

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsfb.org/nigeria-information-increasingly-a-rare-05-02-2015,47558.html>

Africa - Nigeria

News black hole

## Information increasingly a rare commodity in Nigeria

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Reporters Without Borders is alarmed about the glaring gaps in domestic news coverage in Nigeria in the run-up to the 14 February presidential election, especially in the northeastern state of Borno, where the Islamist rebel group Boko Haram has been carrying out massacres.

The scarcity of news coverage is tacitly tolerated by the government although the public's need for information is greater than ever in such times of political unrest and violence.

In Kambari, a village just 5 km outside Borno's capital, Maiduguri, suspected Boko Haram militants killed at least 15 people on 25 January, laying waste to the village and putting it to the torch. No journalist has been able to enter the area. The only sources of information are people who fled from there to Maiduguri.

The same situation was seen when Boko Haram carried out an unprecedented massacre in the city of Baga and surrounding areas on 3 January. Amnesty International put the number of dead at around 2,000. After examining satellite photos, Human Rights Watch said entire villages had been destroyed although the heaviest casualties were in Baga itself.

### Northeast cut off from the world

This information cannot be verified. Because of the security risks, local journalists cannot access this region, which is now a no-go area that even the Nigerian army dares not enter. The army also discourages journalists from visiting the area.

The impossibility of getting to the massacre sites, Boko Haram's gradual destruction of communication and media infrastructure over the years and the indifference displayed by the government has turned the region into a news and information "black hole."

While the government condemned last month's "monstrous assault on freedom of expression" in Paris it had not even mentioned the latest Boko Haram raids and spoke of "only" 150 dead in Borno.

*"We are concerned about the difficulty or impossibility of getting information about what is currently happening in Nigeria, especially in the areas under Boko Haram control,"* said Reporters Without Borders.

*"President Goodluck Jonathan's evasiveness as regards the media and the public's rights in general is becoming very worrying. Preventing external scrutiny will not spare him critical examination of his deplorable record on security. The need for political and security concerns to be studied and debated is greater than ever."*

### Government propaganda

Communication with the few officials still in Borno is limited. Sources in Borno report that military commanders have been ordered to stop talking to the press and instead tell reporters to talk to the military high command in the federal capital, Abuja.

The army and government have sadly distinguished themselves by mendacious statements in recent months, thereby undermining their credibility. Last May, the government and army reported the release of most of the female secondary school students kidnapped in Chibok. In September, they said Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was dead. Both claims turn out to be false.

Now information about what is happening in the northeast has to be gleaned from interviews at the Chadian border with refugees fleeing the country.

### **A presidential election that will be hard to cover**

The grave security problems in the north are undermining President Jonathan's legitimacy and increasing the possibility that his reelection bid will fail, with the resulting danger of violent reactions from both ruling and opposition parties when the results are announced.

All this may explain why it is currently impossible for foreign journalists to get press visas, as has been the case for the past five months. Officials say applications are being examined by the intelligence agency known as the State Security Services (SSS). This does not bode well for pluralist coverage of the election.

The national media pose less of a threat inasmuch as most of them are owned by politicians or businessmen who support the government.

The authorities have lost no time in issuing warnings to media that might be tempted to express divergent opinions. **Innocent Chidi Nwachukwu**, the editor of the weekly *Tentacle*, has been harassed constantly since September and was arrested on 14 January in connection with a 22 September cover story headlined "20 Threats Against Jonathan's Re-Election Survey."

The SSS held him illegally for two weeks, in defiance of an Abuja court ruling ordering his release until a hearing scheduled for 9 February.

Covering political meetings has become dangerous. A crew with independent *Channels Television* was attacked while covering a ruling People's Democratic Party primary rally in Ilorin, in Kwara state, in late November. A cameraman was badly beaten by members of a PDP faction while filming the activities of party members.

Delta state commissioner for information Chike Ogeah warned journalists not to report "inflammatory statements by politicians and critics" to avoid « heating up » the regime on 25 January, just a few days after the National Broadcasting Commission cautioned state radio and TV stations about their partisan coverage.

It is clearly becoming more and more difficult to work as a journalist in Nigeria.

The army has stepped up confiscations of newspaper issues on "security" grounds in recent months and journalists have been barred from covering the trials of Boko Haram members.

Nigeria is ranked 112th out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(Photo / AFP: President Goodluck Jonathan speaks to displaced people from Baga in a Maiduguri camp on January 15, 2015)

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