



CIVILIAN PROTECTION SNAPSHOT: Gwoza, Nigeria

ABOUT CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is an international organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. Our mission is to support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian 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. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals throughout the world where it collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments and multinational bodies on how to make life-saving and lasting policy changes.

CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors. At CIVIC, we believe civilians are not "collateral damage" and civilian harm is not an unavoidable consequence of conflict — civilian harm can and must be prevented.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This snapshot was authored by Dr. Sarem Ugoh (Researcher, Nigeria), who also conducted data collection with Lauren Spink (Senior Global Researcher) and Bulus Mungopark (Community Engagement Manager). Dr. Benson Olugbuo (Country Director, Nigeria), William Meeker (Africa Director), Lauren Spink, Jacob Price (Program Manager), and Alison Giffen (Interim Senior Director Programs) reviewed the brief and provided useful comments. Monica Zuraw (Communications Officer) also reviewed and copy-edited. CIVIC thanks all those who generously gave their time and shared their perspectives and experience during the research.

This research project was funded by the European Union

I. SUMMARY

In August 2014, Boko Haram captured a town called Gwoza in Northeast Nigeria and declared the town its headquarters. Civilians in the area fled into Maiduguri, the capital of Nigeria's Borno state, and over the border into neighboring Cameroon. The Nigerian military recaptured Gwoza town in March 2015, but the area was not fully secured. On the contrary, Boko Haram remained in the area and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, rebranding itself as the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) before splintering into rival factions, including Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (JASDJ). JASDJ frequently carried out predatory attacks on civilians who lived outside of the town perimeter, destroying farmland, looting crops, killing and abducting hundreds of civilians, and causing additional widespread displacement.

In July 2021, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) conducted 29 interviews with civilians residing in the Gwoza and Maiduguri areas, community militia members, traditional leaders, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to explore the impact of shifting armed opposition group (AOG) tactics on civilians and the Nigerian military's response. This protection of civilians snapshot captures the research findings, revealing that respondents largely agreed the security situation in Gwoza town has improved each year since 2015, when the military recaptured the town and made it a garrison with permanent troop presence. The snapshot discusses how the Nigerian military has responded to evolving AOG strategies and tactics over the last six years by providing escorts to civilians while they farm, engage in livelihood activities, and during road travel. Civilians reported

that the military's actions help them to feel protected from AOG threats. In conversations with CIVIC, they highlighted the vigilance of the military, their proactiveness, and their prompt responses to security threats as reasons for the improved security situation. Respondents also noted that there is a decent working relationship between the military and civilians in Gwoza town. Moreover, the death of Abubakar Shekau, former head of JASDJ, has led to a significant decline in predatory AOG attacks against civilians.

However, mass surrenders of former AOG combatants and ISWAP's consolidation and expansion has also raised new security concerns in Gwoza. Moreover, interviewees indicated that the Nigerian military's recent concentration of soldiers in a "super camp" in Gwoza town has resulted in less security in more remote areas, and despite improvements in some aspects of the military's behavior towards civilians in Gwoza town, stakeholders reported sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of women and girls by the Nigerian military. After civilians and INGOs reported cases of SEA to the military, the military took action to reduce the rates of SEA in Gwoza town by limiting the military's presence in the community and internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, but SEA reportedly remains a problem. Additionally, with the Borno state governor's plan to return all IDPs to their former areas of residence by December 2021, civilians from outside Gwoza town felt the security situation did not support returns, putting them in vulnerable situations.

Based on these findings and the analysis provided in this snapshot, CIVIC recommends stakeholders take the following actions:

Nigerian federal and state civilian agencies should:

- Review the current strategy on IDP returns to ensure the security situation in Borno state is conducive for safe returns and adopt a do no harm approach by ensuring that returns are voluntary and that adequate preparations are made for civilians in the form of security, accommodation, and

livelihood options.

- Encourage the use of traditional platforms to support and manage the increasing rate of surrendering combatants and their families who will require reintegration into communities.
- Continue to facilitate the voluntary return of traditional and local leaders to other Local Government Areas (LGAs) where the security situation permits to return local governance to civilian authorities.

The Nigerian military should:

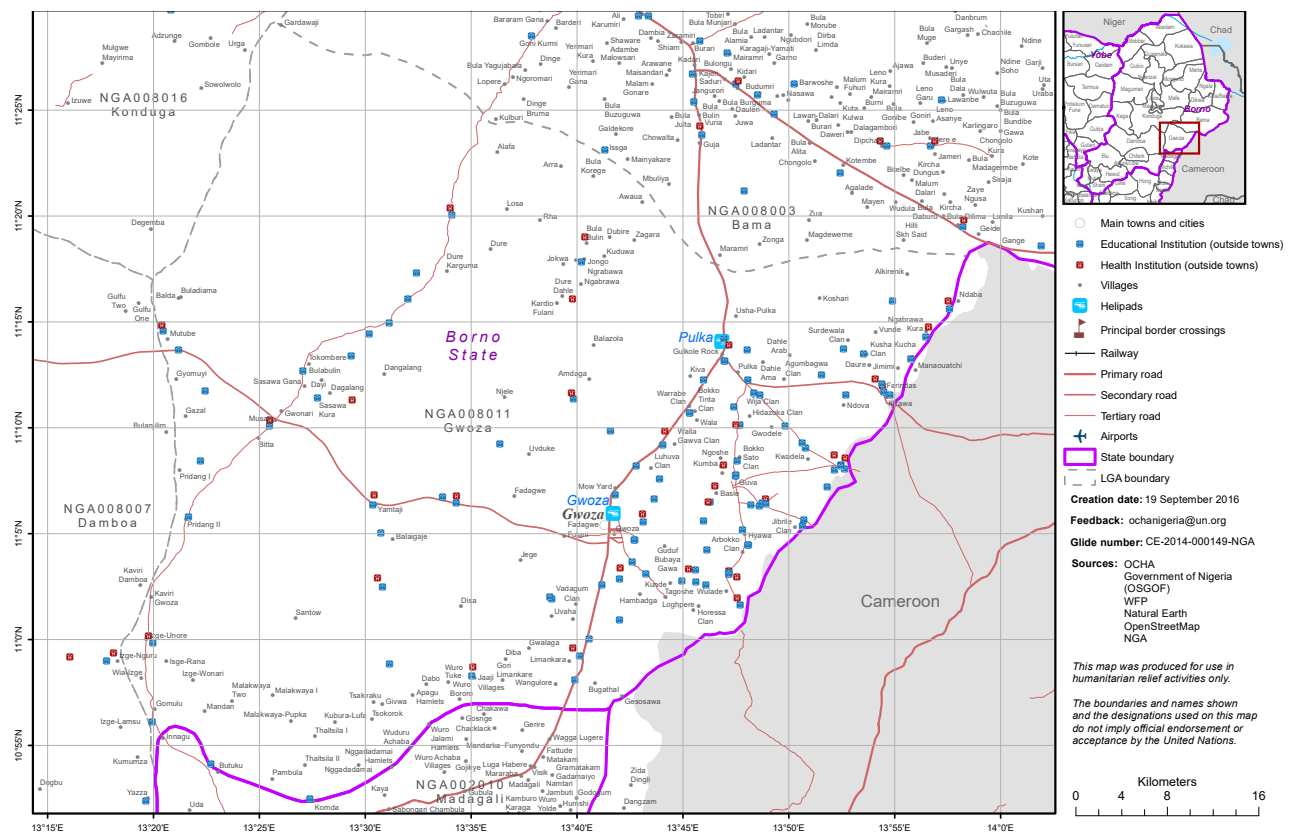
- Revise the current military strategy to extend protection to civilians beyond garrison towns.
- Continue to create channels for civilian leaders and groups to report protection concerns and continue to respond to these concerns, undertake patrols, and carry out other activities that mitigate risks to civilians.
- Implement and enforce a zero-tolerance policy for sexual exploitation and abuse committed by security forces and investigate all complaints by civilians.

INGOs and civil society should:

- Continue to work with civilians to empower them with information on their rights and with the military to improve civil-military relations. Such sessions should also work to address past grievances of abuse committed by Nigerian security forces.
- Continue to better protect civilians as they return to their original homes through the provision of accommodation and livelihood options.

II. BACKGROUND ON GWOZA

Gwoza is a Local Government Area (LGA) in southern Borno state situated approximately 135 kilometers south-east of the capital Maiduguri. It is bordered by the Sambisa Forest to the east and the Mandara Mountains and Cameroon to the west. In August 2014, Gwoza town was captured by Boko Haram who declared the town its headquarters, which led to widespread



displacement of civilians into Cameroon and Maiduguri. The Nigerian military recaptured Gwoza town from Boko Haram in March 2015.¹ In May 2015, civilians slowly started returning to Gwoza town with a larger influx recorded in May 2017, and there have been more returns in subsequent years.²

In 2015, shortly after Gwoza was recaptured by the Nigerian military, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and changed its name to Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, in 2016, due to ideological differences between the group's leaders, it split into two factions: Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (JASDJ) led by Abubakar Shekau and ISWAP led by Mamman Nur/Abu Musab al-Barnawi.³ Gwoza's proximity to the Sambisa Forest – the stronghold of JASDJ – made it a frequent target of the JASDJ faction, who was responsible for the killing and abduction of hundreds of civilians, loss of property, livelihoods, and widespread displacement.⁴

According to civilians, the security situation in Gwoza town in 2016 was tense, with frequent attacks resulting in civilians and military personnel killed daily within and outside the town.⁵ Two civilian interviewees relayed that at that time, civilians in the community lived in constant fear.⁶ Describing this time, one man told CIVIC, “that is how we were staying, just in fear.”⁷ “You could hear up to 100 gunshots in a day,” explained another civilian.⁸

“It gave us sleepless nights. We were thinking that if the military, who are armed, are being killed on [a] daily basis as a result of attacks, what about civilians who have nothing to protect themselves?”

– Male civilian residing in Maiduguri

III. EVOLVING ARMED OPPOSITION GROUP DYNAMICS

After the military recaptured Gwoza town in 2015, JASDJ carried out predatory attacks on civilians who lived within and outside of the town perimeter in Gwoza LGA, destroying their farmland or looting crops. Civilians living in the town faced the most threats when engaging in livelihood activities that required them to venture outside the perimeter and travel by road to nearby communities.⁹ A female civilian recalled, “Due to the level of insecurity, we could not go beyond the tangos [sentry posts at the perimeter of the town by the trenches] to farm because AOGs will kill civilians.”¹⁰ During attacks, JASDJ abducted women to marry and either killed the men or abducted and trained them to be fighters.¹¹ “Here, even if you are 60 years [old], they will kill you. If you are a woman, they will abduct you and keep you as a wife,” said a male civilian.¹²

JASDJ made use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), including Person-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (PBIEDs), so there was a fear of falling victim to these explosions in communities and on the roads.¹³ In 2016 and 2017, road travel was also difficult because there were few military checkpoints on the roads and limited military escorts, so AOGs frequently abducted and killed vehicle passengers.¹⁴ A male civilian emphasized this, saying “in the past, no one dared move out of Gwoza town because they would be killed.”¹⁵

Stakeholders interviewed by CIVIC in Gwoza largely agreed that the security situation has improved each year since the Nigerian military recaptured the town. Since then, attacks on Gwoza town have shifted from being a regular occurrence to being sporadic in 2020, with further improvements noted in 2021.¹⁶ According to respondents, three attacks have been recorded in 2021, but these largely targeted the military, with no direct attacks on civilians in Gwoza town.¹⁷ The security situation has improved with each passing month this year, in part due to the death of Abubakar Shekau.¹⁸

On May 19, 2021, during a clash between JASDJ and ISWAP, the leader of JASDJ, Abubakar Shekau, detonated a suicide vest, killing himself.¹⁹ His death led to defections and the absorption of some JASDJ fighters into ISWAP, weakening JASDJ’s capabilities and decreasing associated direct attacks against civilians. Civilian harm may have also decreased because JASDJ fighters absorbed under ISWAP are subject to ISWAP’s ideology, which officially limits targeting of certain civilians.²⁰ ISWAP has adopted a less hostile posture towards Muslim civilians than JASDJ, but it has continued to include other civilians in its attacks. ISWAP’s main targets have been the military, Christians, and civilians who are associated with the state (e.g., humanitarian workers and state, local, and traditional leaders).

Stakeholders interviewed by CIVIC in Gwoza largely agreed that the security situation has improved each year since the Nigerian military recaptured the town.

Regardless of the cause, since Shekau’s death there has been a significant decline in predatory attacks against civilians and an improving security situation in Gwoza.²¹ A traditional leader stated that “from the time of his death until now things have started improving.”²² This shift coincided with the planting season, enabling civilians to farm with less violence and venture into new territory that they could not access in the past.²³ That being said, there have still been reports of attacks against the military²⁴ and the news of Shekau’s death spread fear and uncertainty in Gwoza town.²⁵ According to a community militia member, there was a rumor that ISWAP would absorb JASDJ fighters and then take over Gwoza town.²⁶ As a result, some civilians fled from Gwoza town and INGOs withdrew their staff from the community. However, once it became clear that security threats were not increasing, civilians and INGO staff returned to the town.²⁷

Since the death of Abubakar Shekau, the Nigerian military has recorded mass surrenders of fighters

and their families due to infighting within ISWAP resulting from the group's move to consolidate AOG factions.²⁸ Gwoza town has also seen an influx of ex-combatants surrendering to security forces from the Sambisa Forest region and surrounding areas.²⁹ The security situation is, however, still evolving and the longer-term impact of Shekau's death on Gwoza cannot be forecast at the time of writing.

IV. MILITARY STRATEGY AND PROTECTION ACTIVITIES

In 2019, the Nigerian military adopted a 'super camp' strategy that consolidated smaller and more remote forward operating bases (FOBs) into larger and more fortified super camps to create a formidable force that could not be easily overrun by AOGs, in particular ISWAP. The military adopted this strategy to mitigate against increased military casualties associated with the vulnerability of FOBs that made them subjects of frequent raids, and ISWAP's strategy of attacking FOBs. The military also suggested that the strategy would enhance their ability to protect vulnerable communities and move civilians out of areas of operation.³⁰ The super camp strategy led to civilians moving (voluntarily and involuntarily) from regions where FOBs were closed into locations with super camps, i.e., moving from villages in Gwoza LGA into Gwoza town.³¹ According to a community militia member, "this brought about hardship for civilians on where to stay and keep their animals."³² The consolidation of the Nigerian military from remote FOBs to super camps also provided room for AOGs to take control of and increase their presence on major roads in the form of illegal checkpoints that led to increased attacks, looting, killings, and abduction of civilians and INGO workers.³³ Although the intent of the super camp strategy was to prevent AOGs from overrunning Nigerian bases, a number of super camps in Borno state have been repeatedly attacked and penetrated by AOGs.³⁴

Despite these attacks, some civilians in Gwoza town attributed the improved security situation in recent years to the consolidation of military strength in and around the town under the super

camp strategy. In 2016 and 2017, there was limited civilian presence and more military personnel within Gwoza town. However, when more civilians started returning to Gwoza town, civilian casualties were recorded when the military engaged AOGs within the town. As a result, the military moved their presence to the outskirts of Gwoza town to repel attacks and reduce civilian casualties.³⁵ A female civilian stated: "They [military] engage them [AOGs] in the outskirts so it does not affect the civilians."³⁶ According to civilians interviewed, the military is vigilant, proactive, conducts patrols in and around the community, and responds promptly when they receive information regarding security threats, greatly improving the security situation in Gwoza town.³⁷ Two civilian participants suggested that this change occurred in 2019.³⁸ Other civilians interviewed relayed that the number of military personnel had increased in Gwoza town in 2021 in comparison to previous years and that troops are now placed strategically around the town.³⁹

Farming and Firewood Collection:

The majority of civilians in Gwoza fulfill their basic needs through farming, and in the course of the conflict, many civilians have been killed and abducted while engaging in farming and other livelihood activities that require them to travel outside of the town.⁴⁰ In response to civilian advocacy for improved security, the military started providing escorts to civilians to reduce the number of casualties on farms. At the onset, in 2016 and 2017, due to the level of insecurity, the military provided patrols only one kilometer beyond the trenches that surround the town perimeter – this limited the land accessible to civilians to engage in livelihood activities such as farming and firewood collection undertaken for sale and personal use. The military allowed civilians to have gardens within the community, but according to one civilian, people were only allowed to grow short crops (beans and groundnuts) that would not hinder visibility.⁴¹ In 2018, as the security situation gradually improved, the military began to provide patrols for farming and firewood collection two kilometers beyond the trenches. This occurred on days agreed upon by the military and based on the



May 2019, Gwoza, Nigeria: Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) truck adjacent to CIVIC-led training on protection of civilians in Gwoza.

military's assessment of the security situation.⁴²

Some respondents cited the ability of civilians to safely farm and collect firewood outside of the town as an indicator of the improved security situation in Gwoza.⁴³ In 2021, stakeholders reported the military patrols for farming and firewood activities now occur every day except for Fridays and Sundays, which are days of prayer for Muslims and Christians. Every morning, the military and community militias (the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and Hunters)⁴⁴ go ahead of civilians into the farming areas and scan the roads to ensure they are safe from IEDs and AOG attacks before civilians start farming or collecting firewood. Civilians are given tokens before they exit the community and return the tokens upon re-entry – this way the military can distinguish returning community members from any new entrants to the town. The military and community militias also stay with civilians during the farming period to deter attacks by AOGs.⁴⁵ The patrols by security forces during livelihood activities help civilians feel secure

and build mutual trust.⁴⁶ According to civilians, they can now go as far as 5-10km beyond the trenches in certain directions to farm with minimal risk.⁴⁷ At the time of writing, a number of interviewees said no fatalities were recorded on the farms or during firewood collection in 2021,⁴⁸ though one civilian stated that a male farmer was killed in May while clearing his farm.⁴⁹

As a result of the improved security situation, the military has gradually extended the timeframe for farming, and civilians can now remain outside the town from approximately 10 am to 3 pm.⁵⁰ A traditional leader who is also a CJTF member noted that, because of how significantly the security situation has improved, occasionally the community militias can go on firewood/farm patrols without the military present, something that was impossible in the past.⁵¹ Two civilians, however, expressed contrary views suggesting that this arrangement was due to the limited number of soldiers available for patrols rather than improvements in security.⁵² A female civilian

pointed out that despite the patrol by the military for livelihood activities, civilians are still aware that anything can happen on the farms, so they still fear harm while engaging in farming activities.⁵³

The patrols by security forces during livelihood activities help civilians feel secure and build mutual trust.

Regarding farming activities, civilians highlighted some remaining concerns. A few civilians complained about the timeframe the military allows for farming, suggesting that it was too short to walk to their farms, engage in farming activities, and then return to the community.⁵⁴ Access to farmland was identified to be particularly challenging for IDPs in Gwoza town, especially widows and female-headed households. Their original farms are often located further than the 5-10 kilometer radius where military patrols currently take place, and therefore cannot be safely accessed.⁵⁵ As a result, displaced persons expose themselves to risks when trying to access their farmland to support and feed their families.⁵⁶ Respondents cited examples from 2020 where women went out to their farms in the morning ahead of the military so they could have more time for farming activities and were subsequently attacked and killed by AOGs. Some women were chased back into Gwoza town by AOGs who also stole their seeds.⁵⁷

Road Travel:

As mentioned previously, respondents relayed that the military scans the roads every day before civilians are allowed to travel to ensure that it is safe and there are no IEDs. Civilians gather at the gate every morning and the roads are open around 9 or 10 am after the scan. The military also provides escorts in the direction of Maiduguri/Adamawa.⁵⁸ Civilians recall that in 2016/2017 they had to wait for the military to escort them from Gwoza town to nearby towns and LGAs, and a trip to Maiduguri or Adamawa could take a month because the military did not embark on long-

distance escorts with civilians. Rather, the military provided escorts only from village to village (e.g., Gwoza town to Pulka), and only on certain days of the week after a security assessment.⁵⁹ The military presence on the roads is said to be higher now and the security situation has improved. Some interviewees reported that they started to notice the change two years ago in 2018/2019.⁶⁰ Other respondents in Gwoza town reaffirmed this assessment, asserting that road travel is safer in 2021 than it was in previous years because of military presence at strategic points on the roads and checkpoints.⁶¹ The military is still largely consolidated in super camps, but over time they have expanded and readjusted their presence in the broader region to provide protection for civilians on the roads. Despite these positive gains, there are still reports of AOG attacks on the roads, including illegal checkpoints in which they loot food and abduct civilians.⁶²

Some civilians complained about the restriction of entry and exit into Gwoza town. They stated that the military sometimes blocks the roads to Adamawa and Maiduguri for days and or/weeks due to security threats (e.g., when AOGs are sighted in the area).⁶³ When this happens, it limits civilians' access to livelihood opportunities and directly increases the prices of food items in Gwoza town. Civilians claim that the military does not provide information on the cause and length of the restrictions when they occur, which leads to frustration.⁶⁴

Complaints related to the curfew around livelihood activities and road travel need to be viewed against the evolving security situation and changing AOG tactics outside Gwoza town and in Borno state. The super camp strategy makes civilians in Gwoza town feel safe, however, other parts of the LGA suffer from regular AOGs attacks. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) monitoring reports suggest the security situation in Borno state is still fragile, which restrains military efforts to support livelihood activities and road travel through patrols and escorts. CIVIC found that civilians in Gwoza town were optimistic about the security situation and

viewed the more positive security situation as a return to normalcy.⁶⁵ INGO officials operating in Gwoza shared the same view of an improved security situation when compared to previous years, but suggested the future was unpredictable with Shekau's death and the consolidation of ISWAP.⁶⁶

V. CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Interviewees noted that when the military recaptured Gwoza town in 2015, they were suspicious of civilians and suspected many Gwoza residents were AOG members or sympathizers. As a result, civilians indicated that they were more afraid of the military at the time, but that perceptions have shifted in more recent years.⁶⁷ Civilians were concerned that the military harassed, assaulted, and detained civilians – often suspecting that they were AOG members or sympathizers, despite having no proof. When civilians disobeyed military orders, they were punished and forced to sweep the battalion's building, detained in a cell, or beaten.⁶⁸ The administrative structures in Gwoza at the time were nonexistent, so the military assumed roles that were traditionally filled by police and traditional leaders, including managing internal conflict. As a result, the military often resorted to the use of force to settle disputes.⁶⁹ Collectively, these actions made it difficult for civilians to relate with the military and vice-versa.⁷⁰

A number of civilian respondents in Gwoza reported that relations between the military and civilians are better now, in 2021, than in the past.⁷¹ Civilians noted that the change began gradually in 2017 and has steadily improved since then, in part owing to civilians advocating for their own protection concerns.⁷² Some civilians interviewed by CIVIC said they feel free to talk to the military because they are aware of their rights, which is the direct result of INGO sensitization programs.⁷³ Initial improvements in civil-military relations have resulted from a shift in military attitudes toward civilians away from suspicion/abuses; military being more willing to listen to civilians and respond proactively to civilian warnings; civilians seeing the

military take action in response to reported abuses; the return of the police and Emir of Gwoza (in 2019) and their resumption of civilian administrative governance; and INGOs educating civilians on their rights and helping build relationships between both groups.⁷⁴ One civilian respondent noted that the military is more responsive to both reports of threats from AOGs and civilians reporting Nigerian soldiers who harm them.⁷⁵ A community militia member mentioned that the military command has asked civilians to report the names of soldiers who mistreat them and said that individuals responsible for the mistreatment would be penalized.⁷⁶

Apart from the military's efforts to better protect civilians in Gwoza,⁷⁷ some civilians gave examples of other types of positive military behavior and support to civilians that has helped improve civil-military relations. For example, one interviewee noted that the military shared their food with civilians in 2016 when there were few INGOs in Gwoza to provide humanitarian assistance, and another relayed that the military paid for the treatment of wounded civilians at local pharmacies.⁷⁸

In contrast to views that civil-military relationships have improved, some interviewees indicated that some men still view the military through the prism of past behaviors and hold grudges against them.⁷⁹ This indicates that additional trust-building is needed to address damage from past abuses. Moreover, despite the fact that many interviewees reported improved civil-military relations, two INGO officials observed that the military still does not trust civilians and considers many civilians to be AOG members or supporters who hide non-state actors in the community and IDP camps.⁸⁰

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse:

Despite other improvements in the military's behavior toward civilians in Gwoza town, stakeholders reported continued sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) of women and girls by military personnel.⁸¹ They accused soldiers of having inappropriate sexual relationships with women in the community, and sometimes getting



Tunde Ojei / CIVIC Photo

May 2019, Gwoza, Nigeria: Community Protection Group (CPG) self-protection planning session in Gwoza.

women pregnant and abandoning the women and children once the soldiers were transferred to another location.⁸² This behavior was attributed to the limited livelihood options for women as a result of the conflict, which has driven them to engage in survival sex, and even prompted some parents to push their children into prostitution.⁸³ The conflict has made it difficult for businesses to function and limited livelihood opportunities for civilians, which has caused economic hardship.⁸⁴ Civilians are forced to rely on inconsistent food distribution by INGOs or find alternate means of survival.⁸⁵ Female-headed households, child-headed households, the elderly, and disabled individuals are not as able to support themselves through farming – or do not have access to farms – and sometimes have difficulty accessing food distributions.⁸⁶ This economic insecurity makes female headed-households particularly vulnerable to SEA. A civilian emphasizing the scale of SEA in Gwoza told CIVIC that, “no place [in Borno state] has prostitution like Gwoza.”⁸⁷ Additionally, when soldiers leave their sentry posts and sleep in the

community while engaging in these relationships it can result in security gaps, making it easier for AOGs to enter the community. A number of community members recalled seeing soldiers in the town scrambling to locate their weapons when AOGs attacked because they were engaging in SEA during the attacks.⁸⁸

Some of the civilians interviewed suggest that, although it is still a prominent concern, the level of SEA in Gwoza town has reduced. They attributed this change to the efforts of the Emir and some INGOs to report the situation to the military brigade, leading the commanding officer to warn soldiers against having affairs and limit their presence in the community and IDP camps.⁸⁹ Despite the warning from the commanding officer, one interviewee indicated that there are still soldiers that engage in exploitative sexual relationships with women in the community.⁹⁰

VI. RETURN OF IDPS AND REINTEGRATION

In his 25-year recovery development plan that was released in 2020, the Borno state governor, Professor Babagana Umara Zulum, announced plans to close all IDP camps in Maiduguri and to return all IDPs from the capital to their former homes by the end of May 2021.⁹¹ The State Commissioner for Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Resettlement has since announced that the deadline has been extended to December 2021.⁹² Some displaced civilians from Gwoza living in Maiduguri told CIVIC they had heard rumors that the governor was asking people to return to Gwoza, but they had not been officially told about a relocation. There were mixed feelings regarding this push for returns. Some IDPs welcomed the opportunity to return to their former areas. Others, particularly those whose houses were destroyed, felt relocating would make them more vulnerable.⁹³ A male civilian living in Maiduguri asked, “why will you force us to return? If we return where are we going to live? To continue living under trees? Have they reconstructed our community before taking us to resettle?”⁹⁴ Some IDPs that had already returned to Gwoza told CIVIC that when they returned accommodation was scarce because host community members were attempting to reclaim their homes from IDPs occupying them. This situation was causing problems between homeowners and IDPs.⁹⁵ With civilians asked to return to Gwoza town, there is also an issue of overcrowding. The trenches around the perimeter of the town have not been expanded, so there is limited space for new civilian residences to accommodate this influx.⁹⁶

Civilians and INGO officials also raised concerns that returning IDPs will have few livelihood options and little support to restart their lives, which can result in secondary displacement in the long run.⁹⁷ Two civilians from areas outside of Gwoza town are reluctant to return because they feel the LGA is not safe: the local government center is habitable, but other remote villages are not.⁹⁸ With the super camp strategy, civilians in Gwoza town feel safer to return while those from outside Gwoza town

do not feel as safe. This highlights one of the major drawbacks of the super camp strategy that provides protection mainly for civilians in garrison towns. An interviewee from an LGA in Gwoza living in Maiduguri highlighted this further by saying, “although the military have tried to recover most of the towns in Gwoza, my town is still not safe, and we could not stay, so we had to return back to Maiduguri.”⁹⁹ If adequate preparations in the form of security provisions, accommodations, and livelihood options are not in place for civilians before returns are initiated, these individuals may suffer secondary displacement and be put in increasingly vulnerable situations. An INGO staff suggested that the Borno state government is trying to paint a picture of normalcy and stabilization in the state, when this portrayal does not match the reality.¹⁰⁰

“When [they] are telling people, ‘come and return’ and their houses are demolished, where will they go? Every space is occupied and there is a lack of villages opening up.”

– Male IDP living in Gwoza town

A separate, but equally important, issue is the reintegration of former AOG combatants. Respondents said that ex-combatants who surrender in Gwoza are screened by the CJTF, traditional leaders, and the military to ensure they are not carrying weapons and were once members of the community.¹⁰¹ Those released into the community stay in an IDP camp that houses ex-combatants and their families, with former combatants closely monitored by the rest of the community.¹⁰² An LGA official reported that in 2020, community members rejected a group of ex-combatants from Operation Safe Corridor (a government de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration center for repentant AOGs) and they had to be taken back to Maiduguri. In order to get the former combatants accepted into the community, the official had to go back and identify

village and ward heads, who then spoke to the community members to reassure them the ex-combatants had been de-radicalized and were ready for reintegration.¹⁰³

Civilians interviewed by CIVIC in Gwoza town had mixed feelings about reintegration of former combatants. Some suggest that they are living in peace with ex-combatants because their consent was sought before reintegration and the Emir and military have asked them to accept ex-combatants.¹⁰⁴ Others refuse to forgive them because of their alleged atrocities, the personal loss community members have experienced, and because some people still view them as AOG members and or informants/sympathizers who pass information to AOGs.¹⁰⁵ Civilians were reported as having better attitudes toward demobilized women and children because it is assumed that women and children were in support roles while the men are viewed as primary perpetrators of abuses and therefore more likely to be rejected from the community.¹⁰⁶ However, INGO staff and one civilian reported that there is a stigma attached to all former combatants, including the children.¹⁰⁷ According to one interviewee, there are reports of demobilized fighters feeling entitled to aid and manipulating and threatening INGOs saying, “it’s our right and if you don’t give us, we can go back to the bush.”¹⁰⁸ Two interviewees indicated that there are suspicions that INGOs are prioritizing support to former combatants, which has resulted in further civilian resentment of the ex-combatants.¹⁰⁹

VII. CONCLUSION

This protection snapshot reveals that Gwoza town enjoys a relatively improved security situation when compared to several years ago, though one still characterized by continued SEA. However, civilians outside of Gwoza town continue to suffer protection threats, in part as a result of the military’s consolidated presence in the town. The protection activities carried out by the military around and near Gwoza town provide an extra layer of protection for civilians as they engage in livelihood activities, but there are still many

areas of the LGA where civilians do not feel safe to return, suggesting that the current super camp strategy isn’t sufficiently encompassing. Additional analysis will be needed to assess the longer-term impact of former JASDJ-leader Shekau’s death, the expansion of ISWAP around the Sambisa Forest, mass surrendering of combatants, and the current military strategy.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this brief was conducted in July 2021 in Gwoza town (the administrative headquarters of Gwoza LGA) and Maiduguri (the capital of Borno state). CIVIC interviewed 29 people (10 women and 19 men), and the group was comprised of 20 civilians, 5 INGO staff, 2 community militia members, and 2 traditional leaders. Some of the respondents were members of CIVIC’s Community Protection Committee (CPC).¹¹⁰ Participants were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. CIVIC aimed to interview an equal number of men and women, but given the small sample size and the over-representation of men in some of the categories of individuals, this proved challenging. Names of interviewees and identifiable characteristics are withheld for their protection.

Due to the unpredictable security situation and barriers to access, CIVIC was only able to conduct interviews with respondents living within Gwoza town and Maiduguri (displaced Gwoza indigenes). As a result, the information provided in this brief is limited to Gwoza town (unless stated otherwise). CIVIC conducted interviews with INGOs to provide context on the security situation beyond Gwoza town and in Borno state. CIVIC was also unable to interview military personnel for perspectives on Gwoza because they were unavailable at the time of data collection due to security operations. As a result, the brief provides a civilian perspective on AOG tactics, military operations, and protection activities in Gwoza town.

1. When the military recaptured Gwoza town in 2015, it was made a garrison town. An interview with a traditional leader suggests that the military built trenches around the perimeter of Gwoza town and asked civilians living beyond the trenches and in nearby communities to move into Gwoza town for their protection. Civilians lived within the trenches and entry/exit beyond the trenches was restricted by the military. CIVIC interview with traditional leader #1, July 2021.
2. OCHA, "Fact Sheet: Gwoza Local Government Area, Borno State, North-east Nigeria," (May 2020). https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/ocha_nga_gwoza_factsheet_01052020.pdf
3. Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province" (May 2019).
4. The Guardian, "Inside Nigeria's Sambisa Forest, the Boko Haram hideout where kidnapped school girls are believed to be held," (April 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/29/nigeria-sambisa-forest-boko-haram-hideout-kidnapped-school-girls-believed-to-be-held>; Jacob Zenn, "Confronting Jihadist Factions in Nigeria: An Antidote to Defeatism," (July 2019); OCHA, "Fact Sheet: Gwoza Local Government Area, Borno State, North-east Nigeria," (May 2020).
5. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #2, #16, Traditional leader #1, and INGO #8, July 2021.
6. CIVIC interview with civilian #4 and #7, July 2021.
7. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, July 2021.
8. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, July 2021.
9. CIVIC interview with civilian #3, #4, #6, #7, #10, #12, #18, traditional leader #1 and #2, community militia #1, and INGO, #7 and #9, July 2021.
10. CIVIC interview with civilian #18, July 2021.
11. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #6, #7, #10, #12, #18, traditional leader #2, and INGO #9, July 2021.
12. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, July 2021.
13. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #18, and INGO #7, July 2021.
14. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, #9, #11, #15, #16, #19, July 2021.
15. CIVIC interview with civilian #12, July 2021.
16. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #6, #7, #11, #12, #13, #15, #19, community militia #2, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
17. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, #18, and #20, July 2021.
18. CIVIC interview with civilian #20, INGO #3, and community militia #2, July 2021.
19. Kurtzer Jacob, Devermont Judd, Moss Kelly. "Boko Haram's Leader is Dead: What are the Humanitarian and Security Implications? Center for Strategic and International Studies," (June 2021).
20. Ahmad Salkida, "What Shekau's death means for security in Nigeria, Lake Chad" (May 2021.); CIVIC interview with INGO #7, July 2021; For more information see Crisis Group. 'Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province (May 2019). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>
21. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #8, #9, #14, #18, community militia #1, INGO #3, #7, traditional leader #1 and #2, July 2021.
22. CIVIC interview with traditional leader #1, July 2021.
23. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #8, #9, #14, #18, community militia #1, INGO #3, #7, traditional leader #1 and #2, July 2021.
24. CIVIC interview with INGO #7, July 2021.
25. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #9, #19, #16, community militia #1, and INGO #3, July 2021.
26. CIVIC interview with community militia #1, July 2021.
27. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #9, #16, #19, community militia #1, and INGO #3, July 2021.
28. The Guardian, "Nigerian Jihadist surrenders spark debate over war strategy" (August 27 2021). <https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria-jihadist-surrenders-spark-debate-over-war-strategy/>
29. CIVIC interview with INGO #7, #9, community militia #1, #2, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.

30. Stella Wolf. June 2020. "Nigeria's Super-Camps Strategy: early gains, disappointing outcomes" <https://securitypraxis.eu/nigeria-super-camps/>; Omilana Timileyin. Super camps make Nigeria Army 'less nimble' against terrorists – Report" (October 2019). <https://guardian.ng/news/super-camps-make-nigerian-army-less-nimble-against-terrorists-report/>
31. It should be pointed out here, as mentioned earlier, that this was the practice in Gwoza before the creation of super camps. However, this caused more displacement of civilians from areas with existing FOBs into Gwoza town; CIVIC interview with INGO #8, and community militia #1, July 2021.
32. CIVIC interview with community militia #1, July 2021.
33. Stella Wolf. June 2020. "Nigeria's Super-Camps Strategy: early gains, disappointing outcomes" <https://securitypraxis.eu/nigeria-super-camps/> ; CIVIC interview with INGO #1 and INGO #7, July 2021.
34. Alarabiya News, "Extremists overrun Nigerian army base as residents flee" (February 21, 2021) <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/02/21/Extremists-overrun-Nigerian-army-base-as-residents-flee>
35. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #6, #7, #10, #15, #16, INGO #3, traditional leader #1, and community militia #2, July 2021.
36. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, July 2021.
37. CIVIC interview with civilian #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #10, #11, #12 #14, #17, #18, INGO #3, #9, community militia #1, July 2021.
38. CIVIC interview with civilian #7 and traditional leader #1, July 2021.
39. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #6, #10, #11, #12, #14, #15 #19, and INGO #8, July 2021.
40. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #6, #7 #10, #12, #18, traditional leader #2, and INGO #9, July 2021.
41. CIVIC interview with civilian #11, July 2021.
42. CIVIC interview with civilian #3, # 5, #11, and community militia #1, July 2021.
43. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #15 and #18, July 2021.
44. The main community militia groups in Gwoza town are the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and the Hunters who work with the military to protect the community and carry out protection activities together.
45. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #5, #6, #8, #13, #15, #18, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
46. CIVIC interview with civilian #2, #5, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
47. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #5, #7, #8, #9, #11, #14, #15, community militia# 2, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
48. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #8, #9, #13, #15, #19, INGO #9, and traditional leader #1, July 2021.
49. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, July 2021.
50. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #6, #8, #19, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
51. CIVIC interview with traditional leader #1, July 2021.
52. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, and #10, July 2021.
53. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, July 2021.
54. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #9, #11, and #19, July 2021.
55. CIVIC interview with civilian #12, July 2021.
56. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #6, #10, #12, #18, and traditional leader #1, July 2021.
57. CIVIC interview with civilian #9, #11, #13 and #19, July 2021.
58. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #19, INGO #8, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
59. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #8, and #11, July 2021.
60. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, #11, #13, #18, community militia #1, INGO #9, and traditional leader #1, July 2021.
61. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, #7, #9, #14, #16, #19, community militia #1, INGO #8, traditional leader #2, July 2021.
62. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #6, #8, #10, #12, #14, #15, community militia #1, and INGO #3, July 2021.

63. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #5, #14, #18, INGO #7, July 2021.
64. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #18, INGO #3, and #8, July 2021.
65. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, #14, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
66. CIVIC interview with INGO #1 and #9, July 2021.
67. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, #8, #9, #10, #14, community militia #1, traditional leader #1, and INGO #8, July 2021.
68. CIVIC interview with civilian #2, #3, #6, #8, #9, #16, #17, #19, #20, July 2021.
69. CIVIC interview with civilian #3 and community militia #1, July 2021.
70. CIVIC interview with civilian #2 and #6, July 2021.
71. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #11, #12, #14, #16, #17, #18, #19, #20, community militia #1 and #2, July 2021.
72. CIVIC interview with civilian #6, #16, and #19, July 2021.
73. CIVIC interview with civilian #9, #10, and #19, July 2021.
74. CIVIC interview with civilian #3, #4, #5, #7, #8, #11, #15, #17, #19, traditional leader #1, and community militia #1, July 2021; CIVIC was cited as one of such INGOs.
75. CIVIC interview with civilian #8, July 2021.
76. CIVIC interview with community militia #1, July 2021.
77. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #5, #7, #14, #20, July 2021.
78. CIVIC interview with civilian #8, #12, July 2021.
79. CIVIC interview with civilian #18, #20, and INGO #3, July 2021.
80. CIVIC interview with INGO #1 and #3, July 2021.
81. Civilians in Gwoza defined sex as prostitution and consensual or forced affairs between civilians and the military; CIVIC interview with civilian #10, INGO #9, and traditional leader #1, July 2021.
82. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #3, #5, #7, #8, #9, #11, #12, #16, #19, #20, traditional leader #1, July 2021.
83. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #2, #3, #5, #7, #13, #17, #18, #20, INGO #8, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
84. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #3, and #14, July 2021.
85. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #7, and #15, July 2021.
86. CIVIC interview with civilian #18, community militia #2, and INGO #8, July 2021.
87. CIVIC interview with civilian #20, July 2021.
88. CIVIC interview with civilian #5, #6, #10, #15, #18, #19, July 2021.
89. CIVIC interview with civilian #7, #9, #11, #15, #17, #18, #20, INGO #9, traditional leader #1, July 2021.
90. CIVIC interview with traditional leader #2, July 2021.
91. The Guardian, "Zulum to close Borno IDP camps by May 2021" (November 2020). <https://guardian.ng/news/zulum-to-close-borno-idp-camps-by-may-2021/>; Nextier SPD, "The Pros and Cons of Resettlement" (June 2020). <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/pros-and-cons-resettlement>
92. Daily Post, "Boko Haram: Borno plans to resettle all IDPs back home by December" (July 2021) <https://dailypost.ng/2021/07/30/boko-haram-borno-plans-to-resettle-all-idps-back-home-by-december/>
93. CIVIC interview with civilian #1, #2, and #3, July 2021.
94. CIVIC interview with civilian #3, July 2021.
95. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #5, #8, #18, and INGO #9, July 2021.
96. CIVIC interview with civilian #4, #8, #11, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
97. CIVIC interview with civilian #1 and INGO #1, July 2021.
98. CIVIC interview with civilian #3 and #8, July 2021.
99. CIVIC interview with civilian #3, July 2021.

100. CIVIC interview with INGO #1, July 2021.
101. CIVIC interview with community militia #1, #2, traditional leader #2, and INGO #9, July 2021.
102. CIVIC interview with civilian #8, INGO #3, and #8, July 2021.
103. CIVIC interview with civilian #20, July 2021.
104. CIVIC interview with civilian #8, #12, #15, #17, community militia #2, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
105. CIVIC interview with civilian #9, #15, #16, #17, #19, INGO #1, #3, and #9, July 2021.
106. CIVIC interview with INGO #1, #9, and traditional leader #2, July 2021.
107. CIVIC interview with civilian #10, INGO #1 and #9, July 2021.
108. CIVIC interview with INGO #3, July 2021.
109. CIVIC interview with civilian #8 and INGO #3, July 2021.
110. In CIVIC's operational areas in Nigeria, Community Protection Committees include 50 members each (25 women and 25 men). These groups are aimed at helping civilians understand their rights, identify threats and actions to advance self-protection in communities and are a platform to build civil-military relations.

Cover Image:

*Gwoza town adjacent to
surrounding mountains, May 2019.*

William Meeker/CIVIC Photo



Bulus Mungopark / CIVIC Photo

May 2019, Gwoza, Nigeria: Community militia members in Gwoza.

RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

T +1 202 558 6958

E comms@civiliansinconflict.org

civiliansinconflict.org