

**THE REPORT OF THE ROUNDTABLE SESSION ON "STRATEGIC PEACE-BUILDING IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: ASSESSMENT OF DDR PROGRAMME" ORGANISED BY THE GUSAU INSTITUTE (GI) AND TUKUR BURATAI INSTITUTE FOR WAR AND PEACE (TBIWP), NIGERIAN ARMY UNIVERSITY BIU (NAUB), AT NIGERIAN ARMY RESOURCE CENTRE (NARC), ABUJA ON DECEMBER 7, 2022**

**1. Background**

- 1.1 The Gusau Institute (GI) was founded by Lt Gen Aliyu Gusau Mohammed (rtd), former Nigerian National Security Adviser (NSA) and Honourable Minister of Defence (HMOD), with the view of contributing qualitative inputs to security management and good governance in Nigeria, Africa, and the global community.
- 1.2 The Tukur Buratai Institute for War and Peace (TBIWP), Nigerian Army University Biu (NAUB), conducts dedicated research into all aspects of terrorism, including ways of combating the challenges presented by extremism, and shares its findings with the Nigerian Army (NA) and other security agencies.
- 1.3 The GI and NAUB signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in March 2022, signalling both institutions' readiness to collaborate on issues of mutual interest. The roundtable discussion assessing the effectiveness of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programme in Northern Nigeria, specifically the North East, was the first event to be co-hosted in accordance with the MoU.
- 1.4 The aim of the roundtable was to provide a neutral platform and networking opportunity for crucial stakeholders to exchange ideas on what is needed for future strategic peace-building efforts in view of lessons learned from past experiences. The focus was on devising road maps for effective and sustained collaboration to achieve lasting peace. The Chatham House Rule applied, allowing for frank and open dialogue.

**2. Rationale for Hosting the Session on "Strategic Peace-building in Northern Nigeria: Assessment of DDR Programme"**

- 2.1 The Nigerian government has been battling the Boko Haram (BH) insurgency since 2009, and it became clearer every day that the sect cannot be defeated by military means alone. This conclusion led to the creation of Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) in 2016 which provides fighters with a voluntary exit route from BH. Although the initiative has had some major successes to date, it still faces problems that need to be addressed. If not, resistance against the programme from both politicians, and ordinary citizens who have suffered at the hands of BH, will grow. Potential defectors will also refrain from joining OSC. Moreover, international donors' confidence will become eroded, putting sufficient funding for a successful programme in jeopardy.

- 2.2 Some of the more pertinent problems that need to be addressed include inter alia the following:
- Lack of awareness campaigns to convince citizens of the merits of OSC.
  - Lack of incentives to communities to accept former BH fighters into their fold, including a measure of justice to victims of BH atrocities.
  - Public hostility and opposition from some prominent politicians.
  - Inadequate intake procedures to filter out civilians who do not belong in the programme.
  - Inadequate detention facilities and safeguards.
  - Lack of pre-emptive measures to prevent radicalization and recidivism.
  - Scant monitoring of rehabilitated BH members.
- 2.3 Having said this, OSC remains among the most mature and large-scale disengagement programmes targeting low-level BH fighters that currently exist. In addition, the Department of State Services (DSS), in conjunction with the Nigerian Army (NA), runs the Sulhu programme aimed at senior jihadist commanders. The idea is that these men can be convinced to surrender and then used to appeal to fellow senior commanders who are still active to defect too. Both OSC and Sulhu should be taken under the loop to determine what the root causes of main problems hindering a positive outcome – and their solutions – are. Concerted efforts and collaboration among all stakeholders are needed in peace-building efforts.

### **3. Participation**

- 3.1 The roundtable was attended by 20 (twenty) experts and decision-makers representing both the public and the private sectors. Participating in the discussions were representatives from the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), Borno State Government, the Nigerian Army, civil society, and academics. A few participants joined the discussion online on the Zoom platform.

### **4. Methodology**

- 4.1 The roundtable was a three and a half hour meeting that consisted of frank and open dialogue with the Chatham House Rule fully observed. The event formally commenced with introductory remarks by the moderator and chair of the event. After his introductory remarks, two former BH commanders shared their perspectives, followed by an insightful overview of the programme by the former Coordinator of OSC. An interactive session followed during which participants made their contributions on the issues presented. The proceedings were conducted in English, apart from the inputs by the ex-BH members who spoke in Hausa.

## 5. Overview

- 5.1 In his opening remarks, the moderator welcomed all to the forum. He proceeded to sketch the context and outline the details of OSC and Sulhu. The rationale for the roundtable and its expected outcomes were explained. The most important questions to answer are what has worked so far, and why; and what did not work, and why. Once the challenges have been identified, the action steps to address them can be decided upon. Moreover, OSC should not be looked at in isolation, but should form part of a broader national security strategy. This will be discussed in more detail during an open conference in 2023, to which this roundtable is a precursor. The chair concluded his remarks by inviting a security adviser closely involved in OSC to give his perspective, and to introduce the two former BH commanders.
- 5.2 The security adviser, a retired brigadier general, gave an overview of the non-kinetic ('soft' force) approach introduced on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2021 in BornoState to address the BH insurgency. According to him, the programme which started with 33 ex-BH members and their families, has grown to date to involve more than 82,000 people, including BH/ Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) fighters, farmers, and their families.
- 5.2.1 The 'Borno Model' focuses on dialogue to persuade the BH fighters to surrender and embrace peace. This involves the triple 'D' and the triple 'R' steps. The first step is **d**isarmament where ex-fighters surrender their arms to any one of the eight military-controlled areas designated for this purpose. They then move to the Hajj Camp in Maiduguri where the **d**emobilization process takes place. Ex-fighters start calling their former comrades to convince them to surrender too as part of the **d**eradicalization process.
- 5.2.2 The triple 'R's kick off with **r**ehabilitation which is organized with the help of the Ministry of Women Affairs. This is followed by **r**econciliation and **r**eintegration. So far, 3,500 minor and low-risk fighters have been reintegrated into society. Presently, the situation reflects that 90% of the intransigent BH fighters have died because of military action or in-fighting. Most of the remaining BH fighters are conscripted members which makes it easier to reach them. They surrender voluntarily.
- 5.2.3 Regarding the reintegration of the mentioned 3,500 ex-fighters, the community had been involved from the onset of the process. Some of the fighters were kidnapped when they were five years old (mostly almajiri boys), and they had spent 12 to 13 years in the bush. For e.g., when Bama was attacked in 2014, almost all the town's people were taken to the bush. Some people were farmers and not fighters, and that distinction must be made when dealing with them now.
- 5.2.4 When they surrender, the Department of State Services (DSS) capture everybody's biometrics. The fighters identify their comrades, and they all remain in custody to be rehabilitated. The farmers are however reintroduced to their communities. For e.g., in Bama the bulama (community head)

vouches for the farmer. Where there is doubt about his identity, a picture is taken and circulated in the community to verify his identity. The farmers also take an oath on the holy Qur'an (which is an important aspect of the culture in the North if you want to ensure truthfulness) that they will embrace peace. After having taken the oath, the farmer is collected by the community.

5.2.5 Of the 82,000 people reportedly in the programme, about 70% are women, children, and farmers. The remaining fighters fall into three categories: minor, low-risk, and die-hard fighters. All the fighters remain a further 6 to 8 months in the programme before being reintroduced into society. The community is again involved in the process. The State Security Service (SSS) screen the minor and low-risk fighters. The bulamas then interview them individually and they recommend who can be reintroduced into society. By the time they have been reintroduced into society, these ex-fighters have been trained to participate in civilian life. The security agencies lecture them, and the state government provide starter packs for them which include food items and money. The community receive them from the training camp.

5.2.6 To date, no problems regarding the 3,500 people already reintegrated have been reported. Another 1,000 people will follow soon. Meanwhile, ex-fighters in the programme keep on calling their ex-colleagues, urging them to surrender too. Their phone numbers and calls are monitored by the SSS. Currently, people can farm again, even as far as 3 to 4 km into the bush. The efforts and dedication of the Borno State Governor to have achieved this must be applauded.

5.3 Two ex-BH commanders shared their experiences with the audience, and it is summarized as follows:

- The Borno State Governor has always led from the front by taking the brave initiative of reaching out to the terrorists.
- He personally cultivated them and consistently gave them sufficient assurances that they had nothing to fear from him or his government as he is genuinely committed to their seamless integration into the mainstream of society.
- He and his government committed sufficient resources to cater for their culinary, health and vocational needs as well as that of their families.
- They, the commanders, therefore felt sufficiently motivated to reach out to many of the remaining terrorists to abandon their stations and return to mainstream society to resume their normal lives.
- Currently they are able to get about 3,000 terrorists to return from the bush every day. (*Note: This is an extremely high figure that needs to be verified.*)
- Because of the deluge of returnees, the camps are filled to the brim already and capacity constraints are becoming glaring.
- They paid glowing tribute to the Borno State Governor's Adviser on Security Affairs who has become a fantastic role model as he has become part of their community and dines and prays with them and socializes extensively.

- 5.4 The former Coordinator of OSC then proceeded to provide insight into the workings of the programme before the floor was opened for discussions. He defined OSC as “a multi-agency humanitarian scheme established by the Federal Government of Nigeria to deradicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate surrendered repentant BH/ISWAP fighters with the overall intention to cause defection of the critical-mass (low-profile members) of the sect’s fighting force.”
- 5.4.1 The OSC programme is targeted at specifically low-profile BH members. A few BH commanders were however also arrested and convicted in the past, and they were either sentenced or discharged by courts of competent jurisdiction. Still, these people are actually high-profile BH fighters, so they should not have been released into society without proper documentation. He therefore stated that the scope of OSC should be expanded to include taking care of those ex-fighters convicted or released by courts of competent jurisdiction too.
- 5.4.2 Most of the fighters that are surrendering come with their families and you need to cater for them as well. The facility in Gombe is not equipped to do so. This is very important since the fighters will not surrender if their families cannot come with them. OSC therefore requested that the Borno State Government avails some rehabilitation centres where the families of the surrendered BH fighters could be taken care of.
- 5.4.3 There are also minors among the surrendered BH fighters who should not be treated together with the other fighters. Therefore, they approached the Borno State Government to also provide space in Bulunkutu where the minors are handled by the Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth. At the end of the DRR programme, these minors’ biological parents are traced and those whose biological parents cannot be found, are released into the care of guardians.
- 5.4.4 Regarding the deradicalization process, the priority is the initial documentation, not minding the fact that ex-fighters have gone through a disarmament process already. They at OSC go through their comprehensive profiles which enable them to separate the fighters and categorize them. At this stage they also collect their DNA samples.
- 5.4.5 The Nigerian Correction Service experts are also engaging the ex-fighters for the deradicalization process. Furthermore, the chief imams and other religious leaders engage the ex-fighters in order to counter the fake narration and religious ideology of BH. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) provides services to assist with breaking their habit of drug abuse. Therapists provide counselling services and with the help of some comedians and theatre entertainment they share and relive their experiences while in the bush.

- 5.4.6 More than 85% of them have not had any exposure to either Islamic or Western education, and they are mostly completely illiterate without any form of education. So, they are quickly introduced to Western education in the programme. OSC works with the Nigerian Army Education Corps to design the programme, and they also work with the Borno State Ministry of Education and the Gombe State Adult Education Board to design the curriculum. Certificates of upper education are designed so that at the end of the programme, those who want to further their education, can use the certificate for continuation of their education. It also serves as a basis for deradicalization.
- 5.4.7 A vocational training centre was set up in conjunction with implementation partners. It was established in Gombe where an ex-combatant can choose whichever vocation he is interested in. They can learn trades like barbing, carpentry, laundry services, leather tailoring and others. However, in addition to the vocational trade, they must go through one aspect of agriculture training, whether it is crop farming, poultry, fisheries etc., because the communities where they are going back to at the end of the DRR programme are all agricultural communities. Also, after the first batch of the DRR programme, during every programme that follows, all the work in the camp, including construction work, is done together with the ex-combatants to enable them to learn more skills and to engage them properly.
- 5.4.8 Reintegration is the key aspect of the programme, and it is done mostly in collaboration with various state governments in the North East. It was generally accepted that OSC would be solely responsible for the reintegration process, but it is impossible and very difficult due to the nature and peculiarity of each state affected by the insurgency. OSC therefore works with each state government to handle the reintegration process, because the dynamics of each state are different. For e.g., in states like Borno, Gombe, Yobe, and Adamawa the nature of the crisis differs. Each state government therefore designs its own reintegration process, while the OSC provides the necessary support and training. The states set up programme committees where every key stakeholder is a member. The state governors personally appoint those who they want to head the committees.
- 5.4.9 OSC also traces ex-fighters' families with the assistance of implementation partners and encourage them to visit the repentant BH fighters in the camp. When they visit, they come along with their community leaders who assist in the confirmation of the real origin of each ex-fighter, confirming that this person is from community A or B, and attesting to that this is the true parent of each fighter. The parent must also confirm that they are willing to take their children back to their various communities or not. Some parents are sceptic as they do not believe that their children are still alive.
- 5.4.10 OSC brings together prominent personalities from the North East to have direct interaction with the ex-fighters. This initiative also creates more room for genuine dialogue and reconciliation. These important personalities go back

to their various communities and inform their people of what they had seen in the camps, and they relay their experiences with the ex-fighters based on the interactions they had with them. They also inform their various communities that these repentant BH boys are genuinely ready to embrace peace, and they urge the community members to accept them back.

5.4.11 OSC also embarked on a sensitization visit to all the states affected by BH, excluding Taraba State. During the visits, the state governors personally received the delegations and held meetings with them.

5.4.12 In each of the communities where the ex-BH fighters are going to be reintegrated, the OSC identifies what the critical needs of those communities are so that the former BH members can contribute. OSC works with the North East Development Commission (NEDC), using its channels and resources and with the limited resources from the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) office and other implementation partners, provide some water boreholes, free medical outreach services, renovation of schools, etc.

5.4.13 In the communities that are not far from the OSC camps, the ex-fighters are mandated to be involved in community service using their learned skills. The community now see an ex-fighter working to repair what they have destroyed before, and this helps the community to believe that these ex-BH fighters have repented. It also provides an opportunity for the ex-fighters to offer services to the community and fix what they have destroyed in the past.

5.4.14 During meetings with traditional rulers and other community leaders, the Shehu of Borno and Lamido of Adamawa requested that these ex-fighters take an oath with the holy Qur'an, swearing that they are going to accept peace and not go back to BH before they can be fully integrated into their various communities. The OSC in conjunction with implementation partners, work to implement the suggestions of the traditional and other community leaders. In doing that, they collaborate with the judiciary to set up a committee headed by the chief judge of the federal high court and representative of the traditional rulers and religious leaders from all the states affected by BH.

5.4.15 Each and every person in the camp has to go through this process of taking an oath with holy Qur'an. He has to recant his past experience with BH and must also renounce all his former allegiances and take an oath of allegiance to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. If an ex-fighter does not go through this process, he will not be handed back to his state government for reintegration.

5.4.16 The state also sets up a committee involving the chiefs and the locals and encourage them to have a transitional centre where they will receive the ex-fighters when they leave the OSC camp and make further arrangements for their reintegration. There have also been a few foreigners from Chad, Cameroon, and other countries that were sent back to their countries of origin. The models that are currently in place in Chad and Cameroon were

derived from the OSC. The people in those countries came to Nigeria to look at what OSC has been doing, and they replicated similar programmes in their countries.

5.4.17 The speaker concluded his input by stressing that the OSC DRR Programme is a multi-agency humanitarian scheme which pioneered a whole-of-government non-kinetic approach to resolving the conflict in the North East. The programme evolved into a counterinsurgency tool by providing viable alternatives and encouraging low profile fighters, and later mid-level commanders, to lay down their arms and embrace peace. OSC can be strengthened to engineer the end of the lingering conflict in the North East while it is replicated to suite the peculiarities of other conflict zones in the country.

5.4.18 The following background notes have also been made available:

- **Justification for OSC:**
  - a. The need to introduce a soft-approach (non-kinetic) to compliment the kinetic efforts of the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) and sister agencies to defeat BH/ISWAP.
  - b. The need to create an all-inclusive (Whole-of-Government) platform to manage certain consequences of the insurgency in the North East.
  - c. The DRR Programme is in line with international best practices and tandem with the provisions of the National Counter Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) and Lake Chad Basin Regional Stabilization Strategy (LCBRSS).
  - d. The need to effectively counter the ideologies of BH/ISWAP by providing viable alternatives to the insurgents, especially the low-profile members who are themselves victims of circumstances and who are the bulk of BH/ISWAP fighting force.
  - e. The need to quickly bring the over a decade long insurgency and its consequential effects on the social, economic, and political developments of Nigeria to a logical conclusion in the best interest of the country.
- **Objective of OSC:** The objective is to influence the attitude, behaviour, and conviction of the BH/ISWAP insurgents and encourage willing and repentant fighters to lay down their arms and embrace peace. OSC also facilitates easy passage and access to surrendering insurgents to security forces for subsequent DRR Process.
- **Nature of OSC:** It is a joint and multi-agency humanitarian scheme involving 17 Services, Ministries, Departments and Agencies (SMDAs), UN agencies and NGOs (international and local). The activities of OSC are guided by strict adherence to extant provisions of International Humanitarian and Human Right Laws as well as relevant local laws and LCBRSS. The SMDAs are as follows: ONSA, AFN/DIA, NPF, DSS, NCoS,



NIS, NSCDC, NOA, FMHADMSD, FMWA, FMoJ, NDLEA, NDE, NEDC, NEMA, NIMC, Borno State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (BSMWASD), local Staff. UN agencies participating include IOM and UNICEF, and CDD is a local NGO involved with the implementation of the programme.

- **De-radicalization and Rehabilitation Processes:**
  - a. Initial Documentation and Advance Profiling. The following are carried out during the initial documentation and advance profiling stage of the De-rad and Rehab process:
    - (1) Comprehensive medical screening.
    - (2) Capturing of biometrics on national data using NIMC facilities.
    - (3) DNA sampling.
    - (4) Risk assessment and categorizing (advance profiling).
    - (5) Capturing images and background information in photo book.
  - b. De-radicalization Therapies. The following are the de-rad therapies the clients are exposed to during the 24 weeks DRR Programme:
    - (1) Psycho-social and psychological therapies.
    - (2) Psycho-spiritual counselling.
    - (3) Art therapies.
    - (4) Recreational activities.
    - (5) Drug-use intervention.
    - (6) Introduction to Western education.
    - (7) Counter-narrative package by a consortium of clerics.
  - c. Vocational Training. The following is a list of the vocational training programmes the clients undergo during the Rehab Stage of the DRR Programme:
    - (1) Barbering.
    - (2) Carpentry.
    - (3) Laundry services.
    - (4) Leather work/shoe making.
    - (5) Tailoring.
    - (6) Weaving.
    - (7) Compulsory farming as complementary.
    - (8) Radio/ phone repairs, food processing, bricks making, etc.
- **Reintegration Process:** Reintegration is the most delicate aspect of the DRR Programme and it is conducted in accordance with the dynamics in each state. The reintegration process entails the following activities:
  - a. Stakeholders' forum meeting.
  - b. Family visitation.
  - c. Prominent personalities visitation.
  - d. Sensitization and engagement visit to the State.

- e. Community service programme.
- f. Administration of oath of allegiance/commitment.
- g. Release/transfer of Rehab clients to their state and national governments.
- h. Follow-up programme to assess the performance of the integrated former combatants.
- **Strategic Communication:** Ideally, a government agency was supposed to handle publicity or strategic communication for OSC. However, that was not forthcoming, and it became obvious that there was a communication gap. OSC designed a Strategic Communication (STRATCOM) Strategy to showcase its activities and convey favourable narratives on the successes and benefits of the DRR Programme to the overall counterinsurgency efforts in the North East. Some of OSC STRATCOM activities are:
  - a. Engaging local and international print and electronic media to cover all its activities.
  - b. Conducting sensitization programmes through campaign products such as radio jingles, TV advertisements and dropping leaflets.
  - c. Holding regular press briefings.
  - d. In conjunction with the implementation partners, hold strategic retreats to enlighten relevant stakeholders on the activities, successes, and benefits of the DRR Programme.
  - e. In conjunction with implementation partners and NEDC, embark on sensitization visits to communities in the North East.
  - f. Based on DHQ approval, allow visits by relevant local and international organizations as well as individuals to the DRR Camp.
  - g. Publication of Quarterly Newsletters, "The Client" to showcase activities and achievements of OSC.
- **Challenges:**
  - a. Lack of confidence and trust in the programme by key functionaries of the government.
  - b. Negative public perception on the credibility of the programme.
  - c. Deliberate attempts to smear the programme for personal and political gain.
  - d. Initial reluctance by state governments to evacuate their indigenes after having completed the programme.
- **Achievements of OSC:**
  - a. Successfully de-radicalize, rehabilitate, and transferred for reintegration 1,000 former combatants, including 16 foreigners from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

- b. Focal point for DRR Programme in the LCBC Region.
- c. Got the buy-in of five North East Governors and other critical stakeholders in the region to believe in and support the DRR Programme.

## **6. Discussions**

- 6.1 In addition to the above inputs, participants shared their views on a range of issues. A retired senior military officer voiced his concern that OSC is being treated as a top-secret national operation, led by the military, and headed by a general, with very little communication to the public. He argued that in his view the programme should be overseen by the Nigerian Correctional Service in collaboration with civilian agencies. Moreover, all states should be informed about the programme, not only conflict states. To support this view, he said that opposition against OSC currently comes from a geographical region other than Northern Nigeria. Doubt is cast regarding the motive for the programme as it is being alleged that 'the current Government is soft on BH as it is their own people.' It is clear that strategic communication to set the record straight is lacking, specifically with communities outside the major conflict areas.
- 6.2 Supporting this view, an academic also lamented the lack of proper communication between the system and the nation. Apart from some pictures and scant information in newspapers from time to time, there is no comprehensive feedback about the workings and the successes of OSC outside of the conflict areas.
- 6.3 An expert journalist on African affairs in turn questioned why the focus and emphasis remain on BH while ISWAP poses a much bigger threat as they are part of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which continues to present a threat, not only to Nigeria, but the whole African continent. Still, Government is not discussing this as vigorously as they are discussing BH.
- 6.4 Countering some of the above criticisms, the executive director of an NGO praised the achievements of OSC. It was emphasized that the DRR programme is only one programme focusing on low-risk insurgents, and that as such it is very successful. Also, the lack of in-depth mass communication regarding the programme is attributed to the way that the Nigerian media reports on events. However, challenges remain. The biggest problem is that there is no national programme that covers all defectors. State governments are left to cope with thousands of defectors and their families without any support. Moreover, senior BH commanders are sometimes released into society as there is not sufficient evidence against them that will hold up in a court of law. They are released into communities without any means of tracking them. As for ISWAP, they currently have a foothold in the North West and North Central, and even the South West. Sadly, there is no programme in place to engage those communities pre-emptively.

- 6.5 Sharing his views, a senior member of an NGO also praised the decision to follow a non-kinetic approach to address the problems associated with BH activities as the significance of attempting to change minds cannot be underestimated. According to him, one of the most important remaining challenges is transitional justice. He argued that this should be based on national law, and it should have significant community involvement in terms of its implementation. This brings one to the problem of different narratives still in place. Despite reports on community involvement in OSC, it seems that it is not as deep as it should be as some communities are still talking about outstanding amends for atrocities committed against them. Still, OSC is on the path to success. Central to that success is emotional justice that translates into transitional justice. Even BH members who argue that they had been conscripted and did not want to be fighters, had been active for ten to twelve years during which some had indeed committed atrocities.
- 6.5.1 The problem is that it will take decades to prosecute all perpetrators, some of whom may die before going to trial. The justice system is simply not equipped to handle this. Prosecutions currently are very selective since only people who are ready to confess, are put on trial. This process goes relatively fast, but the bottle neck/ 'blockage' comes when you must prosecute the huge number of fighters against whom you need to present sufficient evidence.
- 6.5.2 He concluded his remarks by posing the question what the basis for success would be? According to him, success would mean that communities understand why it is in the best interest of all to accept former fighters back into their fold, and former fighters would be accepted based on a new resolution that they will be responsible members of society. To achieve this, you must develop a strategy that will address the real numbers (including families of ex-fighters) as the number of people who currently can be absorbed in the existing programme is limited. Challenges need to be identified and discussed in-depth in a closed meeting so that informed decisions can be made on the way forward.
- 6.6 Sharing his concerns about some of the problems arising from dealing with family members, a participant noted that women with their children (who are in the programme due to military action) often go back to the bush to join their husbands who are still fighting. He queried whether the programme is geared to deal with this.
- 6.7 A retired brigadier general, who had been directly and actively involved in the programme for a while from its onset, related his experiences. He said that at the beginning of the programme, only a few BH members confessed among almost 1,000 who were arrested and interrogated at the time. Also, evidence gathering was difficult and not well-documented. Since then, profiling has become much more efficient. Supporters and opportunists were also identified. For e.g., there were three arrested men who claimed that they were only businessmen, and not fighters. However, they supplied fighters with provisions and logistics which constitutes an offense. They carried

truckloads of supplies to areas where even soldiers could not go to and sold it at five times the normal market price. They might not have been fighters, but they knew that they were enabling BH to continue with their activities while profiting from it. It was recommended that after having been convicted and having served their jail terms, these men should be handed over to OSC, and eventually the State Governor so that there could be a measure of oversight to see if they relapse or not.

6.7.1 Regarding the concerns raised that OSC is not receiving enough publicity, he reminded the gathering that the programme started during a serious conflict where safe passage was impossible. For e.g., one of the men arrested said he was sent to bomb a centre at Gombe, but his vehicle broke down. He succeeded in pushing it to a primary school where he wanted to detonate the bomb close to where the children were taking their breakfast under a tree. The bomb fortunately failed to explode. When telling his story after his arrest, he said he would do it again if given a chance to do so. Apart from these confessions, it was very difficult to gather evidence that could be used in a court of law. It was equally difficult to report on what was happening. At the time, it was a matter of 'let us see if it works'. It was only later that the programme became more structured.

6.8 Acknowledging all that was said, a senior retired military officer expressed concern about how the reintegration process is viewed from the victims' side. Compensation is required where land, property, and even lives were lost. The community leaders should be involved in this process, specifically in condolence visits to affected families.

6.8.1 He also suggested that OSC be restructured and remodelled to go beyond the life span of a state government, i.e., be institutionalized. Regarding publicity, he emphasized that we need to control the narrative and tell our own story. It was suggested that a press conference in this regard would contribute to this goal. Furthermore, despite the non-kinetic approach being successful, he believes there should be more efforts to get other stakeholders involved, specifically politicians who are currently hindering the process. If there is evidence that they are negatively impacting the government initiatives to restore peace, they should be brought to book.

6.8.2 It was also suggested that OSC should look to the North West, North Central and South West and advise on how problems there could be countered based on lessons learned in the North East. Grievances should be listened to and addressed before the situation gets out of hand. Feedback was also given about the negotiations for the release of kidnapped passengers on the Abuja-Kaduna bound train in March 2022. Based on ongoing dialogue with the kidnappers, commitment was secured for a safe Abuja-Kaduna corridor. However, uncertainty remains about the other side of the corridor. It was suggested to the kidnappers that they should interact with other splinter groups and convince them to enter into dialogue too. Meanwhile, it was agreed that construction of the powerline in the area would proceed

unhindered. The committee also continues to talk to families of kidnap victims still in captivity to see how they can help them.

6.9 Contributing to the conversation, a prominent academic said that defections cannot be attributed only to the more recent 'soft power' approach. A sustained military campaign contributed hugely to success. Also, since there was no food in certain areas, people were forced to surrender. The death of Shekau and events following were also a major contributing factor to defections.

6.9.1 Speaking further, he questioned the seriousness of ex-commanders' pledging allegiance to the Nigerian authorities since it goes so deeply against their belief system. According to him, this might also explain relapses, and the return of women and children to the bush where they receive more respect than in ordinary communities. They resent being treated as IDPs, albeit in a better environment, and they feel powerless in this new dispensation. They therefore prefer to return to their old ways. This should be looked at.

6.10 Another academic and serving senior military officer expressed his appreciation for the work that OSC is doing, but he suggested that some aspects can be refined as the workload is so huge. He proposed that units are created to tackle certain important aspects. Documentation and reintegration for e.g., should go further down than only community leaders vouching for people. This is a problem since there is lingering resentment from families against whom atrocities were committed, and they know the perpetrators. Regarding the way forward, he stressed that we must develop a more effective reintegration policy where the community itself is more deeply involved, and not only community leaders.

6.10.1 In addition, one of the most important non-kinetic programmes is to provide employment for ex-fighters. This negates the grievance of unemployment as a reason for not surrendering. Currently, there are 500 youths employed as part of the programme.

6.11 A representative from the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) noted that the reintegration process remains of great concern due to stigmatization, lack of stakeholders' engagement, and some communities not accepting their members back. There is also a problem of lack of funding.

6.11.1 The NCoS is doing a revalidation exercise of the past 6 to 7 years, and according to the laws of the then Nigerian Prison Service, they are mandated to reform, rehabilitate, and reintegrate. With the limited resources that they have, they are able to encourage some of the high-profile BH commanders in detention to embrace peace and dialogue. One of the BH leaders in their detention facility is called DIC, and he yields influence over other detainees.

6.11.2 They go and sit with them in their cells, and pray together with them, because most of them do not want to come out and pray with other people in

the mosque or any prayer ground inside the prison facility. After the prayers, they stay with them, ask them a lot of questions, and also use the time to preach to them and teach them the religion of Islam, using the Hadith of the prophet to counter the existing radical narrations of BH. Gradually, some of them begin to go out and pray together with other people inside the prison.

- 6.11.3 Community leaders are informed when BH members have undergone a proper deradicalization process and the government is satisfied about their attitude, and their release back into their communities. They work together with the divisional police officer (DPO) in the community for the reintegration process. The DPO in turn ask ex-BH members a lot of questions to find out more about their real origins.
- 6.11.4 They are also brought to the attention of the local chief and the traditional rulers who must be part of the reintegration process. Most of the reintegration processes are done in secret, but they encourage the traditional rulers to provide accurate information and feedback. Immediately after former BH members have been successfully reunited with their families, and the families are happy, the Nigerian correctional service officials stand back and allow the community to take control. However, they receive constant feedback from the community leaders who must be involved so that they are aware of all what is happening.
- 6.12 The question was posed by a retired brigadier general whether there is a model like 'witness protection' in place when it comes to reintegration. Sometimes BH members escape and quietly reunite with their families, carrying on with their daily activities. Some are known to the security agencies, and others not. The question therefore has to do with the possibility that these ex-fighters might make a request to be discreetly relocated to other communities to escape stigmatization.
- 6.12 According to the former Coordinator of OSC, the programme allows for relocation to communities other than the ones the ex-fighters originated from. For e.g., there was an instance when an ex-fighter was rejected by the person/ family that he had wronged, so he was relocated to Maiduguri. Also, six people from the Sulhu programme chose to relocate to other communities. It is custom for the community leaders to handle the reintegration process, but they should have at least 90% support from the community. It was stressed again that this kind of war cannot be won by military means alone.
- 6.13 One of the participants lamented that it is sad that once a general retires, he leaves with all the institutional knowledge he had accumulated over time. He pleaded for a way to recommend to government that for continuity's sake, we need to find a way for experts and expertise to remain in place in OSC.
- 6.14 The chair then posed the following questions:
- We live in a country consumed by conflicts over an extended period of time. Why have we allowed insecurity to continue for so long?

- The North West remains a big theatre of conflict despite numerous recommendations over the years to address security threats. Problems such as banditry, kidnapping, and cattle rustling have been growing steadily. What is the nexus between these seemingly non-ideological crimes, and BH/ ISWAP?
- We heard about the successes of OSC, but very little about problems that still need to be addressed. Apart from the reference to the need for transitional justice, what are the other challenges?

6.15 The former Coordinator of OSC responded as follows to some of the issues raised during the meeting:

- Since the issue of lack of mass communication was mentioned by a few participants, he reiterated that a government agency was supposed to handle publicity or strategic communication for OSC, but that did not happen. They decided to devise their own strategy in this regard, and the quarterly newsletter published in Hausa, Kanuri, Fulfulde, Arabic, and English came into being. Apart from informing the public, the government should also take note of the various narratives as events unfold, from trials and convictions to related issues.
- Regarding the comments that some BH members slip back into communities without any repercussions, he stressed that OSC is a structured programme that deals with members who surrender willingly. In his view, where resettling and reintegration take place peacefully, it should be allowed.

## **7. Summary and Plan of Action**

### **7.1 Framework (Legal, Policy, and Institutional)**

Recognition that there is a need for a national legal framework for the implementation of DDR programme in Nigeria based on the following observed deficiencies:

- i. Nigeria does not have a clear legal framework for the conduct of DDR. All previous DDR programmes were decreed by the President or Governors based on exercise of executive prerogative of mercy as provided in Section 175 (1-3) of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution as amended.
- ii. The Office of the National Security Adviser (NSA) is the only institution with the mandate to undertake a DDR programme under OSC.
- iii. The current practice where state governments are left to cope with thousands of defectors and their families without any technical and financial support is not sustainable.
- iv. Given the huge success of OSC programme in the North East, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, but rather replicate the OSC model across the various hot spots in the country subject to adaptation to local peculiarities.

7.1.1 The following recommendations were made:

- i. OSC is overloaded and should be unbundled into work packages with better coordination. With expanding workloads and increasing beneficiaries putting pressure on the office of the NSA, a decentralised



organisation structure that assigns decision-making to lower units, giving them the autonomy to take the necessary actions is critical. This means units should be created to tackle certain important aspects (e.g., documentation and reintegration, etc).

- ii. The OSC should also be remodelled and institutionalized to go beyond the life span of any particular government at state or federal level.
- iii. Witness protection programmes that are aimed at providing security, health, safety of witnesses (and their household) whose testimonies are essential to the successful prosecution of fighters is required.

## 7.2 Programme Coverage

Recognition that ISWAP should be given adequate attention as the group poses a much bigger threat than Boko Haram due to its connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and continued expansion into neighbouring African countries.

7.2.1 The following recommendations were made:

- i. Integration efforts should be cascaded and drilled down to lowest levels in the communities.
- ii. The need for deploying a calibrated mixture of a sustained military action (kinetic) and a soft approach (non-kinetic) to defeat BH/ISWAP was recommended.

## 7.3 Communication

Recognition that proper communication about the workings and the successes of OSC within and outside the conflict areas will enhance the buy-in of all stakeholders. This suggests the need to control the narrative so that OSC can tell its own story.

7.3.1 The following recommendations were made:

- i. Organising press conferences, seminars, and other communication platforms would contribute to the achievement of this goal.
- ii. It would appear that the leadership and management of OSC in their efforts to propagate the activities of the organisation tend to overemphasize its achievements without sufficiently acknowledging its challenges. A more balanced approach is, therefore, recommended.

## 7.4 Justice System

Recognition that efforts should be geared towards promoting transitional justice that recognizes victims who are deprived of all their rights and forced to live on society's margins. This will help to address grievances and the lingering resentment from families against whom atrocities were committed. This should be based on national law, and it should have significant community involvement in terms of its implementation. To this end, compensation is required where land, property, and even lives were lost.

7.4.1 The following recommendation was made:

- i. The justice system should be strengthened and equipped to deliver speedy prosecution of fighters. The current effort is very selective since only people who are ready to confess, are put on trial.

## **8. Establishment of a Committee to prepare for an open conference in 2023**

8.1 A committee with eight representatives from the roundtable participants was established to compile a position paper for an open conference on the topic in June/July 2023.

8.2 Timeline for deliverable is mid-March 2023.

## **9. Closing Remarks**

9.1 The closing remarks were delivered by the chair. He thanked the organisers of the roundtable, and everyone present at the event.

9.2 Discussions ended at 1340hrs.

***Ends***