu emirate under which Hawul falls. Although Hawul does not see an active AOG presence as other parts of the state, this yan banga group is determined to act to forestall attacks if they were to occur in the future.

Some yan banga groups have links with the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), a group that was formed in Kaduna state by retired police officers and soldiers to respond to crime. Eventually the VGN became registered at the national level and spread to other states where pre-existing community defense groups, including the kungiyar maharba, were asked to join. A kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Biu said his group joined because “we have a common goal; it has a structure and leadership... They even have a head office in Abuja and other places...that means if we join hands or if we unite, we are going to succeed.” His group joined the VGN approximately a decade ago and now he says, “we are hunters but are now incorporated into the vigilante, so we use the name vigilante/hunters.” Yet, not all yan banga in Borno fall under the VGN structure. In many communities, such as Dikwa, the yan banga have no relationship with the VGN and report through kungiyar

maharba leadership structures rather than to state and national VGN. In practice, decision making tends to be largely de-centralized.

Members that joined under the VGN system of recruitment had to secure the approval of local community leaders, the divisional police officer, and the VGN local government commander. These officials had to sign the application form for any prospective member, who was then screened and their references checked before being admitted to the group. New members are given the VGN code of conduct and attend training sessions for which they pay the group to cover costs, varying based on location and accommodation. The VGN invites outside facilitators, including university lecturers, retired army officers, and lawyers, to teach new recruits. The content of their training includes the practicalities of carrying out responsibilities such as how to conduct body searches and patrols, the need to stay within the VGN's jurisdiction, information on human rights, how to relate with civilians, and teamwork. The level of standardization across VGN training courses is unclear as a VGN leader said they rely on individuals and organizations willing to facilitate workshops. Nevertheless, this training exceeds that which other community militia groups receive. The VGN updated its nationwide member database in 2018 in anticipation of the passage of the VGN Act by the National Assembly, which formalized the organization as a state security agency. As of January 2020, this bill was still going through the legislative processes needed to be passed into law.

While the VGN requires that all members must be over 18 years, respondents said that yan banga members outside the VGN structure ranged in age from 15 to over 70 years old. However, roles tend to be differentiated based upon age, with child members running errands, older members providing advice to the group, and young adults and middle-aged members conducting security operations. As with the kungiyar maharba, the religious and ethnic composition of yan banga groups reflect community demographics of the localities where they originate. Some yan banga groups are mono-religious and/or mono-ethnic in membership while others, particularly in southern Borno, are more diverse. While women play active roles, their agency seems lower than counterparts in the kungiyar maharba. In some yan banga groups, there are no (or very few) female members, even though some men say they have no objection to their joining. “I would like women to

join because what a man can do, even a woman can do,” said a yan banga man interviewed in Konduga LGA.

Kesh kesh (Shuwa vigilante)

The kesh kesh is a group of people from the Shuwa ethno-linguistic group. They are aligned with the kungiyar maharba and yan banga and have played similar roles in safeguarding communities from violence and countering AOGs.

The kesh kesh formed due to the inability of the police and the kungiyar maharba/yan banga to deal with crime in areas such as Bama, which is home to members of the Shuwa ethno-linguistic group. The kungiyar maharba/yan banga in Bama suggested that community leaders reach out to leaders of groups involved in robbery and cattle rustling and try to conscript them. In Bama, these leaders were brought to the emir's palace, given the option to swear on the Quran that they denounced their criminal activities, and asked to talk with other group members to do the same. These repentant members – now kesh kesh – work to counter criminality, including through presence on roads on market days. Kesh kesh groups were also formed in Shuwa communities that did not face criminality.

In the decades since, new members have joined. As a result of aging membership and the flight of members to Maiduguri for safety, the group started a recruitment drive to ensure group continuity. However, no women were recruited as part of this initiative.

Yan gora (Civilian Joint Task Force)

Unlike the other groups, the yan gora emerged as a direct result of the violent conflict in northeast Nigeria. It is often described by people in Borno as a ‘child of necessity’ required to save communities. Formation of the yan gora was highly context specific. In some places, informal groupings of individuals acted to defend communities and later became absorbed into the yan gora, while in others no yan gora emerged. Today there are an estimated 26,000 members in Borno state alone.¹⁸

The group emerged in Maiduguri in mid-2013 when conflict in the state capital was at its peak, characterized by widespread fear among civilians for their security

17 Janani Vivekananda, Martin Wall, Chitra Nagarajan and Florence Sylvestre, ‘Shoring up Stability: Addressing Climate and Fragility Risks in the Lake Chad Region,’ (adelphi, 2019).

18 While this figure of 26,000 estimated numbers is often quoted, it is difficult to confirm given the absence of centralized, and verified, recruitment processes.

and an exodus of people from the state. Nigerian security agencies found it difficult to distinguish who was associated with JASDJ and treated most of those living in Maiduguri as potential sympathizers or members. Security forces engaged in mass arrests and arbitrary detention particularly in the aftermath of attacks on security personnel. These violations were one push factor that made civilians susceptible to the recruitment efforts of JASDJ.¹⁹ Military personnel justified their actions based on perception that communities supported JASDJ, particularly if civilians were reticent to identify suspected members. However, civilians were afraid to divulge information as JASDJ members carried out targeted killings of those who opposed them, including those who passed information to the military.

The yan gora formed in response to these dynamics, and their members identified those associated with JASDJ to military personnel. The group spread across the city and was described as ‘game changers’ by Kashim Shettima, then Governor of Borno state.²⁰ They were instrumental in forcing JASDJ members to leave the city. Given the group’s success in Maiduguri, the military and the Maiduguri yan gora replicated this model in other LGAs. Bama was the first LGA to ‘take gora’ when the military commander asked community leaders to find members and form this group. In Gwoza, a military officer called a town hall meeting and presented the idea to those gathered there. According to a civilian woman present, “He said what we will do is that if you are not involved or you are not in support of what [JASDJ members] are doing, all you have to do is become part of the group by taking an oath and picking a stick. We will work together, and you will be identifying those that have hands in it.” In Monguno, yan gora members from Maiduguri came to the town, gathered people, and told them “you have to carry a stick and fish out those people among you that are bad or else it will not do, you are not going to have peace... you have to rise up and carry a stick.”²¹ In other locations, people, including many who were also part of the kungiyar maharba and/or yan banga, decided to ‘take gora’ at the behest of their communities.

In Biu LGA, an informal grouping of people engaged in countering JASDJ formed organically. During the

mourning ceremonies for the deaths of three brothers killed in the same night, a mourner identified a young man who was responsible for the murders. Those present caught the suspect and handed him to the military. After this incident, people started to apprehend suspected JASDJ members, interrogating them to get the names of other members and subsequently hand them over to the military. Members went door to door to search for weapons, including female members who were able to enter women’s rooms where JASDJ associates tended to hide weapons. They also armed themselves with guns funded by community donations. As a result, JASDJ members left Biu, collected reinforcements, and came back to attack the town. At this point, residents fought alongside the military to defend their town and successfully repelled the attack. With time, this informal grouping of people formalized and became the Biu branch of the yan gora. To this day, no AOG has ever successfully overrun them and occupied Biu.

As with the kungiyar maharba and yan banga, membership of the yan gora reflects the demographics from where they originate. Female members are present to different extents based upon locality, and the roles they play vary as well. Some female members were actively encouraged by the military to join the yan gora and play particular roles. For example, a yan gora woman in Dikwa said a military officer asked women members living in IDP camps in Maiduguri to return to Dikwa to search recovered women arriving from areas of AOG influence. These women were amongst the first to return to Dikwa after its military capture. As in other community militias, women undertake important roles but, as described later on in the challenges section, are less likely to be paid and more likely to be excluded from decision making. Particularly in locations where communities are more conservative, female members tend to be older and either widowed or divorced.

The levels of training and orientation members receive varies. While members swore on holy texts in 2013 that they would not cheat or steal people’s property, oaths were not always taken by those who later joined. Some respondents said they didn’t receive any formal training, but underwent informal orientation

and received instructions from fellow members before accompanying soldiers in operations. Soldiers gave instructions to members, including warnings not to be divided by religion, to see everyone as brothers, and to be forthright when identifying AOG members. A yan gora man interviewed in Konduga LGA said, “What soldiers used to tell us is that this is your community. If it becomes good, it’s your win. If it spoils, it’s your own. Whatever you see that is not clear to you, report it to us. If you see something, say something.” Still other members received formal basic training from soldiers, including how to march in formation, how to behave when conducting military operations, and the need to stay flat on the ground during exchanges of fire. In some cases, they were also taught points of international humanitarian law (IHL). “If we go for an operation and see people assuming that they are Boko Haram, you may find some civilians among them. If you ask them to either surrender or to raise up their hand, you cannot shoot them, but maybe they first release fire on you, you have to shoot back... [If there are children nearby], they ask us not to even try [anything], we should allow them because we are not expert in this,” said a yan gora man interviewed in Monguno. However, this instruction was far from comprehensive and tended to focus on a few points such as the prohibition on killing someone who is surrendering rather than the broader suite of issues that are prohibited.

The yan gora is organized hierarchically, modelled on the military. They are divided into different sectors inside Maiduguri and ‘charlies’ outside of town, with further sub-division under each sector or charlie. While yan gora groups across Borno communicate with each other and with leadership in Maiduguri, in reality they consist of dispersed commands that are more accountable locally than centrally. Each group/sector has its equivalence in the military structure. Depending on the location, yan gora leaders have varying degrees of discussions and

“[The military officer] said people have started returning to Dikwa... and the military are now worried because they want to have some people who can help or assist them in searching new arrivals but unfortunately there are no female indigenes in Dikwa. So, they are pleading if we can have volunteers among you whom we know to assist us in such a duty. Then we agreed and four of us volunteered.”

– *Yan gora woman interviewed in Dikwa*

meetings with the military and police in their areas of operation. As discussed later in the report, many civilians point to the yan gora’s growing proximity to politicians and general degeneration of the group, including human rights violations and civilians harmed during operations, and outline their fears for the group’s future.

19 Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, ‘Getting Behind the Profiles of Boko Haram Members and Factors Contributing to Radicalisation Versus Working Towards Peace,’ (Finn Church Aid, The International Dialogue Centre, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers and Citizen Research Centre, 2016).
20 Abubakar Monguno of the University of Maiduguri who had conducted a study on the CJTF speaking at a summit held in Gombe in June 2015, author’s notes.
21 Civilian man interviewed in Monguno, Borno State.

Moreover, the actions of yan gora should be seen as a natural outgrowth of the context in which they developed. While many people were receptive to the idea of forming a yan gora group, some communities²² chose not to form such groups. People resisted joining the group as they had other responsibilities and/or did not understand how people without training could succeed when trained soldiers were unable to defeat AOGs. According to a civilian man in Monguno, “People were looking at them like mad people...that they are working to shorten their life, that they are taking too much risk. Those that joined this group...were not educated and they didn’t have sense. Yes, for me if your senses are intact, how will you join such a group?” As discussed further in the report, there has been intense pressure from the military on communities to form yan gora groups, and on individuals to join despite the formation of groups increasing the risks that communities will be targeted by AOGs.

“The way we respond to civilians has changed...some of them are traumatized, some of them are maybe under tension, some of them...maybe they are on the run for their life or under attack. So, follow them gently, listen to them and then calm them down and get information from them. So, from there all of us get used to it and we were never beating people again. We don’t talk harshly to people again but listen to understand or to hear from people.”

– Yan gora man interviewed in Biu

22 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.

PRESENT DAY DYNAMICS

Current roles of pre-existing community militias

The current conflict has greatly affected all three pre-existing community militia groups – from decreasing their livelihood activities to significantly increasing their role in formal security, sometimes alone and sometimes alongside the military. This section outlines how groups adapted in response while later sections provide more detail about roles members play.

Kungiya maharba (Hunters)

The kungiyar maharba of many communities are no longer able to hunt due to security threats. In some areas they have not engaged in the current conflict, perhaps to avoid their community being targeted by AOGs in retaliation for forming such a group.²³ Yet, groups in other areas have fought AOGs, sometimes alongside the military and other community militias. Members’ knowledge of surrounding areas, gained through years of hunting, has been invaluable to security agencies. Some have even been known to join communities that are displaced and to work alongside, and defend, those communities.

In general, members receive little training, but some leaders provide orientation as to how members are to act. Soldiers’ behavior has a powerful role-model effect, both positively and negatively, when it comes to how they engage with, and harm, civilians. According to a kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Kaga LGA, “I have not received training or orientation but only learned by experience. For instance, if there is a gunshot, if we’re dealing with people, I will tell that person to lie down... they have not been teaching us, but we learn from what the soldiers are doing.”

Respondents said members of the kungiyar maharba rarely commit human rights or IHL abuses or harm civilians during operations. Civilians attribute this to the kungiyar maharba being more mature and fearing consequences of bad behavior due to their oath. A kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Bama said, during operations with the military, “we entered one room and I saw a dish full of gold coin. It will be worth many

23 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.
24 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.

millions but because I know I have taken an oath that I will not steal, I will not do anything...I called the [military operation] commander and I showed him, I said sir come and see this...I don’t want to even be tempted to touch it...if you are not careful even a stray bullet can come from anywhere and strike you to death because you have already taken oath.” This sentiment underlines the mostly positive roles played by the kungiyar maharba during the conflict, and the positive community perceptions of their behavior.

Yan banga (Vigilante)

Over time, some yan banga members transitioned from safeguarding communities from criminality to fighting AOGs. As with the kungiyar maharba, their numbers have become concentrated due to conflict related displacement. Soldiers have also encouraged civilians to join the yan banga in some communities.²⁴

Some members received minimal training from the military to augment their own training. For example, respondents said they were taught how to position themselves around the community when expecting an attack, how to use a gun, and how to exercise restraint when using force. Most respondents said they had not received orientation or training on how to interact with the community, mitigate the risks of harm to civilians during operations, avoid harassing people, or understand gender-based violence. Like kungiyar maharba members, they said they had learned ‘on the job’ from watching others. Conversely, as noted above, those that have joined the VGN have been exposed to training that included elements of human rights and civilian protection.

Kesh Kesh (Shuwa vigilante)

As the conflict has manifested in the northeast, the kesh kesh began working together with the kungiyar maharba and yan banga in Bama to fight AOGs. In Maiduguri, kesh kesh members who had been displaced from other areas met the leader of the kungiyar maharba and were subsequently sworn in to join the group.

Since joining the fight against AOGs, government actors have given uniforms and patrol vehicles to kesh kesh members, but members have not received training.

Civilians viewed the kesh kesh largely positively and reported few cases of human rights or IHL violations from kesh kesh members.

Interactions between community militia groups

In many communities, the yan gora was created even though communities were already home to kungiyar maharba, yan banga, or kesh kesh groups. There are a number of reasons for this proliferation of community militia groups. First, existing groups were not always able to respond to security threats. As a yan banga man interviewed in Konduga LGA said, “There is nothing we can do. When there is attack, we just run because those people that are coming, they are better equipped than us...Even the military were running, talking less of us.” Second, existing groups were not always willing to fight AOGs, as they felt doing so was inconsistent with their mission and purpose, they did not have adequate equipment or weapons, and/or they feared their communities would be attacked in retaliation. Third, countering AOGs required mass involvement in the early days and other groups did not want to lower strict entry requirements to add members. Fourth, yan banga and kungiyar maharba groups engaged in practices closer to indigenous religions, rather than Islam or Christianity, and people chose to join the yan gora to avoid being involved in such practices. Lastly, existing groups were seen as more difficult to control as they had established ways of working and leaders with status, so the military found it easier to encourage the formation of new groups.

Despite a history of government patronage bringing about inter-group conflict, groups work well together in many locations. The kungiyar maharba, yan banga, and kesh kesh work as one where all three groups are present. These groups work together with the yan gora, for example engaging in joint patrols. However, there can be friction between the yan gora and other groups.²⁵ In one location, the yan gora feel the yan banga/kungiyar maharba do not support them because they feel the yan gora are encroaching on their territory. Meanwhile, the yan banga/ kungiyar maharba of this town see the yan gora as undisciplined, verbally harsh, and physically violent towards civilians. Moreover, they feel yan gora

leaders are not addressing issues and punishing wrongdoers within their own group. Their leader said, “Under me, if somebody makes a mistake and he has been warned, and he repeats, what we will do is collect his weapon, suspend him, and watch to see whether he will change. But in the yan gora, you will see the same person who committed this offense actively amongst them. This is some of the attitude that I am not happy with and I will never want to associate with them.”

In general, there is a perception among civilian respondents that the yan gora see themselves as superior because of military links, while civilians often feel closer with other groups. However, the military in many locations has moved away from working with the yan gora and toward engaging other groups due to their superior local knowledge of the terrain, better command and control, willingness to obey orders, reticence to complain, and reduced likelihood of abusing civilians, including sexual violence.²⁶ The kungiyar maharba believe that the involvement of yan gora members in the abuse of civilians, stealing property, and other bad behavior has led to the group experiencing higher casualties.

Links with the federal and state governments

Community militia members, due to their knowledge of local terrain and their commitment to defending their communities, have supported military operations. Broadly, there are two main modalities for doing so. The first is when community militias are asked by the military to support them for a limited period. The second is where members have been asked to stay with soldiers for longer lengths of time. Community militia members are often asked by soldiers to lead them to places with which the military is not familiar. A woman civilian interviewed in Damboa spoke of the military assembling yan banga members to ask them who knew of particular villages and then members “went with them to see how they will liberate the villages.” In some instances, members have been asked to perform other tasks. A civilian woman interviewed in Bama recounted how the military asked a yan banga man to “pretend to be cutting wood while the remaining military went around and were laying ambush.” In addition to accompanying



CIVIC team member with community militia members in Gwoza, Borno State

William Meeker

25 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.
26 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.

soldiers on operations, community militias work closely with the military in other ways. For example, they go on patrols, pass information and intelligence, and serve as a conduit between civilians and the military as such direct interaction is traditionally rare.

Respondents noted that it is mostly male members who work with the military in this manner although female members can also take part. In Biu, yan gora women have been involved in operations. According to a female member of the yan gora in Biu, women took part in fighting, searched and protected women, and served food to the yan gora and security agencies during operations.

Community militias also work with the police, go on patrols, and deliver criminal suspects to police stations. Some members have been recruited into security agencies. A civilian woman in Damboa said her younger brother who had joined the yan gora was undergoing training at the time of interview.

The Borno state government established the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES) for some yan gora members. Originally aimed at training and mobilizing 6,000 members, the scheme trained 1,850 ‘apparently due to the army’s uncertainty about training so many potentially unreliable persons.’²⁷ BOYES members were provided uniforms, patrol cars, identification documents, and a monthly stipend of N15,000. Their pay was recently increased to N20,000 by Governor Zulum, who also instituted a Neighborhood Watch of 2,900 members to combat drug use and other crimes in Maiduguri.²⁸ In 2014, Members of the yan gora selected for BOYES underwent three months of training in areas such as endurance, sentry duty, parade, how to identify AOG members, and how to protect themselves against attack. They were taught how to gather intelligence, conduct and record interrogations, and interact with civilians. Their training program also includes content on IHL. While this training reached only a minority of yan gora members, those that attended tried to pass the knowledge they gained to others.

While female members were not included in BOYES, some female respondents did receive training. For example, female members asked by soldiers to assist

them in Dikwa received nine days of training on how to protect themselves, take cover during attacks, identify people carrying explosive devices, de-escalate situations, link with security agencies, and inform civilians of potential dangers. There was little follow-up training after this initial engagement in most locations. Biu LGA was an exception; there the local government security committee consisting of the police, military, intelligence personnel, local government officials, and other key stakeholders have continued to engage yan gora members. Government actors have organized sessions to retrain, guide, and maintain oversight of yan gora actions. In Biu, military personnel also engaged in mentoring yan gora office holders. For example, the yan gora Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) in charge of discipline has received coaching from the military RSM on how to handle the duties of the position. Other research locations did not show different stakeholders working together in this manner to ensure oversight and training of the yan gora.

These dynamics build on a long history of interactions between community defense groups and the state, beginning with colonial times, extending to the kungiyar maharba and yan banga in the 1980s, and manifesting with the community militias of today. For example, older yan banga respondents said they received government stipends from the late 1980s onwards to date. From 2014, members of all community militia groups (although not necessarily all members) have received money from local government officials with large variation in the amounts, regularity, and formality of these transfers across locations. Some members also receive money directly from the military. This payment varies between locations, is at the discretion of the military commander concerned, and often does not come regularly. In some areas, a lump sum of money is given to leaders to pass on to their members on an ad-hoc basis.²⁹ Members on operations for lengthy periods of time are paid more regularly. According to a kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Kaga LGA, “The soldiers used to give us 20,000 naira per month because we are together with them in the bush and helping them there.”

While some community militia members are paid, those who do not receive these stipends are left behind.

Women members, in particular, are left out of BOYES, which is the most regular form of receiving government stipends. Some military commanders and local government officials give female members money at their own discretion as they see the importance of their work, but this amount is often less than what is given to the men through more formal channels. According to a yan gora woman interviewed in Biu, “All of us women are given 5,000 but our ogas [bosses] and other men are getting 15,000 every month.” Moreover, in some locations, members believed their leaders kept part of the money the government had given them to distribute to members. For example, one yan banga member interviewed said, “They used to send us N5,000 but [the leader] will take 600 out of 5,000 and give us 4,400.”

Differential treatment of members regarding remuneration has led to tensions within (and between) groups and has lowered morale. Some BOYES members interviewed felt uncomfortable about being paid as they had to work alongside people they knew were not being paid. Leaders said variance in

payment meant it was difficult to control or punish those not paid who often refused to take part in certain activities, saying they should be done by those who were receiving money. Furthermore, there has been a lack of clarity and unhappiness as to the criteria used to select BOYES members. There is widespread perception among civilians and members that selection was due to connections rather than performance. A yan gora leader in one of the research communities said, “That [BOYES] did not come through me as a leader of yan gora in this town...because they have big, big people in Maiduguri, so that was how they happened to go [into BOYES].” A Maiduguri based civil society activist quoted in CIVIC’s 2018 report said, “over 90% of the beneficiaries were not the original CJTF members. They were favored youth with links to the politicians.”³⁰ Moreover, civilians believed the yan gora was originally motivated by protecting the community, but this changed owing to members’ involvement with politicians, interactions with the state, and the creation of BOYES. Respondents viewed this transition as profoundly corrupting, as some members are now motivated by money, power, status, and political connections rather than focused on community protection.

27 International Crisis Group, ‘The Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram,’ *Africa Report No 244*, 23 February 2017, p. 5.
28 Abdulkareem Haruna, ‘Borno inducts 2,900 youth as Neighbourhood Watch force against drugs, crimes,’ *Premium Times*, 26 May 2018.
29 Communities not disclosed in the interests of conflict sensitivity.

30 Chitra Nagarajan, ‘Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora in Borno State, Nigeria,’ (CIVIC, 2018).

MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Members of community militias spoke at length about their motivations for joining and staying in groups. Members interviewed also spoke of associated challenges, including facing great danger and risk, struggling to provide for their families, and difficulties balancing family and community militia commitments. They spoke of their unease at seeing other members abuse their power, harm civilians, and commit human rights or IHL violations, and were uncomfortable with being asked to undertake such actions themselves. Female members said they were often marginalized, discriminated against, and not taken seriously. Many people left these groups as a result, but those that stayed provided reasons why they continued to do this work despite the serious challenges.

Motivations for joining

Many militia members that joined groups prior to the present-day conflict had previously been focused on studying and/or earning incomes, mostly through agriculture, livestock rearing, and trading. Many members joined community militia groups as a result of directly experiencing violence and suffering at the hands of AOGs. For example, a man who was part of the kungiyar maharba in Kaga LGA had two children taken away by AOG fighters. He then had another daughter injured and a son-in-law and grandchild killed in a bomb blast. He said, “that was what led me to collaborate with the military that let us join hands and fight this [group] because if we fold our hands the thing is going to eat us up. That is why. Because of the things that I went through.” A woman interviewed in Biu who witnessed her brother be killed went on to catch the man who killed him, and started arresting other suspects, searching houses for weapons, and fighting to defend Biu. A yan banga woman interviewed in Damboa recounted returning to Borno after six of her brothers were killed on the same day and her father died of a heart attack she believed to be linked to their deaths. She blamed AOGs for what happened to her family: “So I said let me just join this group so I participate in fighting this.” Women also joined despite people around them trying to dissuade them from doing so. A yan gora woman interviewed in Bama said, “even when I joined, some people came to tell me that this is supposed to be men’s work, why are you doing this as a lady. And I said what makes you think

“I have passed through some terrible times. I have seen how [JASDJ fighters] have really affected people’s lives. I must also join this group to protect people. . . I have that burning desire in me to participate.”

– Yan gora woman interviewed in Bama

a woman cannot contribute her quota in protecting lives and property of the people?”

Members spoke of wanting to protect civilians and their pride and purpose in seeing the results of their work. One yan gora man interviewed in Kaga LGA said, “Before, nobody is sleeping in his house, but now everybody is sleeping in the house because of what we are doing.” They want to be part of restoring peace. A yan gora woman who was asked to return to Dikwa to search people arriving from rural areas said, “What motivated me is nothing [else] but we are fed up of what is happening in Maiduguri. We are tired of being there as an IDP, so all I am after, all I have been thinking, is for us to one day return to Dikwa and continue our life. So as that came, the idea came, I was also very happy to be part of it to make sure that peace return to Dikwa. So that is what I felt and I volunteered to join.” A yan banga man who is also part of the kungiyar maharba in Kaga LGA, after complaining about the lack of money and finding it difficult to feed his family, said, “I’ve never thought of leaving the work. I have passion for my work.” While insecurity deters some, it motivates others. As a yan gora man interviewed in Biu said, “this fight is not yet over. We know that they are still around...we are determined [to continue] unless we now see that this fight is over, so all of us still remain intact and active.”

Some female members said they joined specifically to protect women and girls from both community militia men and from AOGs. A yan gora woman interviewed in Kaga LGA said, “I joined the yan gora because if women are coming from the bush, that’s from the villages, so the

men yan gora they don’t want to be searching them and I don’t want them to be searching women, so I have to join so that I will assist them in searching women particularly.” They also joined to fight against those who were abducting women and girls. According to a man working for an organization that engages the yan gora, “Women joined precisely because these boys were coming and taking women and girls away, so it was a way to fight for their sisters and girls who had been taken.”

Members also spoke of wanting to protect those they who were not involved with AOGs. As described below, many communities formed the yan gora, and pre-existing community militias agreed to work together with security agencies to stop communities facing punitive consequences for failing to do so. As one yan gora woman said, “Now, they are not being accused by the yan gora of Maiduguri but it’s under my control, anything I said [about whether or not individuals are suspected to be AOG members] is final.” Members also spoke about recognition their groups have received from the state and other actors in the form of commendations, patrol vehicles, equipment, uniforms, and stipends.

Members also spoke of wanting to protect those who were not involved with AOGs. As one yan gora woman said, “Now, they are not being accused by the yan gora of Maiduguri but it’s under my control, anything I said [about whether or not individuals are suspected to be AOG members] is final.”

Challenges

Members of community militias are part of conflict-affected communities and have experienced the same impact of violence as civilians. Their family members have been abducted and killed, sometimes in front of them. They have been displaced and they have been attacked and injured. They live with difficult economic circumstances due to the impact of violence and continued insecurity. Members struggle to take care of families, particularly as their number of dependents has risen as other adults have been killed or are missing. As a kungiyar maharba woman interviewed in Bama said, “They killed like about 13 people in my family and one left two children and another two children. So, I have over eight children whom I am taking care of. “

Physical dangers

While carrying out their duties, members face high levels

“As you know, [AOG fighters] are looking for all of them, especially those that have hand in security activities. So, my mother being recognized or known to be a leader. . .they invaded her house. They even killed 11 people then. Then they abducted four girls from her house [so we escaped to come to Bama].”

– Kungiyar maharba woman interviewed in Bama

of insecurity and danger. They are also targeted with threats from AOGs because of the work that they do. A yan gora man in Kaga LGA said, “We once received a letter from members of [JASDJ] that we should come and join them or they are coming to kill us.” Community militia members also run risks while running checkpoints as described later on.

If members are injured while on operations with soldiers, they are treated by military medical teams. Community militia members have recovered from injuries and continued to work in dangerous circumstances. However, once they become permanently disabled, many have had to exhaust savings or go into debt to pay for healthcare. Sometimes, government officials or security agents pay some costs, but their contributions are often far from sufficient. A yan gora woman in Biu recounted how she had survived two bomb blasts while running a checkpoint into the town. These explosions had killed her colleagues and put her in the hospital for months. She had to sell her belongings, including food stores, to pay medical bills. If members are killed, no compensation is paid to families. While other members contribute money toward family welfare, this sum falls far short of what is needed.

According to a yan banga man interviewed in Dikwa, “[A colleague] who was killed, he left behind two wives and so many descendants. Since then, nobody has ever taken anything [to them] in the name of compensation or assistance...We lost some people, so many people were injured, but no one has ever taken care of them...Nobody takes care of us.” Every member of a community militia interviewed talked of financial worries.

Lack of Resources

Members also spoke about not receiving the weapons, equipment, and money they need to do their jobs. They spoke about going on operations in the bush wearing slippers and having to push survivors of attacks in wheelbarrows to the hospital. Across a number of locations, leaders spoke about receiving vehicles from the state government, but not having sufficient funds to pay for fuel and repairs. The economic hardship and lack of resources could help explain why some members engage in extortion.

While members did not start this work for monetary reward, the conflict’s impact on livelihoods has persisted for years. Areas outside the towns in which they now live are not safe for them to hunt animals, farm crops, or pass through for trade. Many reported that access to livelihoods was contingent upon connections and nepotism rather than character and ability. As the economic impact of the conflict shows no sign of completely abating, their complaints about lack of payment despite their assistance to state security agencies has grown more frequent. Members are also unhappy that they do not receive humanitarian assistance. One yan gora man in Damboa said, “We are also IDPs with families in camps, but when we approach humanitarians for assistance, they say we are yan gora and so not eligible.”

Relations with communities

The work in which community militias engage has also caused tensions between community militia members and civilians. Relations vary across the state. In areas where members have harmed civilians during operations, including human rights abuses or IHL violations, civilians can be mistrustful. Civilians are often unhappy with being told what to do, for example at a checkpoint, particularly if community militia members are younger. Regarding the yan banga, a civilian man interviewed in Monguno

“Your wife will give birth; you don’t have money to do the naming ceremony with. When it is sallah, you don’t have money to buy things for sallah celebration. Before, you would eat food three times a day, now it is once, twice or sometimes none. Before you used to eat yam and red oil, now even to find food to eat is a problem.”

– *Yan gora man interviewed in Kaga LGA.*

said, “They know me to be part of this community for long. If I’m going out, they will search me. That means they do not trust me. If I’m coming back from my farm, they will ask me to remove my [outer] clothes [to see if I am carrying explosives]. To me, I’m not happy about it because they know me and they’re still treating me this way.”

Community militia members spoke of people whose family members had fallen under suspicion being angry with them for reporting them. A yan gora man interviewed in Biu said, “We were able to identify some members [so] their relatives and family members now are seeing us as enemies.” This anger is not surprising given that identification can be used for extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detention.

Community militia members admit and are unhappy with the reality that they have made mistakes. One kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Monguno said that he no longer enjoys his job due to implications the group has made mistakes in misidentifying people as AOG members or supporters. Community militia members, particularly in the yan gora, also spoke of their

displeasure with fellow members who extort money or harm civilians. They do not like colleagues taking drugs as they believe being intoxicated on duty means they are unable to perform their protective roles, may react harshly, and extort and steal to buy more drugs.

Relations with security forces

Community militia members reported problems around their relationships with security agencies. Some police officers complained that the yan gora see themselves as of higher status due to members’ relationships with the military and their efforts to mediate criminal cases. Conversely, yan gora respondents cited cases where people they had handed over to the police had walked free a few hours later, presumably because of payment of bribes. Some yan gora members perceived lack of respect from some military personnel, which they believed affects their status with civilians. Some militia members spoke of military personnel engaging in diverting humanitarian aid, physical violence against civilians during and outside of military operations, and harming civilians during operations. Of note, respondents said they did not know where to report incidents that they witnessed.

Relations with politicians

Community militia members were also concerned about attempts by politicians to use groups to advance their political ends. Ahead of the 2019 elections, politicians in many parts of the state were trying to reach out to members, and some respondents were worried they would be asked to engage in voter intimidation and political thuggery. In one location, a politician appointed a new leader of a group because he knew the current leader would not be amenable to working for political purposes. Community militia leaders have sought to counteract these attempts. One leader said, “If a politician interferes, we withdraw people from the area.

For example, a politician seized one of our vehicles saying we are not loyal. We reported him to the party chair and threatened to withdraw people from his area if the car was not returned. It was returned.” However, leaders in some locations also spoke about struggling to control their members, particularly as politicians were offering money in the context of a depressed economy where members had few economic opportunities.

Low morale

These factors have affected morale, which has led to many members leaving community militia groups or planning to do so. A man who left one of these groups in Monguno said, “I have a family. I have a father and mother that I am taking care of and going back to [the group] would not allow me to do [what] I need to do in order to get money for food.” Some members said they had taken a break from community militias for periods of a time due to low morale and to find ways to provide for their families. A kungiyar maharba woman interviewed in Bama said she stopped going to the checkpoint to conduct searches when she had no funds for fuel from the military. For a time, she had to cycle there. The money she was paid was only enough to cover her meals while at the checkpoint and she was not able to fulfil the financial needs of her family. She asked, “How can I continue under such conditions?” A yan banga man interviewed in Dikwa said he and others were thinking of leaving this work. He said, “What we are thinking is maybe to completely leave the work and look for another thing to do to survive. We are doing this work. The government doesn’t recognize [us]. We are dying. [Our] members are getting injuries all the time. Nothing is coming from anybody. What is the essence of doing this? Are we fools? Should we continue losing our lives? What about the future of our families?”

PROTECTING CIVILIANS

Community militias have taken significant actions to better protect civilians from harm and have been instrumental in enabling the relative stability that some parts of Borno enjoy today.³¹ Civilian respondents said they were able to share information with community militia members more easily than with security agencies, and that members acted on this information. A civilian woman interviewed in Biu said, “If something happens, you will not see anything of any government security agency, it’s always them that you will see.”

Bridging gaps between security agencies and communities

All community militia groups are proactive in collecting information from civilians for consolidation and sharing with security agencies. They also pass on information, guidance, and instruction from security agencies to communities. For example, they will often share information regarding changes in the curfew time or security tips. However, community militia groups have different reach depending on their groups’ own demographics. This has a disproportionate effect for women, particularly those who practice seclusion and remain within their own community or who are less likely to know multiple languages and may not be able to meaningfully interact with group members who don’t speak their language. While some civilian women can communicate with militia men, others from more conservative families are prohibited from talking with men outside their household. Where community militia groups have few or no female members, community militias have limited reach to women and girls and tend to communicate to men who may or may not pass on information to women. The gender composition of different community militias is also a factor in their success. For example, kungiyar maharba groups with female members and leaders are more likely to receive information from civilian women on which they can act; conversely groups without female members may lose these connections, access to information, and their ability to better protect women.

Civilians, community militia members, and security agents alike see community militias as an important conduit between civilians and security agencies. Civilians see community militia members as part of their communities and many respondents talked about how members are ‘part of us’, understand local languages, and have deep family or friendship connections. This contrasts with relationships between civilians and government security agencies, particularly military personnel, many of whom are from different parts of the country and unable to speak Hausa, let alone Kanuri or other local languages. Yet, community militia members interact with security agencies, holding meetings with them, going on joint patrols, supporting the military through operations, and working jointly to manage entry and exit from IDP camps. As a result, they not only relay messages and information, but also are asked to request security personnel to act in certain ways. Female community militia members play an important role bridging the gap between security agencies and civilian women. Soldiers say talking and working with female community militia members, for example at checkpoints or during screening processes, is the main way they interacted with women in the community due to the lack of female military personnel in forward operating bases, women’s reluctance to approach them, and instructions from commanding officers not to talk with female civilians to prevent SEA. Thus, militias play a vital role in connecting women to the military.

An important information-sharing role community militias play is passing on intelligence of impending attacks, including that people carrying explosive devices are planning to come into the area. The military often use community militias as a conduit to communicate with civilians in these cases, asking them to share information and advise civilians to take particular actions. For example, a civilian woman interviewed in Kaga LGA said, “When something was happening in Jakana, they came, and they were telling us to go inside. We should not go out because there is a problem around the town...They were saying outside on the street that they’re killing people.” Community militias have also been known to share security tips on actions security forces should take to reduce the likelihood that civilians are harmed during an attack.

31 This section draws on and expands further the findings of CIVIC’s earlier study.

Detaining AOG members

Civilians experienced high levels of fear when JASDJ members carried out targeted killing of civilians. They would spend the night outside and return home in the morning in an attempt to avoid such incidents. Community militias, particularly the yan gora in Biu and Maiduguri, arrested anyone suspected of association with the group, questioned them to ascertain the names of other potential AOG members and location of weapons, and handed them over to the military. Subsequently, the group would then arrest new members and recover any weapons. As one yan gora woman interviewed in Biu said, “So people are now hunting them. They are the one that are hiding on the run, not the people on the run.” In Biu, female and male yan gora members were involved in these actions, which took place in Biu town and surrounding villages. Female members were influential as they would search women’s rooms or women’s clothing in which guns and other weapons were often hidden.

Defending communities from attack

Civilians spoke about how community militias defended their communities when they were attacked. Sometimes the groups acted independently due to lack of military or other security presence, and other times they fought alongside soldiers. Civilians said community militia members reacted quickly to defend communities known to be under attack. A civilian woman interviewed in Bama narrated a story where JASDJ fighters were trying to abduct women working on the farm. The person who heard gunshots reported to the yan gora and “there and then they didn’t even wait for anything, whether to notify the military, they are only mindful of going to rescue those women without arms, only knife and stick, they pursued, they run after the three [JASDJ fighters] and they were able to rescue that woman and they brought back that victim’s body [of one woman] who had been killed by JASDJ during the attempted abduction.” A kungiyar maharba man interviewed in Kaga LGA explained why community militias were able to react more quickly. Concerning an attack on a nearby village which led villagers to flee, he said, “That prompted me to talk to the military officer...who was in charge of the battalion here. I approached him to tell him that how do we see to these people’s help? Then the captain told me that I have a kind of leadership that at any time I can go and do whatsoever I want. But their own is different. They have to report, they have to receive order from [senior officers] on any incidence or when there is any attack...Now we are

“We received the news that [AOGs] were coming. . . Before we know, we just heard some shots...we saw they have already displaced people...The people of the community now said, look we have to do something about this, we can’t wait, so all the civilians, all those that have volunteered came. . . [The military] came and joined the people from the community and that is how all of us joined hand...The [AOGs] lost many members then, so they know they can’t come back again.”

– Yan gora woman interviewed in Biu

here, we have a report of an incidence, they cannot tell us don’t go. But for them, they have to wait for clearance.” In some communities, attacks no longer take place as AOG members know there are strong community militia members present who will be able to repel attacks.

Community militia members have also helped people escape violence and reach safety. This assistance is often provided to people who are unable to see, hear, or walk – including those who are elderly – or to women with babies and young children. A civilian man from Damboa interviewed in Maiduguri spoke about how he had become disabled due to an attack on his town and had one of his legs amputated. He managed to escape his town and yan gora members helped him to get to



Members of the yan gora
(Civilian Joint Task Force) in
Maiduguri Metropolitan
Council, December 2019

The Walking Paradox

Maiduguri. Injured civilians are often taken to a facility where they can access medical care. A yan gora man interviewed in Kaga LGA said, “If there’s attack in the community, we will go and bring those that sustain various injuries and take them to hospital for treatment.”

Running checkpoints

As the dynamics of contestation between AOGs and the state have changed, the work of community militias has also evolved. From late 2014 to mid-2015, the military recaptured many headquarters of LGAs and major towns. Attacks on these towns, particularly by ISWAP in northern Borno from mid-2018 onwards, still occur. However, tactics of AOGs changed from 2015 onwards with more emphasis on setting off bombs and sending in people carrying explosive devices with instructions to detonate in crowded places, as opposed to capturing territory outright. While these tactics have reduced in recent times, attacks of this nature are still a significant threat. As a result, community militias screen people entering towns and at the entrances of areas such as markets and places of worship, which are potential targets. They ask questions, conduct body searches, and check belongings. Female members, in particular, screen and search civilian women at checkpoints, markets, and events. Given the numbers of women and girls carrying explosive devices to detonate in crowded areas,³² having women check women and girls is a crucial action taken by these groups to protect communities from harm. The majority of those who detonate explosive devices on their bodies are women. According to a 2017 study, 50 percent of people involved in these incidents from 8 April 2011 until 31 May 2017 were identified by the media as female but, as the media do not report the gender of these ‘suicide bombers’ in many cases, the real proportion may be higher.³³ A civilian woman interviewed in Monguno said, “If you’re going to farm they’ll ask you to remove, to just raise your hijab up and search you...they search people who are coming from outside so that the enemy will not follow those that went to farm and enter the town.” Not only do these actions reduce the likelihood that IEDs will be detonated, but they also help to ensure community safety and peace of mind. Members of community militias have been injured and killed by these explosive devices.

“Anybody that comes from the gate, the first people they will call is [my colleague] and I to come and look at the new arrivals. If it is people that I knew before, I will say how are you and then also try to find out so how have you been in the bush? And then welcome them and also screen them properly...”

– Yan gora woman interviewed in Dikwa

Screening new arrivals

Borno continues to see significant levels of displacement, including people coming into towns with military presence from surrounding villages. While the majority of these people are civilians, there is a risk that active AOG fighters may hide among them to gather intelligence, engage in targeted killings, and launch attacks. In order to mitigate this risk, the military has set up screenings for all those entering towns. There are protection concerns around how screening is conducted and whether identification of suspected AOG members is based on evidence or penalizes people from particular areas or ethno-linguistic groups. Community militia members are involved in these screening processes, in some cases identifying who is an AOG member among those who are from their communities. They also welcome them, search their bodies and belongings, and direct them on where to go for food and shelter assistance.

³² The people carrying such devices are often known as ‘suicide bombers.’ As the existence and level of agency of those who carry and detonate bombs is unknown, the term will not be used. Reports are some people are drugged, duped, or unaware of plans while others volunteer for the task, motivated by commitment to the group’s ideals.

³³ J. Warner and H. Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers*, (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2017).

Standing guard and conducting patrols

Community militia members conduct patrols around towns and station themselves at key locations so they can react quickly in the event of attacks. They also keep watch at night in shifts. Civilians said that community militias helped put their minds to rest. In Monguno, a civilian man said of the yan banga, “Even now when it is evening, they station themselves in the entrance of the town, and the back of the town, at the edges of the town, to protect the community.”

Providing security to enable livelihoods and theft prevention

Civilians can face significant risks from AOG attacks when going to farm and collecting firewood. Many towns in Borno are surrounded by trenches inside of which there is relative control by security agencies. Outside this perimeter, territory can be contested and AOG fighters are present. Over the past three years, civilians have been attacked, raped, injured, mutilated, and abducted by AOG fighters beyond the perimeter. At the same time, civilians outside certain areas can be viewed with mistrust by military personnel who may assume they are connected with AOGs or passing information and goods to them. In response to these dynamics, many community militias in different parts of the state accompany civilians, often alongside soldiers, to enable them to farm and collect firewood with relative peace of mind. A civilian woman interviewed in Monguno said, “Now that it’s farming season, they go to where people are farming and walk around. You, being a farmer, seeing them around your farm, you will feel comfortable. But when their presence is not around, so you will feel somehow, you will be scared.” Civilian protection committees that CIVIC works with in Bama, Banki, Damboa, Dikwa, and Gwoza requested military commanders to provide patrols to enable them to collect firewood and farm. In these locations, soldiers and community militia members escort civilians at set times to areas surrounding these towns and are present in the vicinity while they carry out firewood collection and farming activities.

Another way community militias mitigate the economic impacts of conflict is by acting against theft. The yan banga emerged in response to increased criminality and have been taking actions to counter crime in the decades since. The present violent conflict has led to

“They are securing people’s food. For instance, if they are distributing food, they will make sure that people are in a good queue. Then they will be giving numbers like from one to ten you should enter and collect your food, then the next set from one to ten they should enter and collect their food. And make sure that nobody has snatched someone’s food away.”

– *Civilian woman interviewed in Monguno talking about the yan banga*

increased impunity and opportunities for theft and decreased police presence. Civilians said all community militias acted to recover stolen property and hand people suspected of theft over to the police. They also conduct patrols at times where theft is likely to occur, such as when people have gone to their farms or left communities during heightened insecurity. Civilians also said community militias helped retrieve valuable items including gold, money, and food items after they had been displaced. For example, a civilian man in Monguno said, “People that were in the village before that they left and came here, they did not come with all their properties...[the yan banga] will serve as their guard, as security, to follow [civilians] to whatever village it is to go and bring their goods, their stuff they left behind.” In other cases, civilians told members locations where goods were hidden so they could recover them on their behalf.

Keeping order

While yan gora members have been accused of diverting humanitarian aid, civilians in a number of research locations also spoke about how community militias assist during distribution of humanitarian aid. They control crowds, assist people who are elderly or disabled to come to the front of the distribution queue, and act to prevent theft of food.

Providing access to security and justice for women and girls

In many communities in Borno, women often lack access to public spaces. As discussed above, this exclusion sometimes means that community militias do not interact with women from families that practice seclusion. However, where militias include female members, these members can help women and girls access information, security, and justice. Female militia members are able to enter houses in which secluded women live, find out their protection and security concerns, and raise them with other militia members for action either by the group or by others with power and influence in the community.

Resolving disputes

There is a long tradition of community militia groups resolving disputes that predates the present conflict. For example, yan banga members acted to de-escalate conflict and mediate so conflicting parties could agree on mutually satisfactory outcomes. As violence has led to displacement and the breakdown of social structures and norms, small scale conflict between individuals or families is common. Community militia members act to resolve matters as they arise, for example separating fighting children, asking the reason for their quarrel, and bringing the matter to parents. Civilians also come to them for resolution. According to a yan banga woman interviewed in Damboa, “If there is a misunderstanding between women, instead of going to the police station, sometimes they will bring the issue to me and I will settle the matter.” Cases include accusations of association with AOGs, verbal arguments over items distributed in IDP camps, or cases where landlords are trying to evict tenants who do not have enough money to pay rent. For more serious matters, incidents will be brought to community militia group leaders who decide if they can settle the matter, or whether it needs to be taken to the community leader or police.

“They do the judgements among themselves, but even among them there is a rank. The junior ones when they caught a criminal, they will take it to the senior ones. The senior ones among them will do the judgement. It depends on the nature of the thing that happened. There are some cases. . . they will take it to bulama. If it is something that concerns the police, they will take it to the police. If it is something that they will do it among them, they will just do it amongst themselves.”

– *Civilian man interviewed in Monguno*

During the height of violence, community leaders, police, and government officials fled towns leaving a vacuum of authority. As a result, community militias stepped into this space. Although there are accusations of unfairness, civilians largely praise them for providing quick, impartial, and satisfactory justice without charge. Civilians continue to turn to community militia members for justice, in part due to the inaccessibility or absence of community leaders or the requirement to pay money – which they no longer have. Moreover, women and young people have limited access to community leaders to resolve disputes or seek justice. In many communities, women can only

raise their concerns if older men in their families are willing to do so on their behalf. IDPs also said they did not feel able to go to community leaders, even if present. Many leaders are also perceived to be biased towards particular religious or ethno-linguistic groups. While police officers have returned to many areas of the state, people have very low levels of trust and confidence in them. They see police officers as perpetrating harm themselves or willing to accept money for action or inaction. At the same time, community militias have status for the roles they play in protection, particularly given their proximity to the military. These dynamics have caused conflict between community militias, community leaders, and the police. Community leaders also believe that community militias have started taking actions that fall within their own responsibilities. The police and some civilians, including human rights activists, say community militias are acting outside their mandate, particularly when it comes to settling cases of serious crimes, including rape, through mediation, when they should go through the criminal justice process. However, there is increasing awareness among members that there are limits to their adjudicatory roles, in large part due to interventions by non-governmental organizations.

Serving the community in other ways

Since members of community militias are from the communities in which they work, they are often able to diagnose and address local needs more than state actors. Civilians spoke about how members of the yan banga, yan gora, kungiyar maharba, and kesh kesh assisted women to reach healthcare during childbirth, taught children football and civic education, and fetched water and food for people with disabilities.

In a number of cases, civilians mentioned that community militia members react quickly to bring back corpses of people killed for burial. A civilian woman interviewed in Damboa said, regarding the yan banga, that “If there is an issue or report of our people being killed in one village, if they have a conscience, even if the military didn’t go, the yan banga will mobilize themselves and go and bring the corpses.” Respondents also spoke of the importance of performing burial rites for deceased family members, and how they believed doing so would enable the soul’s passage and allow them to heal. While these actions do not physically protect civilians, they contribute significantly to psychological well-being.

A force for community cohesion

While community militias in some areas consist largely of one religious or ethno-linguistic group, in places which are more diverse they reflect the location’s demographics. In areas such as Biu, people came together to form the yan gora, with Muslim members protecting churches on Sundays and Christian members protecting mosques on Fridays. Members of the group believed that undertaking protection of religious sites for the two main religions in the region would help to protect communities as they fought against JASDJ’s ideology, which sought to sow religious divisions.

HARMING CIVILIANS

While civilian respondents were appreciative of the work of community militia members in protecting them, they also pointed to how community militia groups, particularly the yan gora, harmed civilians.³⁴ In general, members of the kungiyar maharba, yan banga, and kesh kesh tend to consist of members who were more mature and patient, according to respondents. However, respondents gave examples of members of all groups committing harm during military operations in which they participate. Despite their proactive defense of communities, the reputation of the yan gora has declined in recent years. Some civilians now view them as insincere and even believe their substantial casualties are punishment for their actions. According to a civilian man interviewed in Monguno, “Maybe because of their insincerity, even if they go to the bush for the security work, they are being killed. Always, their number is reducing. Before they were much and now they are very little because many of them have been killed. To me it’s as a result of their insincerity.” Many yan gora members were unhappy with the actions of their colleagues vis-à-vis civilians and stressed the need for a common code of conduct and firmer discipline and punishment. Yan gora leaders talk about having ‘bad eggs’ amongst their members. They try to discipline them but struggle to do so given members face significant challenges as described above. These actions have led to tensions between the yan gora and other groups.

Assaulting and killing those suspected of association with armed groups

A key action in which yan gora members engaged, particularly in the early days, was to arrest, interrogate, and transfer people suspected of JASDJ association to the military. Methods used by groups during interrogations could be harsh. A yan gora woman justified actions saying, “It’s not only threatening. We use force. You are no more a suspect, you are

confirmed members, so we tie you very heavily...Yes, very tightly so that you must confess.” At times, people suspected of JASDJ association would face mob justice. Crowds burned houses and beat suspects. A yan gora man interviewed in the same location said, “One man maybe he was arrested and before you know a man is beating him, a slap from this one, this one hits him from behind. Ten people maybe on one man.” The yan gora woman quoted earlier said, “Everybody was involved so when they said this is a [JASDJ] member, they will do it, it’s just like mob action, everybody will.” When asked for details of what people would do, she said some people were killed due to the crowd’s actions. Civil society respondents said similar behavior took place in locations across Borno. In some areas, the yan gora from other places engaged in reprisal actions against communities perceived as colluding with AOGs, which was particularly common in areas seen as having high levels of AOG recruitment. Civilians spoke of husbands staying away from communities as they were afraid of accusations. A civilian woman said, “They covered their face...to disguise [themselves]...They were killing almost every youth...They started by killing everybody and they threatened many irrespective of whether you are innocent or you’re a member. Once they entered your house, they will pull the man out and they will gun him down.” Civilian women, often left behind by their husbands, fathers, and brothers who had fled to relative safety, had to safeguard and defend remaining male family members in the face of this intense pressure.

Enabling detention without trial and other human rights abuses

When community militias suspect someone of being an AOG member, they hand them over to the military. Once in military custody, the suspect can be detained for a long period of time, and trials, when they happen, have raised due process concerns.³⁵ Conditions in detention facilities and the human rights and IHL violations there have been well documented.³⁶ In some cases, family members have

34 This section draws on and expands further the findings of the earlier study.
35 For more details, please see Human Rights Watch, ‘Nigeria: Flawed Trials of Boko Haram Suspects: Ensure Due Process, Victim Participation,’ 17 September 2018, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/17/nigeria-flawed-trials-boko-haram-suspects>, last visited 5.10.2019.
36 For example, Amnesty International, Nigeria: “If You See It, You Will Cry” *Life and Death in Giwa Barracks*, AFR 44/3998/2016, 11 May 2016.

been threatened to force confessions. A yan gora man recounted the story of a suspect running away when the group went to arrest him. The military told them to take three children from the house to the barracks and tell the family they would be detained there until the suspect came forward. The parents subsequently confessed their son was a member and brought him to the military so the other children would be released. He said yan gora members did not like carrying out this instruction: “We felt guilty because innocents are going to suffer because of a criminal.”

Recruiting and using children

When community militias first engaged in countering AOGs, there were few restrictions placed on who could be part of this effort. The kungiyar maharba and yan banga – in which membership is, to some extent, hereditary – already had children who went to hunt and perform other group tasks. While the youngest of these were not engaged in fighting AOGs, some young people in their mid-teens (under 18), considered to be children under international law but adults by communities, did take part in group efforts to defend communities. Many children also joined the yan gora. According to a yan gora woman interviewed in Biu, “In the beginning even 10-year-old children then were members...everybody was a member, so you just can’t say he’s not going.” A woman interviewed in Kaga LGA was 16 years old at the time of the interview, but joined the yan gora approximately three years ago.

Younger members perform different tasks. In Monguno, a civilian man said yan banga members aged 15, 16, or 17 usually run errands for soldiers, are present at checkpoints, and search people coming into the community. They have been prevented from taking part in certain activities such as accompanying the military on operations or searching people’s homes, but told to pass on intelligence, for example, if they see strangers when playing. These activities – intelligence gathering, running errands, and checkpoints – still put children at risk. The yan gora was listed by the United Nations for the recruitment and use of children in 2016.³⁷ Since then, they have acted to stop the recruitment and use of children, signing an action plan in September

2017 committing to this and to refer those already associated with them for community reintegration. Referrals and reintegration of many children formerly associated with the yan gora have taken place and use of children has significantly fallen in the years since. Nevertheless, respondents in areas further away from Maiduguri spoke of continuing to see people under 18 engaged at checkpoints. While children associated with other community militias help their parents, family, and community members who are in the group with other tasks, rather than play direct combat roles, there are no known interventions engaging with these groups.

“It was on market day that they started shooting, killing people. . . They just shot them to death. Because of the shooting and what is happening, you cannot stand and look at who is doing the shooting, but I know it was soldiers and yan gora and yan banga. . . Boko Haram used to come there frequently. . . Maybe as a result of Boko Haram going there and doing things, that was why soldiers too went there and killed people.”

– *Civilian woman interviewed in Monguno*

Harming civilians directly and indirectly during military operations

As described above, community militias accompany military personnel on operations. During military operations, civilians are harmed directly and indirectly, and community militias that are part of these operations are sometimes implicated in these incidents.³⁸ Members of community militias themselves reflected that this harm occurs, for example recounting times where civilians have been harmed while targeting AOG members or when people killed or injured, assumed to be AOG members, turned out not to be so.

Pressuring communities to form community militia groups

There was intense pressure from the military to form or join a group as failure to do so, particularly amongst young men, was seen as a sign of AOG membership or sympathy. While many members were happy to join groups, they were under strong compulsion to do so. According to a civilian man in Monguno who has since left the yan gora, “I was happy because when I carried the stick, it’s a kind of protection to me. I have to carry the stick because everybody is carrying it. And if you do not carry it that means people will look at you somehow.” A civilian woman who was in Gwoza said, “Some women joined but they joined for the fact that anyone that refused to join was suspected as a member of the opposition group. That’s why most of the women are afraid to be identified as alleged members or supporters, that’s why they joined them.” A civilian man also spoke about intense pressure on communities to form yan gora. He recounted how soldiers and the yan gora of another location came to his village to ask it to ‘take gora’. Villagers refused as they did not want to attract JASDJ attacks. He said yan gora members returned and started to physically assault civilians, including village elders.

Entire communities decided to form a yan gora group to avoid repercussions of failing to do so. A civilian man said, “Then there were no gora in the community. So, when something happens in the community, soldiers will come and kill every youth that they saw...they don’t segregate,

they just kill everybody without investigation...because there’s no [clear difference] between the members of the sect and the members of the community, when someone shoots in the dark, soldiers would not know that this is the person that’s shooting them and they would start shooting everybody that they saw.” This man was part of a group that went to Maiduguri to ask yan gora leaders for advice, who told them the community had to ‘take gora’ to prevent reprisals. This pattern was consistent across many communities targeted by blanket arrests and killing, which only stopped when they formed a yan gora of their own. According to a yan gora woman who was part of forming a yan gora in a Maiduguri IDP camp, “There are two reasons why this yan gora formed. Number one is as protection against the Maiduguri yan gora so they no longer view you with suspicion and number two is to try to assist and protect your people.”

AOGs have attacked communities that form yan gora or where existing groups have fought them. According to a 2018 conflict analysis of Kaga LGA, “The presence of the CJTF seems to be a major factor in determining whether a community is attacked or overrun. In Mainock, where there was no CJTF presence, armed opposition groups still assert that it is their territory but have not engaged in destructive attacks until recently. Similarly, Ngamdu brokered an agreement with armed opposition groups in which, in exchange for not organizing a CJTF unit or allowing soldiers to deploy in the community, they did not attack the area. In contrast, Benisheikh’s mobilization of a sizable CJTF, recruiting from both Benisheikh and surrounding communities, has resulted in protracted and destructive conflicts between the armed opposition groups and residents of the town. As a result, the community is ‘almost empty.’”³⁹

Engaging in sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse

Almost all civilians complained about the behavior of some yan gora members towards women and girls. No complaints of this nature were received by members of other community militias. Women’s rights activists said women and girls reported sexual violence committed against them by yan gora members.⁴⁰ Yan gora members

³⁷ United Nations, *Secretary-General’s Annual Report for Children and Armed Conflict*, (UN, 2016).

³⁸ Community militias committing direct and indirect harm against civilians while accompanying military operations was discussed by a number of respondents. This report does not provide identifying details in the interests of safety and security of respondents.
³⁹ Chitra Nagarajan, ‘Conflict Analysis of Northeast Focal States: Biu, Bursari, Gombi, Hawul, Hong, Jakusko, Jere and Kaga Local Government Areas,’ (CRS, 2018) at p.15.
⁴⁰ This report does not provide identifying details in the interests of safety and security of respondents.

themselves acknowledged that their colleagues commit sexual violence and, in some cases, acknowledged their own perpetration. For example, a yan gora man in a 2018 workshop on civilian protection and harm mitigation told CIVIC how his group, himself included, had raped women and girls while recapturing territory from AOGs. Members also perpetrate SEA. Here, yan gora men in some locations purposefully identify the women who are likely to be vulnerable and disadvantaged, such as girls separated from parents, widows, women who have many children to care for, women associated with AOGs, and women whose husbands are detained. Members tell civilians they will make sure they are on lists for distribution or provide them with food in exchange for sex. In addition to food, non-food items, shelter, and movement outside camps (which women and girls need to gain incomes) can also be conditioned by members on sex. In these cases, the power yan gora men hold over these civilian women is such that there can be no meaningful consent, with many women entering into these relationships as they have no other means of taking care of themselves and their families.

Some civilians were also unhappy with how community militia men search women. Female members mostly search women, but when they are not present or are overstretched due to their fewer numbers, civilians complained that some community militia men asked women to remove clothes so they could see whether they were carrying weapons. While civilians felt asking this was often needed to prevent attacks, they also felt community militia men did this even when it was not necessary. According to a civilian man interviewed in Monguno, the yan banga “will tell you to remove your khimar. Put it over your head just so that the body will be seen...It’s the men that are doing it. [The women] are not happy about it because if they are going out, they will cover their body as required by the community, but if they are coming back, they have to raise it up which they are not happy about. They have to remove it, they are not happy.”

These abuses have led to tensions between yan gora men and other young men. Non yan gora men feel disadvantaged as they cannot offer food, shelter, freedom of movement, and other incentives for women and girls to enter into relationships with them. At the

same time, women and girls who do enter into sexual and romantic relationships with yan gora men are often seen as doing so in order to gain material benefit, are discriminated against, and looked down upon for doing so. Despite SEA being quite common in many communities of Borno, and some understanding of the factors that lead women and girls to experience this violence, high levels of stigmatization are common around instances of sex outside of marriage.

Perpetrating physical violence and intimidating civilians

Civilians said community militia members’ harsh tones and verbal abuse leads to them feeling fear and anger. A civilian woman in Damboa said, “They don’t give respect to elderly people, they abuse people anytime they want. These are some of the things that I feel is making me angry all the time.” Female civilians felt they are spoken to more harshly than their male counterparts, as yan gora members look down upon and discriminate against women. Civilians also spoke about how members deal out harsh punishment for minor infractions. For example, a civilian woman in Biu said, “[They] break your glasses if they see you walking, if you break the law of curfew. They will beat you up, they will tie you tight there until morning.”

Sometimes, this verbal abuse becomes physical. In addition to violence committed against suspected AOG members, civilians were unhappy with some yan gora members who engaged in physical violence against others. Of note, respondents did not mention violence committed by members of other community militias. In a number of locations, civilian respondents spoke of yan gora members beating and injuring people while keeping order in food distribution queues and when people protest that they are helping others to jump the queue. According to a civilian woman interviewed in Monguno, “They will come and tell you to shift. That they want to put someone in your place. If you say no, I was here since morning and I’m tired, I can’t allow you to put someone in my place, then they will beat you, beat you, you have to shift so they will put that person before you.” Other interviewees spoke of physical violence against keke napep⁴¹ drivers who parked incorrectly.

“If they find money on [civilians coming into the town when searching them]. . .they will collect the money, and if people refused to give them the money they will threaten them to say, we will report you to the soldiers and say that you are a member of the sect. And you know what it means, you are going to be killed, then you have no option rather than submit the money to them.”

– *Civilian man interviewed in Monguno*

Committing extortion and theft, including diversion of humanitarian aid

The majority of civilians interviewed spoke of yan gora members diverting humanitarian aid, stealing civilians’ belongings, and extorting money from them. A civilian man in Damboa said, “They will make sure they first get their share, even by force, even if it is not meant for them. They will use their power as they always stay by the entrance. They will ask the organization concerned to give them their own share or they will impede the group’s access to IDP camps. They will deprive others from getting.” Due to their proximity to the government, yan gora members were perceived as complicit in the corruption and diversion of aid in which some government officials were engaged. Some civilians felt yan gora members purposely create chaos during distribution to snatch cards to get food to sell. They also

use other means to take cards. According to a civilian woman from Monguno, “In the food distribution point, they beat women and they will ask you...let me see this, your card. If you hand it over to them, they will say this is your card and put it in their pocket and go out [leave] with it.”

Civilian women and men alike said that militia members specifically target women for this theft by exerting their power over them. Some yan gora members also divert livelihood interventions such as distribution of seedlings, fertilizers, and other farming inputs. Civilians also said some yan gora members were extorting money from them. According to a civilian man interviewed in Monguno, if members find food in the bags of people leaving town, they accuse them of taking it to AOGs in the bush. “Then they will torment you. You will say, no this for my personal consumption. They will say no and even go as far as collecting like bribes from people [before they let them pass].” Alternatively, yan gora members search belongings when people are fleeing from safety into towns and take what they find. Civilian respondents also said yan gora members, who were the first to come back when towns were recaptured by the military, used that opportunity to steal what people had left behind.

Employing punitive justice measures and being used to settle personal scores

While the majority of civilian responses were positive concerning the roles of community militias to dispense justice, some respondents complained the yan gora was used by some civilians with ties to members to settle personal scores. A civilian man interviewed in Monguno said, “if there is conflict between two people or two people are fighting and they now decided to call BOYES or [if] he [a BOYES member] comes and does injustice in the process of resolving the conflict, maybe he gives [a decision favoring] the one that is a favored brother in the process of doing judgement, if he do it with selfishness or something then we will say why don’t you follow due process to understand who is wrong and who is good?”

Trading and using drugs

Some civilians said drug use among the yan gora is high as members take drugs to help address fear of the danger that comes with being members of the group. They also believed members took drugs to forget

41 Keke napeps are also known as tricycles, auto rickshaws or tuk tuks.

about the harm they had experienced, witnessed, and perpetrated. Respondents were unhappy as they feared this drug use would lead to criminality in the future as people felt forced to find funds to acquire the drugs on which they had become reliant. They also suspected yan gora members were involved in bringing drugs into towns and into IDP camps. No evidence was found to support this notion and, despite widespread perceptions of the links between drugs, criminality, and violence in Nigeria, data that supports this connection is also not present. However, these perceptions and related fears are important in and of themselves and need to be addressed.

“We have agreed that if there’s any disciplinary action to be taken against them, it should be in the barracks because they are directly under the military. So we have sensitized the community that if any yan gora members misbehaves or commits some crime, I will call their leadership and tell them that I had a report from such a person over your member or I will call barracks direct. Sometimes the community, before I even hear, they will report to the barrack themselves.”

– Kungiyar maharba leader



Members of the
yan gora (Civilian
Joint Task Force)
in Maiduguri
Metropolitan Council,
December 2019.

The Walking Paradox

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REDRESS AND CHANGING BEHAVIOR

Different community militias have different processes for the investigation and punishment of their members. As outlined above, the kungiyar maharba requires its members to swear an oath to maintain good behavior. If a member breaks these rules, they are suspended for some time, reinstated, and then expelled completely if their behavior does not change. Moreover, members believe that they will be punished by supernatural forces if they break their oath. Meanwhile, yan banga leaders spoke of conducting investigations and initiating punishment according to the offence. VGN leaders say members who break the code of conduct face disciplinary action and will be dismissed from service and handed over to the police if they have committed crimes such as rape. The yan gora models its disciplinary process after the military, with a RSM responsible for making sure members are well dressed, areas where members work are kept clean, and discipline is enforced. The yan gora chairman refers cases of misconduct, for example when members beat civilians or use their power to settle scores, for investigation to the RSM, who can then dismiss the offender from the group and collect his identity card. In Biu, civilian complaints are heard by the yan gora leader and RSM, who pay compensation for goods destroyed and damage caused and instigate disciplinary measures accordingly. These measures could include stationing offending members to areas where their behavior will be watched closely.

There have been many cases where civilians have been able to achieve redress from yan gora leaders, but their ability to do so depends on a given leader's disposition. For example, in Biu, civilians said the yan gora leader is reportedly open and proactive. They have turned to others with power such as the community leader or LGA chairman for assistance. There have been cases where the military has stepped in to correct behavior, including of yan gora leaders. In one research community, an army major told a yan gora official who was adjudicating criminal cases that such cases should be handed over to the police. The official was subsequently relieved of his position by yan gora members who signed a petition to this effect and presented it to the military.

However, in general, barriers to redress remain high and internal disciplinary processes do not function as well as they could. Civilians see the yan gora as close to soldiers. According to a civilian man interviewed in Monguno, “Because the yan gora are directed by soldiers, so people have this fear of them.” Civilians feel unable to report commission of harm, as many people with power and authority who could act on their behalf are yet to return to the area and they feel security agencies and government officials will not act if they report. IDPs, often not viewed with respect by host communities, feel particularly powerless and afraid.

However, community militia members and civilians alike said groups had changed over time in terms of the ways in which they harm civilians. At the height of violence, the yan gora were seen to be exerting power in the name of community security and bolstered by their military connections. According to a civilian woman in Damboa, “this yan gora work has led so many people to misbehave. Some even look at themselves as military. If something happens, they take the law into their hands.” A civilian man in Monguno said of the BOYES: “They feel pompous when they wear their shoes and their uniform. They feel like they are important. They feel [like big men] as if they are like soldiers.” However, the military in many areas, such as Dikwa, distanced itself from the yan gora because of their behavior. As a result, the yan gora in many areas, including Dikwa and Bama, have tried to change. A civilian woman in Bama said, “They want to reclaim their lost glory. They are trying to adjust [their] ways because they are now realizing that vigilante and the kesh kesh are closer to military than them. So, some of them are changing, their attitudes are now changing.” Respondents said fewer human rights violations are committed. A yan gora man in Kaga LGA said, “Before when we caught someone or we are suspecting him, we will not ask or question him, we will just harm that person. But now, we follow due process, ask questions to make sure that person is guilty before handing him over to soldiers [because] we come to discover that some people were wrongly accused.”

Many of these changes are due to shifts in the context. After some areas of Borno were recaptured by the military, the roles of community militias decreased, particularly where state authorities have returned and taken control of the area. These groups also became

more regulated and morphed from being informal groupings with mass community participation to smaller groups. According to a kungiyar maharba man in Bama, “Before, our numbers is many. We were almost 2,000 but now we are only 150 in number... Before everybody was a member but now, we screen. We look at those that can be able to do this and those that are strong and those that have the passion for the job.” Leaders are now more proactive, particularly after receiving orientation, sensitization, and training themselves. A civilian man in Monguno said, “Their leaders will [now] call them to order whenever there is problem [since] they were trained...That is why there is changes in their behavior, [because leaders] will call them to order and advise them.” Government, multilateral and NGO actors have also reached out to yan gora members to offer them training, for example in skills acquisition and livelihoods. However, many outside Maiduguri complain that they were not included in these opportunities, and agencies have to make concerted efforts to include women as male leaders often find ways to marginalize them. Organizations engaged in protection and peacebuilding work tended to be more aware of these gender dynamics than economic empowerment programs, specifically telling leaders that their female members had to be included as participants and following up to make sure this was done, but few female respondents had benefitted from skills acquisition workshops done by organizations with a purely economic empowerment focus. Workshops on human rights and civilian protection have led to changes in knowledge and attitudes. For example, participants in CIVIC’s workshops have told CIVIC they had previously been unaware of these concepts and during the course of workshop sessions have reflected on the harm they have committed and how to mitigate the risk of harm in the future.

Another key factor in fewer human rights violations being committed by community militias has been interventions by the community to control and restrain the actions of these groups, often supported by outside actors. Often, individual civilians reached out to individual members. For example, a civilian man in Monguno said, “[misbehavior] has just reduced and

they are not powerful as they used to be before... their parents called them to order and they talked to them concerning what they were doing. They say this thing you are doing is not good and it's not helping matters, you have to stop it.” Civilians also came together to talk with the group as a whole or ask others such as camp management, community leaders, or security agents to act. For example, civilians supported by CIVIC formed a protection committee in Damboa that spoke with camp management about yan gora behavior and engaged leaders separately. A civilian woman in Damboa recounted that, “Even during food distribution, they wouldn’t mind whether you are elderly or you are young, they will be beating everyone. But camp management, as well as what we initiated as a protection committee, talked with them. We said see, we are not happy with you beating these elderly men and women...That is when things now subside.”

However, in the absence of supporting interventions, barriers for civilians to raise concerns and push for redress remain high. A civilian woman in Bama who met yan gora leaders with other members of a protection committee said, “If not for the coming of this protection committee, ordinarily like this, we are average, who do you think can start going to [yan gora leaders] to talk about this? But now in the name of committee, if things happen, we can be able to approach them. But before, individually, who can do that, we are afraid.” In her community, yan gora members were using their position outside IDP camps to enter camps at night to approach women and girls, particularly those whose husbands and fathers were missing, and offer places on food distribution lists in exchange for sex. Protection committee members spoke with yan gora and military leaders in the area. After these conversations, yan gora leaders warned their members to stop this behavior and told them to no longer enter the camp. Military officials also spoke with the yan gora, promising consequences if this behavior continued. Following these actions, protection committee members in the camp reported a drastic reduction of SEA committed by yan gora members. This incident shows it is possible to stop harm, but only where yan gora leadership and military officials can be persuaded to act and civilians supported to demand action.

FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

A number of respondents spoke about how many militias pre-dated the current conflict and are likely to continue long afterwards. Civilians are most concerned with the yan gora and expressed a high degree of uncertainty about what would happen to the group in the future. Even leaders and members of this group expressed concerns, acknowledged risks existed, and asked for urgent interventions to mitigate these risks. Many respondents who were members said they wished to leave the groups and asked for support in accessing education and restarting livelihoods in order to do so. They want peace and a return to normalcy, with many even urging the opening of dialogue with AOGs in order to bring this about.

There are three potential trajectories when it comes to community militias in the state. These are not clear-cut trajectories, but may all be followed by some members to varying degrees. Much depends on how the conflict evolves and how policy measures are put in place by federal and state governments. It is also critical that programming of non-governmental actors and prospects for improved livelihoods are inclusive and sustainable. Policy and programming around disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) of AOG fighters and community militia members – particularly with an eye toward balanced efforts that include all groups – will be key to what happens in the future, as well as to what extent interventions exclude or include female members.

Return to normalcy

Many respondents felt the prospects of return to normalcy were higher for kungiyar maharba, yan banga, and kesh kesh members – as opposed to their yan gora counterparts – since they had existed before the conflict, play important community roles that would continue, had members who were steadier in character, had livelihood options (even if these had been severely damaged by the conflict), and followed codes of conduct and ethics. For example, a yan banga man interviewed in Hawul said, “We had kungiyar maharba even before this crisis and obviously definitely sure somehow, one day this crisis will end. Just the way that the crisis met them in the group, the crisis will still leave them in the group.” Some respondents, on the other hand, had also already seen yan gora members

leaving the group and being reintegrated into communities, continuing to pursue their previous livelihoods or being retrained in new skills, and felt that the likelihood for significant numbers of members taking this path was high. However, respondents were concerned about the prospect of tensions within the yan gora and with the yan banga, kungiyar maharba, and kesh kesh given many government and donor interventions/programs are focused on the yan gora alone. While members of these other militias were thought to be more level-headed and calm, those interviewed expressed frustration that all support was going to the yan gora given how much they themselves had sacrificed and suffered. If interventions continue to be biased towards one group, increased inter-group conflict is highly likely, particularly as tensions between these groups already exist. Moreover, interventions around transitional justice, reconciliation, and healing are necessary to ensure social cohesion as many civilians expressed continued anger about the harm that has been committed. For example, a civilian man interviewed in Monguno said, “To me, they have done a lot of wrong to people and these people have been cursing them. Now that people have cursed them, in the future when they lost their jobs, hopefully this crisis will finish and they will not have anything to do. And there will be curse on them.” This level of anger may inhibit true reintegration into communities and limit job and livelihood prospects.

Increased politicization and engagement in criminality

Civilians viewed yan gora members as having had training, access to guns, and the taste of power. All respondents – civilians and community militia members alike – worried about increasing politicization and mobilization by politicians. As they were used around the last election cycle, civilians fear the yan gora will again be used by politicians to advance their own political objectives before, during, and after elections. Civilians also felt yan gora members were already shifting focus away from protection and that they would become more involved in criminality and gangs – particularly given high rates of drug use among members, which would lead them to search for sources of money to buy drugs. Of note, Yan gora men were seen to be more likely to go down this trajectory than yan gora women.

A new phase of the conflict develops

There are risks that dynamics around community militias will develop into a new phase of the conflict. Attitudes of members towards AOG fighters has changed to some extent. From 2015-2016, CIVIC observed a blanket refusal by community militias to accept AOG reintegration, while from 2017-2018 CIVIC began seeing calls for the government to proactively persuade fighters to surrender and from 2018-2019 CIVIC observed members supporting people associated with AOGs reintegrate back into communities. However, levels of acceptance for people associated with AOGs differs across the state. Respondents recounted stories where people were attacked by the community, including yan gora members, and accused of supporting AOGs because they were associating with those who had been abducted. They also spoke of an incident where people threatened to burn down a police station where a person suspected of association with AOGs was being held, which led to the suspect having to be evacuated for their own safety. Moreover, there is intense unhappiness with way DDRR is being done and the perceived preferential treatment of AOG fighters who had engaged in violence against communities, rather than community militia members who defended communities or civilians who had experienced violence. If care is not taken, these dynamics could develop into a new phase of the conflict, either in making conditions so unbearable for people formerly associated with AOGs that they return to these groups to continue fighting or community militia members engaging in more violence or criminality over insufficient care being taken in community consultation and involvement in DDRR processes.

“My only fear is if all of them do not have something doing, there’s going to be another threat because we women will be patient enough to go back maybe to marry or some of us will go back to our parents. Some of these guys that were trained on how to handle gun may misuse it. Some of them may use it to rob... I am seeing it’s like this is likely to happen.”

– Yan gora woman interviewed in Biu

CONCLUSION

Community militias have played significant roles in the course of the conflict in northeast Nigeria. They have been instrumental in protecting civilians by serving as information conduits between communities and security forces, and conducting operations and patrols that enable civilians to safely conduct livelihood activities. However, as the conflict has persisted, community militias – especially the yan goara – have engaged in behavior that has harmed civilians and risks fueling new cycles of violence.

It is imperative that federal and state governments, donors, and NGOs engaging in conflict mitigation, development, protection, and peacebuilding take steps now to mitigate harm to civilians and encourage

the successful reintegration and social cohesion of community militia members. These actions include enhancing accountability for abuses, strengthening reporting and remediation mechanisms for harm committed, ensuring inclusive and balanced engagement of the different community militias and between these groups and communities, establishing effective off-ramps, and improving consultation with civil society and conflict-affected civilians. If these dynamics and risks around community militias are not handled properly and expeditiously, Nigeria may experience further instability and violence, exacerbating the suffering that civilians have had to endure for far too long.

Back Cover *Members of the yan gora (Civilian Joint Task Force) in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council, December 2019.*

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T +1 202 558 6958
E comms@civiliansinconflict.org