



# CIVILIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE YAN GORA (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria

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**T** +1 202 558 6958  
**E** [info@civiliansinconflict.org](mailto:info@civiliansinconflict.org)  
[civiliansinconflict.org](http://civiliansinconflict.org)

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## **ORGANIZATIONAL MISSION AND VISION**

Our mission is to work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm.

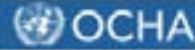
Our work takes us from the homes of civilians in active conflict zones to the halls of power around the world where decisions are made that affect their lives. We document harm to civilians and analyze its causes. We advise parties to a conflict on practical tools for preventing and responding to civilian harm. We advocate for the adoption and implementation of solutions to the problems we identify and specifically encourage military actors to track, investigate, and make amends for the harm they cause. We then offer our technical expertise to implement proposed protection solutions. At the same time, we work with civil society partners and local communities to enable civilians to raise their voices and advocate for their own protection.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This briefing paper was written by Chitra Nagarajan who also conducted the supporting interviews. Bénédicte Aboul-Nasr and Julius Gaiya provided research for the paper and transcribed the interviews conducted. Ali Yohanna Timothy and Bulama Aji, both of the Grassroots Researchers Association, assisted with finding respondents and interpreting interviews respectively. Chidi Blyden-Rowe, Shannon N. Green and William Meeker provided useful comments to an earlier draft. Kate Raley copy-edited the report.

Published 2018.

# Nigeria- Borno State: Reference Map



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*Marching band students practice together at the Government Day Secondary school. Center for Civilians in Conflict*

“Civilians credit the yan gora for bringing back some stability and safety to Borno. They believe that the group was proactive in investigating reports received from community members, sharing information with civilians, and serving as a bridge between communities and security forces.”

“We run from Boko Haram then our CJTF is again punishing us, where do we go?”

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the violence in northeast Nigeria continues into its ninth year, communities have been mobilizing to augment Nigerian military responses. These groups, known as the yan gora (Civilian Joint Task Force – CJTF), yan banga (vigilantes) and kungiyar maharba (hunters) have played important roles in protecting communities and pushing back against opposition groups. In the course of these activities, these groups have also caused civilian harm. To better understand civilian perspectives around the dynamics associated with the yan gora in Maiduguri and explore potential areas to mitigate civilian harm and advance civilian protection, CIVIC conducted research in Borno State in December 2017.

Civilian perspectives offer a number of areas where the yan gora have been helpful in civilian harm mitigation and protection as well as areas where members of the group have themselves committed harm. While civilians are very appreciative of the efforts of these community militias, there are growing concerns about current and future actions of the yan gora in particular.

Civilians credit the yan gora for bringing back some stability and safety to Borno. They believe that the group was proactive in investigating reports received from community members, sharing information with civilians, and serving as a bridge between communities and security forces. The yan gora also patrol communities, conduct joint patrols alongside the military, perform security scans and body searches, and run checkpoints. They have assisted civilians to safety, enabling them to securely pursue livelihoods such as farming, and played a key role in resolving disputes.

However, all civilian interviewees also pointed to concrete ways some yan gora members harm civilians. Members have been involved in assaulting and killing those thought to be associated with armed groups. They restrict movement outside IDP camps and use their positions of power for sexual exploitation and abuse. They intimidate civilians, employ punitive justice

measures to settle personal scores, trade drugs, and have been implicated in the commission of extortion and theft, including the diversion of humanitarian aid. Civilians felt that opportunities for redress for harm do not exist. Civilians said they felt unable to go to the police or military with their cases given the group's close contact and joint work with these agencies. When they did take cases to authorities, they were told to exercise patience rather than receive justice.

Civilian perceptions towards the yan gora have changed significantly over time. Every civilian interviewed was concerned for the future. In particular, civilians shared concerns over: 1) the increased politicization and mobilization of the group associated with the 2019 elections; 2) that the group's involvement with politicians was diluting their focus on protection; 3) the group would become increasingly involved in criminality and gangs; 4) the group derailing processes of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation; 5) tensions within the yan gora, or between the yan gora and yan banga and/ or kungiyar maharba, would develop into a new phase of the conflict.

The yan gora presents a distinct challenge for the Nigerian Government and communities in the northeast. They have provided a necessary service—protecting communities—and by many accounts were instrumental in ensuring the northeast did not fall into the hands of armed opposition groups. However, the tens of thousands of Nigerians that have participated in the yan gora<sup>1</sup> in Borno State should, in the near term, adopt approaches to mitigate civilian harm and advance protection. In the long-term, effective demobilization, disarmament, reintegration, and rehabilitation or regularization into security forces must be explored. CIVIC will conduct more detailed research into all community militias and continue to remain an active member of the Northeast Peace and Security Network, a group of Borno-based organisations, which is developing a strategy and recommendations for these groups, civil society, and the Nigerian Government.

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<sup>1</sup> The numbers reported were as high as 26,000 in early 2017: International Crisis Group, 'The Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram,' Africa Report No 244, 23 February 2017.

## INTRODUCTION

As in many countries experiencing violent conflict, community militias in northeast Nigeria fill gaps in community protection, fight armed opposition groups, and, in some cases, are themselves the cause of civilian harm. When it comes to parties to the conflict, CIVIC's work in Nigeria has primarily focused on the Nigerian Armed Forces. However, this is one of several security actors operational in northeast Nigeria. Other security agencies with the mandate and responsibility to protect civilians include the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) and National Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). As areas of Borno state – the epicenter of the conflict in Nigeria – continue to stabilize, the military is increasingly transitioning security responsibilities to these civilian agencies. Given that the security situation in Borno remains volatile, these agencies will have an important role to play in civilian protection. CIVIC has and will continue to engage these agencies in our work on the protection of civilians (POC) and civilian harm mitigation (CHM).

In addition to the Nigerian Armed forces, the NPF, and the NSCDC, other important security actors in the region include community militias that have formed due to the state's inability to protect its own civilians. These community militias include kungiyar maharba or

hunters, yan banga or vigilantes and what has become known as the yan gora or the Civilian Joint Taskforce (CJTF). Civilians are concerned about these groups, the yan gora in particular, due to the harm they are currently causing and their potential to cause harm in the future. CIVIC's engagement with the yan gora has shown that, while they are open to engagement and learning about how to mitigate harm to civilians in their work, the group has little awareness of either the laws of war or of POC/CHM. As a result, CIVIC has decided that engagement with the kungiyar maharba, yan banga, and yan gora will be one of its strategies in northeast Nigeria in the future.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing paper focuses on civilians' perspectives and experiences of the yan gora's presence and work in their communities and focuses on implications for civilian harm and protection. It will be used to inform CIVIC's future programming, policy-influencing, and training. It is a precursor to sustained work around the yan gora, yan banga and kungiyar maharba in northeast Nigeria. CIVIC will engage these groups on POC/CHM in its focal communities, as well as conduct wider research that informs policy influencing work in collaboration with others to ensure joint approaches.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that this paper will use the terms kungiyar maharba/ hunters, yan banga/ vigilante group and yan gora/ CJTF interchangeably and reflect the terminology used by respondents. For each of these groups dan refers to the single i.e. a group member whereas yan refers to the collective i.e. the group as a whole. In this paper, the term 'dan gora' signifies a single individual, the term 'yan gora members' refers to two or more members and 'the yan gora' refers to the organisation as a whole.

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper details the findings of a qualitative study that used symbolic interactionist methodology and the grounded theory analytical model. It draws on a literature review and CIVIC's work in northeast Nigeria between November 2016 and March 2017, particularly a roundtable with CJTF leaders, as well as nine workshops and dialogue sessions held with civilians and security agents, separately and together. It also reflects the author's observations, interviews and discussions with CJTF members and leaders, civilians, security agencies, government ministries and departments, Abuja based, Borno based and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies in Abuja, Maiduguri and local government areas (LGAs) across Borno since 2013. All quotes in this paper, unless stated otherwise, are from interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

The primary data used to inform this paper comes from interviews conducted in December 2017. CIVIC did not aim for representativeness but rather to provide a snapshot of perspectives. Care was taken to ensure gender parity, age diversity, and a range of ethno-linguistic and religious backgrounds in respondent selection. Respondents included 15 people (seven women and eight men), ranging from 19 to over 50 years in age, and drawn from a variety of backgrounds and geographical areas. The respondents included Christians and Muslims, people of Babur, Dogole, Hausa, Kanuri, Lamu, Mafa, Margi, Shuwa, Tera and Zaliifa ethno-linguistic groups, business people, civil servants, drivers, electricians, farmers, mechanics, students, tailors, teachers, traders, and people working for NGOs. Three respondents had previously been or continued to be affiliated with either the yan gora or yan banga, a reminder of the extent to which groups are embedded within communities. Internally displaced people (IDPs) from a number of different LGAs in addition to those who had been living in Maiduguri before the conflict were chosen. Respondents had come to Maiduguri from Askira Uba, Bama, Gwoza, Konduga, Mafa, Marte, Monguno, and Ngala LGAs due to violence at home. They were currently

living in IDP camps and informal settlements, with hosts or independently in the city. In this way, although interviews were only conducted in Maiduguri, it was possible to glean information across a range of LGAs.

CIVIC was guided by key principles of conflict sensitivity, gender, social inclusion, ethics, and safety and security of both the researcher and participants. Interviews were conducted in English, Hausa and/ or Kanuri at the discretion of the respondent. Some interviews took place in a mix of languages. A semi-structured interview guide was designed and delivered using appreciative inquiry and in conflict sensitive ways. It integrated questions about gender and social inclusion. Interviews were transcribed and transcripts analyzed using grounded theory with codes and themes emerging naturally from the data itself.

Systems were put in place to ensure adherence to the highest ethical standards at all times. This approach included ensuring that respondents were clear about the aims of the research, what involvement meant for them in terms of risks and benefits, and obtaining informed consent. It also meant respondents received adequate support during the research process to be able to participate fully. Information was treated sensitively and confidentially, with anonymity preserved. Referral pathways were established. One referral was made. Interviews were conducted outside the respondents' usual surroundings in a quiet and safe space to ensure privacy, safety, and security. Audio recordings and transcripts of interviews were stored and sent using encrypted means with only those involved having access to these files.

After providing some historical context, the paper traces the history and evolution of the yan gora. The report then outlines ways in which members protect and harm civilians. It goes on to show how civilian perceptions have changed over time, before ending with civilians' fears for the future.

## THE CONTEXT

Borno state is in Nigeria's extreme northeast, bordered by the countries of Cameroon, Niger and Chad and by Gombe and Adamawa states. Formerly known as the 'home of peace,' the state has witnessed some of the most intense violence in the country's recent history. In 2005, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati Wal Jihad (JAS, translated as People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), commonly known as Boko Haram,<sup>3</sup> noticeably emerged in Maiduguri under its charismatic leader Mohammed Yusuf. In his 2015 inaugural address, President Muhammadu Buhari named his "extra judicial murder" by the police, together with "official bungling, negligence, complacency or collusion," as being causal factors in the rise of the group.<sup>4</sup> Originally formed to protest the corruption and inequality produced by state structures and to call for a return to a 'purer', more Islamic way of life, JAS ideology, tactics and strategy have continually evolved. Over time, the group's tactics have morphed into declaring territorial control, detonating bombs including the use of 'suicide' bombers,<sup>5</sup> forced recruitment and kidnapping, and violence against women and girls (VAWG) including sexual violence and forced marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Although the acts of armed opposition groups have resulted in civilian death, injury and displacement, it is important to note that all parties to the conflict have committed civilian harm. The Nigerian military has failed to protect communities from violence, committed civilian harm during operations and directly targeted civilians, including through unlawful detention, harassment, destruction of property, forced displacement, sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), indiscriminate targeting of groups such as young men, torture, and excessive use of force.<sup>7</sup> Low levels of trust and confidence in the military, paired with high incidence of mutual suspicion, have marred relations

between security agencies and civilian communities. The newly formed yan gora were instrumental in driving JAS from Maiduguri, the state capital, but, increasingly, there are reports of their commission of civilian harm, including human rights violations such as extra-judicial killings, harassment, SEA, recruitment and use of children, and diversion of humanitarian aid.<sup>8</sup> The yan banga and kungiyar maharba are seen to have committed less civilian harm, but it is important to note the lack of empirical research in this area.

After being forced to leave Maiduguri, JAS fighters went on to capture much of the territory of Borno state and some of the territory of neighboring Adamawa and Yobe states. Operations by the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) working with the yan banga, yan gora and kungiyar maharba recovered territory from 2014 to 2015. Always with competing factions, JAS split into at least two distinct groups in 2016: JAS headed by Abubakar Shekau and Wilayat al Islamiyya Gharb Afriqiyah (translated as Islamic State West Africa or ISWA) headed by Abu Musab al-Barnawi. The two groups take markedly different approaches to interaction with civilian communities and commission of civilian harm, with al-Barnawi moving away from the indiscriminate violence and targeting of civilians that has increasingly characterized tactics of Shekau's group.<sup>9</sup>

As of January 2018, approximately 1.7 million people remained internally displaced in northeast Nigeria with 3.7 million people expected to face critical levels of food insecurity and approximately 926,000 people living in areas hard to reach for humanitarian assistance.<sup>10</sup> While the Nigerian state has control of LGA headquarter towns with police and NSCDC personnel increasingly being re-deployed there, the territory beyond a one to ten kilometer perimeter is more contested. Civilians have told CIVIC of being ambushed on roads, being attacked when they go to fetch firewood or go to farm, and of their crops being destroyed or harvested by armed opposition groups.

3 Please note that in the interests of conflict sensitivity, the research will use the exact names of the groups involved where relevant and the term armed opposition groups to refer to all those active in the northeast as opposed to using the blanket term 'Boko Haram.' This term, rather than being the name of the groups themselves, is one given to them by the media and serves to simplify their message and aims. Furthermore, given the split in the group and the different tactics, strategies and engagement with civilians that groups have, using a blanket term to refer to all groups does not adequately reflect reality.

4 Inaugural speech by His Excellency, President Muhammadu Buhari following his swearing-in as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on 29th May 2015.

5 As the existence and level of agency of those who carry and detonate bombs is unknown, quotation marks will be used around the word suicide in the absence of another succinct descriptor. Reports are some people are drugged, duped or unaware of plans while others volunteer for the task, motivated by commitment to the group's ideals.

6 Please see Amnesty International, "Our Job Is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill": Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria,' AFR 33/1360/2015 2015 for more details.

7 K Dietrich, "When We Can't See the Enemy, Civilians Become the Enemy": Living Through Nigeria's Six Year Insurgency,' (Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2015).

8 Incidents were noted as far back as I. Umara, A. Muazu, A. Fari, Y. Imam and Y. Bukar, 'Study of the Activities of Civilian Joint Task Force in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council and Jere Local Government Areas,' Borno State, Nigeria, unpublished paper, 2013.

9 O. Mahmood, 'Will Changes in Boko Haram Leadership Revive Local Support?' ISS Today 22nd September 2016.

10 OCHA, 'North-East Nigeria; Humanitarian Situation Update,' January 2018.

## HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

### Emergence

The yan gora started in Maiduguri. The most common way respondents described their emergence was as “a child of circumstance” or a “child of necessity,” required to save the community.<sup>11</sup> A 26-year-old Kanuri woman described the atmosphere in the city: “It was at a time when the conflict was at its peak and a lot of people were leaving the state. Everybody was afraid. There were curfews from 4 pm to 6 or 7 in the morning. There was not much movement. A lot of people had left the state. We were afraid of going to school. Everyone got fed up and the bravest among us initially took it up.”<sup>12</sup> At the time, JAS members were in Maiduguri and people with whom CIVIC has spoken commonly state that every family and household had at least one member in the group. Nigerian security agencies, who found it very difficult to distinguish who was associated with the group, tended to treat all those living in Maiduguri as (potential) JAS members. Speaking at a summit held in Gombe in June 2015, Dr. Umara, of the University of Maiduguri, characterized this as “the mistake made by the military” stating, “they were considering all youth as Boko Haram with everyone seen as an enemy and acting indiscriminately as a result.”<sup>13</sup> Civilians felt caught between JAS on one side and the Nigerian state on the other. They felt the Nigerian state was unable to protect them from harm and indeed, much of the time, was the actor perpetrating harm against them. In this context, initiated by an individual, Ba’a Lawan, people started mobilizing into what became known the yan gora or CJTF, so named to demonstrate complementarity with the Joint Taskforce which, at the time, brought together the security agencies operational in Borno.

In June 2015, a member of the CJTF remarked, “[JAS members] were escaping by going through houses. All in the houses were rounded up while they escaped. They were endangering 500+ lives at a time as a result. When we realized, we said no, we need to identify those involved. It was in secret first then we were coming closer to security [forces]. When they realized we were coming to assist, they decided to partner [with us]. We started in one ward then spread across

Maiduguri.”<sup>14</sup> The CJTF were described at the time as “game changers” by Kashim Shettima, the Governor of Borno State.<sup>15</sup> As one NGO woman activist interviewed put it, “When they came in, we celebrated them as heroes.”<sup>16</sup> This dynamic was mirrored outside Maiduguri. Many communities took up arms to defend themselves, with kungiyar maharba and the yan banga often leading this effort. One IDP from Gwoza told CIVIC in December 2016, “We came to realize there was reluctance or weakness on the side of the government so [we] decided to come up with this. We have come to realize [that we] have to protect ourselves. If we had stayed back to wait for assistance in Gwoza, nobody in Gwoza would have survived by now.”<sup>17</sup>

Given the yan gora’s role in bringing some peace to Maiduguri, the group tried to replicate this success in other LGAs. Bama was the first LGA to ‘take gora’. A 29-year-old man from Bama, displaced into Maiduguri recounted how Ba’a Lawan had wanted the yan gora to spread to all other areas of Borno and how the military commander in charge of Bama had gone to community leaders asking them to find members to form the yan gora to uncover JAS members in the community.<sup>18</sup> This formation of the yan gora was done despite kungiyar maharba and yan banga already being active in these communities. Although these groups are distinct and regarded differently, as will be explored further below, there is some fluidity between groups. In Akira Uba for example, those who joined the yan banga at the peak of the conflict and helped civilians flee the LGA to safety later joined the yan gora when they reached Maiduguri. Respondents from other LGAs spoke highly of the Maiduguri yan gora compared to those of their LGAs.<sup>19</sup> This impression is partly because the Maiduguri group has been able to safeguard the city from armed opposition groups to an extent not possible in other LGAs, many of which were attacked and controlled by JAS.

The emergence of the Biu yan gora was markedly different. Instead of the leadership from Maiduguri setting up a branch, the group emerged organically when young people during the days of mourning for friends who had been killed by JAS decided to take action. Although Biu was a LGA where JAS recruited in the past, some religious leaders openly condemned their ideology and actions. JAS presence was seen

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11 Respondents speaking during Interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

12 Ibid.

13 Speaking at a summit held in Gombe in June 2015, author’s notes.

14 Ibid.

15 Dr. Abubakar Monguno of the University of Maiduguri who had conducted a study on the CJTF speaking at a summit held in Gombe in June 2015, author’s notes.

16 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

as ruining the nature of the LGA, which had a tradition of tolerance, high levels of education, strong family bonds and a large degree of friendships, familial ties, and peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Young people, supported by older community members, formed the yan gora. They patrolled the town in shifts. Christians and Muslims protected each other's places of worship. Members went around the community identifying JAS members, burning their homes, and engaging in extrajudicial killing. Residents of Biu town and neighboring communities communicated, sharing information about movements and fighter strength with each other and with the military, leading to successful repulsion of attacks. Security agents posted there tend to be from Biu which helped ensure good relations between civilians and security agencies and significant personal motivations to protect the LGA. When JAS members, who had fled Biu, returned with reinforcements, "everybody in the community, women, men, older people and children alike, came out during this time to defend Biu.... In this way, people in Biu came together to protect their localities across community lines, to protect and 'recover' neighboring LGAs such as Hawul and as the last line of defense against JAS expansion into nearby Gombe state."<sup>20</sup>

The scaling up outside Maiduguri was not uniformly positive. A woman over 40 years old from Monguno spoke about what happened when the yan gora came to her town: "At that time, they molested so many people.... They were beating any people, anytime. Those who went from Maiduguri to Mongono. At that time, they were not differentiating Boko Haram from inhabitants and it made things difficult initially."<sup>21</sup> Interviewees also spoke of some level of forceful recruitment. In Ngala, according to a 28-year-old man from there, "we were forced to lay down and undressed. They selected some of us as members of the CJTF, of which I was among the first selected as a driver and member... We started being operational soldiers... We were forced and there was no way to reject it, because you must participate in the group at that time... there was no way you could say no." However, this same man went on to talk about how the people concerned "welcomed the idea because [we] were anxiously waiting to form a group to fight Boko Haram, because the situation was so tense at that time."<sup>22</sup>

It is also important to note that not all LGAs were successful in forming yan gora. For example, the group located in Hawul, a LGA attacked and controlled by JAS, was perceived as lacking strength and having low participation, significance, and impact. Furthermore, many young people, often highly educated, did not want to join the group.<sup>23</sup> In Hawul, the yan gora only formed after civilians began to return to the community in 2015.

There are further reasons why communities have not wanted to form yan gora or yan banga. Often, doing so puts individuals at risk. During a roundtable held by CIVIC in November 2016, yan gora leaders spoke about how people whose family members have been arrested by the CJTF and handed over to security forces as suspected members of armed opposition groups have committed reprisal actions against the members concerned.<sup>24</sup> When JAS attacked a place, they would typically search for yan gora and yan banga members. According to a 32-year-old man from Gwoza, "As they captured the town, they asked for CJTF amongst us. We all said there's none even if we have them but they'll intimidate and shoot to scare us but we said no, there's none amongst us. We started telling our CJTF to leave in the night and slowly they left through the bush... The CJTF escaped first then we followed."<sup>25</sup>

JAS have also taken revenge against entire communities that form the CJTF. According to a recent conflict analysis on Kaga LGA: "The presence of the CJTF seems to be a major factor in determining whether a community is attacked or overrun. In Mainock, where there was no CJTF presence, armed opposition groups still assert that it is their territory but have not engaged in destructive attacks until recently. Similarly, Ngamdu brokered an agreement with armed opposition groups in which, in exchange for not organizing a CJTF unit or allowing soldiers to deploy in the community, they did not attack the area. In contrast, Benisheikh's mobilization of a sizable CJTF, recruiting from both Benisheikh and surrounding communities, has resulted in protracted and destructive conflicts between the armed opposition groups and residents of the town. As a result, the community is "almost empty."<sup>26</sup> A 28-year-old man from Ngala spoke about how, after the military and yan gora had captured one of their camps, JAS "mobilized all their members in the bush and came in full force, and just started killing people

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20 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 'Conflict Analysis of Northeast Focal States: Biu, Bursari, Gombi, Hawul, Hong, Jakusko, Jere and Kaga Local Government Areas,' (CRS, 2018) at p. 15.

21 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

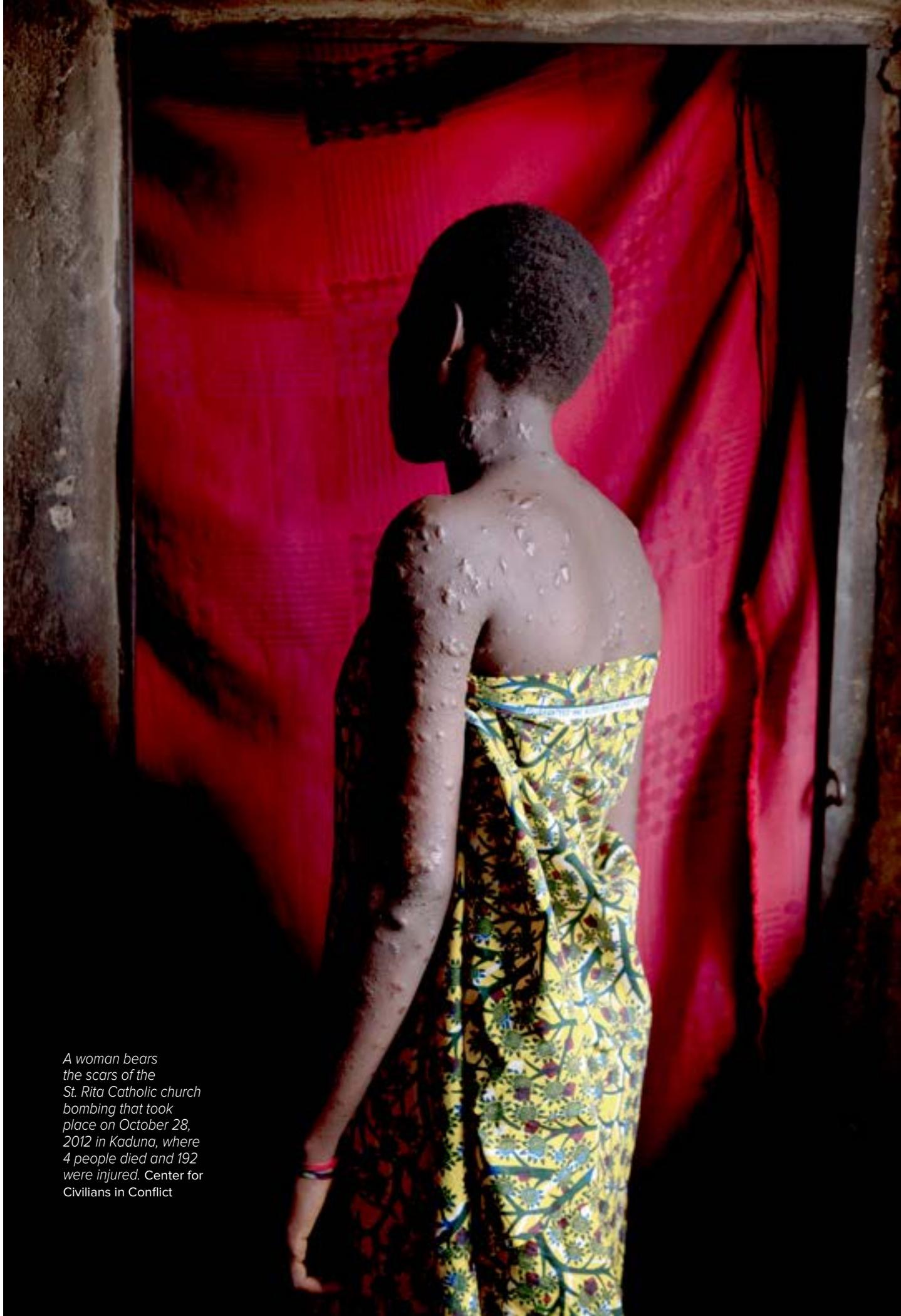
22 Ibid.

23 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 62.

24 Notes of CIVIC roundtable on civilian protection and harm mitigation held with yan gora members in Maiduguri in November 2016.

25 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

26 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 112.



*A woman bears the scars of the St. Rita Catholic church bombing that took place on October 28, 2012 in Kaduna, where 4 people died and 192 were injured. Center for Civilians in Conflict*

anyhow. Even the military ran, they overran the military. They came into the town, killing, destroying property, burning vehicles and the rest. People had to run, I climbed and spent the whole night on top of a roof and only came down after they left. When I came down from the roof, I discovered they had killed so many people. There were dead bodies littered everywhere, everything and all was destroyed.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, some analysts believe that while volunteer vigilantes have been effective in degrading armed opposition group strongholds, they have also contributed to intensifying the conflict by “engendering selective reprisal attacks... on communities that are associated with the vigilante forces”<sup>28</sup> and that “the promotion of vigilantism was a principal driver that turned the conflict from an anti-state insurgency into a messy civil war, pitting Boko Haram against communities.”<sup>29</sup>

The link between the yan gora and the Nigerian state is contested. Some yan gora members have been recruited into government security agencies. While Defence Headquarters distance the armed forces from the yan gora saying they do not work with them, there is regular communication, the army has conducted training for them and soldiers and yan gora members alike talk about going on joint patrols and operations. In some locations, such as Bama as described above, military commanders requested communities to set up yan gora. Indeed, the hierarchy of the yan gora has been designed to replicate that of the military, with yan gora leaders having clear counterparts in military commanders. The Borno State Government, as will be described below, pays some members a monthly stipend. Recently, Shettima, visiting Biu in the aftermath of a bomb blast that killed 17 people, asked for people to join the yan gora saying, “I urge parents in the five communities that made up Biu who have grown up children to volunteer 500 of them, 100 in each community” in order to keep Biu safe.<sup>30</sup>

## Membership

The yan gora is seen as part of the community. Many respondents spoke about everyone in their locality being a member of the yan gora in the early days. A

man from Marte said, “I have never been a registered member but I have contributed when we were at home during the crisis. At that time, everyone was a potential member of the CJTF because you cannot sleep, you have to go round with the CJTF.” A woman from Bama corroborated this assessment, saying that “almost everyone was a CJTF member at the time in Bama as anything you see, you would report it.”<sup>31</sup>

While many respondents spoke of the yan gora bringing together civilians from all ethno-linguistic and religious backgrounds, there were some indications of this not always being the case. One Zalitfa man from Gwoza said that those in Gwoza were Lamu as this group tended to be more martial. Dr. Monguno, speaking at a June 2015 summit in Gombe spoke of the Maiduguri yan gora consisting mostly of Muslim youth saying, “the overbearing dominance of such a large volunteer force by one religious group in a cosmopolitan city is a cause for concern.”<sup>32</sup>

The yan gora predominantly consists of younger members in the community. Indeed, “youth participation in the CJTF reflects one of the new avenues by which they can garner influence and respect as the CJTF and its members have power and are invited to discussions in a way that young people outside this affiliation are not.”<sup>33</sup> Although members are primarily young men, women are also active in the group in many locations. The number of women members varies according to locality. According to one man from Gwoza, over 10 percent of yan gora members in Gwoza are women whereas in Bama, it seems only some older women are members with younger women unable to participate.<sup>34</sup> In much of northern Nigeria, women’s freedoms and opportunities are curtailed when they are of reproductive age but increase once they become older.<sup>35</sup> However, this dynamic does not apply to the whole of Borno with young women active in the yan gora, for example in Biu, Gwoza and Maiduguri according to respondents interviewed.

While men accompany soldiers in their operations and conduct patrols of their locality, the roles of women in the yan gora include: interacting with other women, conducting body searches when required (for example at entrances to IDP camps), screening

27 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

28 O.A. Chukwuma, ‘Nigeria: Volunteer Vigilantism and Counter-Insurgency in the North-East,’ 20 Conflict Studies Quarterly 2017 34-55.

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

30 M. Maina, ‘Suicide Attack: Borno to Recruit 500 Civilian JTF to Secure Biu,’ Daily Post Nigeria, 5 December 2017.

31 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

32 Author’s notes.

33 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 109.

34 Respondents speaking during interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

35 G. Taylor, E. Fraser, J. Jacobson and R. Phillipson, ‘Economic Opportunities and Obstacles for Women and Girls in Northern Nigeria,’ (Social Development Direct, 2014).

women as they enter towns, and keeping an eye out for female 'suicide' bombers according to respondents interviewed.<sup>36</sup> In addition, women in the group are generally tasked with interviewing women suspected of association with armed opposition groups. Women, whether members or not, have been key in passing on intelligence, including when it comes to reporting their own family members for participation, membership or support for armed opposition groups.<sup>37</sup> There was some indication of women feeling more comfortable reporting information to other women who are in the yan gora rather than men, particularly given the prevalence of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. According to a (male) member speaking during a CIVIC roundtable in November 2016, "The women committed a lot to bring peace as when the men could not move, they were the ones gathering information and they caught and handed over suicide bombers."<sup>38</sup>

Women's roles have increased in importance given the numbers of women and girls who have carried bombs for detonation. This dynamic has markedly changed attitudes towards women and girls. Previously not seen as a threat, they are now often viewed with more suspicion than men. As a 29-year-old from Bama said, "Those that carry the bomb, mostly, they are women. It's not good for a male to search a female so we send females to go search."<sup>39</sup> In December 2016, an IDP man living in Bakassi camp in Maiduguri told CIVIC of the importance of increasing the number of women in the yan gora so there would be enough women to screen the women who come into the camp.<sup>40</sup> This viewpoint is unsurprising given the number of attacks that had recently taken place outside Bakassi camp before the conversation took place.

It is important here to note that women's roles in the yan gora are markedly different from those in kungiyar maharba or the yan banga. In addition to the roles that women in the yan gora play, women who are part of the kungiyar maharba and yan banga go on military operations, take part in active fighting alongside men, patrol towns and villages, and command groups of fighters that include women and men. While some of these women come from hunting families, with daughters of these families inheriting family occupational positions, others make a decision to join. They seemingly face no ostracism from families or

communities for doing so and some combine caring for children alongside community security responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

Many respondents spoke of disabled people being part of the yan gora. While people with disabilities may not partake in active fighting, they do play important roles in checking those coming in and out of IDP camps, and other locations, taking responsibility for doing so when able-bodied members go out on operations. They also play important roles in community dispute resolution. When yan gora members become injured during fighting, they do not leave but remain active in the group. The numbers of disabled people in the yan gora vary. Most respondents spoke of a few people with disabilities being in their community yan gora. In Bama, where a yan gora leader had mobility issues, "many disabled were coming out to join," according to a 31-year-old woman from that LGA.<sup>42</sup>

Child members of the yan gora have received some attention. That children would want to be part of this group is not surprising. As one woman from Maiduguri said about her son, "One day, I came home [and] I saw him with a stick, like I said it was kato da gora. He said raise up your hands, I want to search you. So, in the community you find even small small boys wanting to be part of it."<sup>43</sup> Children associated with the CJTF have been used mainly for intelligence related purposes, search operations, night patrols, crowd control, and to staff guard posts. According to a woman from Bama, they have also followed the adults and taken part in beating those suspected of association with armed opposition groups.<sup>44</sup> Pathways to recruitment include: associations with positive community image, desire to take revenge on JAS, and fear of security forces who may see those who do not join the yan gora as JAS members. In addition to these reasons, girls join to show solidarity for those abducted, as protection against sexual violence, or due to fear of being forced to join JAS. While children associated with the yan gora and yan banga were viewed positively as having brought peace, there was some concern about their behavior (caused by their witnessing of violence), exposure to drug use, and the increased authority they had experienced. It can be very difficult to persuade children associated with the CJTF or vigilante groups to leave these groups, as they say they are getting money they can use for themselves and their families. Boys in

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36 Respondents speaking during interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

37 C. Nagarajan, 'Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria,' (June 2017); C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess.

38 Notes of CIVIC roundtable on civilian protection and harm mitigation held with yan gora members in Maiduguri in November 2016.

39 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

40 Notes of CIVIC workshop on protection with IDPs from Bakassi camp, December 2016.

41 C. Nagarajan, 'Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria,' (June 2017).

42 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

particular (from six to 17 years in age) feel like they are heroes defending their communities. They are reluctant to give up the attendant ‘respect’ and ‘prestige,’ that this affords them in their communities.<sup>45</sup> The CJTF has made moves to curtail recruitment and use of children. Speaking at a June 2015 summit in Gombe, Dr. Umara of the University of Maiduguri said, “Before, even a child of 3 or 4 would be part of CJTF but now, no child below the age of 15 is allowed to join.”<sup>46</sup> The yan gora signed an action plan in September 2017 committing to stop using children and refer those already associated with them for rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>47</sup>

## Evolution

Over time, yan gora membership, operations and relationship to state actors changed. Initially, a group of volunteers working to safeguard their community, some yan gora members have received training from the military and stipends from the state government. There was significant unhappiness among respondents as to the selection criteria and changes that state involvement in the yan gora has caused. At present, there are two, perhaps three, sets of people associated with the yan gora. Members of the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES) are paid approximately N10,000 on a monthly basis and given uniforms by the state government. However, respondents say many of those who are part of this scheme were chosen due to connections rather than work they had previously done. According to a Maiduguri civil society activist, “over 90% of the beneficiaries were not the original CJTF members. They were favored youth with links to the politicians.”<sup>48</sup> This has caused unhappiness with those who are not paid, i.e., the original yan gora, yan banga and kungiyar maharba who “followed the military, they protected the camps, and they don’t even get 5,000 Naira per month.”<sup>49</sup> These changes have also affected community perceptions, as will be shown below.

## PROTECTING CIVILIANS

All but one civilian interviewed,<sup>50</sup> even if they went on to talk of the ways that yan gora members were harming civilians, gave them credit for bringing back some stability and safety to Borno. As one woman from Bama said, “The CJTF are brave. They have killed a lot of the threat. They came at a time we’d lost all our hope. We thought we would never see peace again. We wanted to give up, and the brave ones started working then they became the CJTF. At first, it was for security and they’ve really helped a lot. Even, some people came back to Maiduguri who had left as a result.”<sup>51</sup> A man from Gwoza spoke of how they provided a sense of security and hope: “At that time people were very comforted because they were living in homes and people were sacrificing their lives voluntarily... we could sleep in their homes as people were guarding you.”<sup>52</sup>

## Collecting and sharing information

The yan gora were seen as being proactive in investigating reports received from community members. As one woman from Konduga said, “Before the forces will see something or go to that place, they will try and go and see what is going on there. They are the first people to go and see what is going on there.”<sup>53</sup> They relay this information back to the community as well as to security agencies. They also pass information about the security situation, including current risks, in a timely fashion to community members as well as share ways to improve security awareness and safeguard the locality. They share information using loudspeakers and by speaking at public gatherings alongside security agencies and community leaders.

## Linking security agencies and communities

Many respondents spoke of how integrated yan gora members were in their communities, how they are “our children” and “part of us.”<sup>54</sup> As one woman from Bama said, “most of them understand the local languages we speak. Most of them are probably our brother so they understand the language and they communicate

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45 The information in this paragraph is largely drawn from P. Donli, ‘Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in Northeast Nigeria,’ (NSRP/ UNICEF, 2017).

46 Speaking at a summit held in Gombe in June 2015, author’s notes.

47 Discussions with UNICEF staff working on child protection.

48 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

49 Ibid.

50 She had had her son accused and detained by yan gora in Monguno and her 13-year-old daughter raped and forcibly married by a dan gora in Maiduguri. Understandably, she did not have much positive to say about the group.

51 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

perfectly well with the community.”<sup>55</sup> Yan gora members’ knowledge of the community and easy means of communication is contrasted with security agents, particularly the military, many of whom are from other parts of the country and unable to speak Hausa let alone local languages. Although the military has made some steps towards improving civil military relations, long-standing mutual suspicion between communities and security agencies still continues and hinders civilians from being able to talk with soldiers and police officers directly. For women and girls, the threat of SEA is an additional factor that prevents them from approaching security agents. At the same time, yan gora members interact with security agencies, passing information, going on joint patrols, and supporting them on operations. As a result of these factors, yan gora members are seen as the bridge between security agencies and communities. Members of the group are seen as playing crucial roles in relaying information between civilians and security agencies, promoting security awareness, and calling “security personnel to rescue us.”<sup>56</sup> As one man from Bama who had been part of the yan gora said, “If you get information, there is no relationship between the people of the community and the military directly. We get information and reach the military and give community feedback.”<sup>57</sup> Soldiers with whom CIVIC spoke in Dikwa in February 2017 said talking with women CJTF members was one of the main ways they interact with the women in the community and hear women’s perspectives given the lack of women in the military in these locations, women’s fear and reluctance to interact with soldiers, and norms inhibiting interactions.<sup>58</sup> The yan gora are also seen as a conduit for complaints to other authorities, as in Kaga, where people feel their LGA chairman is diverting humanitarian aid.

## Working with security forces

In addition to their role in linking civilians with security agencies, yan gora members are seen to play key roles in passing on security and intelligence. They check civilians coming into IDP camps to ensure nobody associated with JAS is there potentially gathering intelligence with which to plan attacks. They also go on patrol with soldiers. As one soldier told CIVIC in Dikwa in February 2017, “When we go out for patrol, the CJTF know the villages as it’s their terrain. We carry

them along for patrol. CJTF will be asking questions to the villagers and interpreting to us... the CJTF play a vital role. The CJTF are not from the villages but are the same tribe so can speak with them.”<sup>59</sup> Beyond patrols, yan gora members have taken part in offensive military operations. There were reportedly 70 members who took part in recapturing Mubi in Adamawa state. One man from Ngala who had previously been a dan gora recounted how he took part in the capturing of a nearby JAS camp, driving the yan gora vehicle that led the way. He also spoke of how the yan gora was requested by the military to lead and open the road from Maiduguri to Ngala during the process of military recovery of that territory and how they later provided security for politicians representing the area to visit the LGA.<sup>60</sup>

## Doing security scans and body searches

One of the primary ways in which yan gora members interact with civilians is through providing security at the entrances to IDP camps, markets, buildings, and other parts of town. This role is particularly important given the high incidence of ‘suicide’ bombers in Maiduguri as well as in multiple LGA headquarter towns in recent years. As mentioned above, the checks are done by people of the same gender. A woman from Maiduguri spoke of how members check people going into and out of communities during the evening and night: “all of them live within their community and they know who is who... and if any stranger is coming into the community, they’ll question him, who do you want to see and at times they tell their member to follow him to see if the person is going to that person’s house. They’re very security alert.”<sup>61</sup> Another woman from Askira Uba credits them with preventing many casualties, saying “the bomb that exploded at the gate in Bakassi, if it weren’t for the effectiveness of the CJTF, the bombers could have caused more harm. They decided to stop them from going into the camp so the bomb later exploded without causing any damage. There was a time also, some bombers attempted to cross over the fence and they were stopped by CJTF members, thereby averting a lot of disaster.”<sup>62</sup> Another IDP, a man from Gwoza who lives in Bakassi camp, spoke of how the yan gora’s work to ensure security had led to increased levels and perceptions of safety in the camp.<sup>63</sup>

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55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Discussions with soldiers in Dikwa in February 2017.

59 Ibid.

60 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

## Running checkpoints and conducting patrols

The yan gora operate checkpoints and patrols in and around the towns, with members working in shifts. As one woman from Konduga said, “In the night, they will go around the back of the village. They will hold their sticks... to see if everything is alright. Some of them will even sleep there.”<sup>64</sup> The checkpoints set up by the yan gora are seen as a strategy that reduced the number of JAS members in Maiduguri in the past as well as the incidence of ‘suicide’ bombers. The patrols have stopped many people before detonation, had people who had been forced to carry IED vests surrender to them, or enabled detonation in such a way that minimized civilian casualties. There have also been reports of yan gora without weapons stopping those suspected of being suicide bombers as they enter the town, thereby detonating the bomb and killing both the person carrying the vest and themselves in a way that does not harm others.

## Screening people to ensure community safety and peace of mind

As yan gora members have knowledge of people in the community, they are often asked by the military to check new people entering areas to ensure that they are not associated with armed opposition groups. One man from Ngala, a dan gora when living there, told CIVIC how he checked people reported to have escaped JAS to make sure they were not JAS members. During this process, a man was recognized as being a JAS member and handed over to the security forces. In Biu, there was widespread suspicion that IDPs from nearby Damboa included many people associated with JAS using their time in Biu to find out information to plan and carry out attacks. In response, yan gora were brought from Damboa to Biu. They were asked to screen Damboa IDPs to see if any of them were not actually IDPs or were suspected members of armed opposition groups. The Damboa CJTF concluded all of the IDPs living in Biu were displaced by the conflict and none were members of armed opposition groups, thereby significantly quelling community tensions.<sup>65</sup> In Jere, levels of stigma and suspicion against strangers including IDPs has fallen due to the introduction of rigorous screening processes by the yan gora of newly displaced populations coming into the LGA.<sup>66</sup>

## Providing security to enable daily life

Respondents spoke of how yan gora members provided security for farmers when they go to their fields. One man from Gwoza stated how they “move out of town first to wait for farmers, especially in the black spot areas using the traditional dane gun. They will give them a time by saying before so or so time, you need to finish. They will then escort farmers back to town.... In some instances, some farmers were killed. In one instance a farmer went out before they came out and took their positions and he was killed before their arrival.”<sup>67</sup> The role that the group plays is crucial given the numbers of civilians killed or chased away when going to farm by members of armed opposition groups, the fears civilians have every time they go to their farmland, and the importance of farming to both food security and livelihoods. According to respondents, yan gora members have also protected worshippers in mosques and churches, and provided extra security during elections, even resolving disputes that arise on Election Day.<sup>68</sup>

## Assisting people to safety

Respondents spoke of ways in which yan gora members had helped people escape violence and reach safety. One man from Damboa spoke about how he had become disabled due to an attack on his town and had to have one of his legs amputated. He rode on a tricycle first to Konduga, then Mailari, at which point yan gora members helped him to get to Maiduguri. Another woman from Askira Uba spoke about how people were assisted by yan gora members when they arrived in Maiduguri and escorted to an appropriate IDP camp.

## Resolving disputes

In addition to protecting civilians, yan gora members play a role in community dispute resolution and reconciliation, for example, in cases of theft. The initial reason behind this development was said by respondents to be because civil authorities had fled. With the police, LGA officials and most traditional leaders no longer present, there was a vacuum, with only yan gora members coming out “to fight the insurgents and stop what was happening.”<sup>69</sup> The yan gora were the only form of authority present save the military. By the time civil authorities returned to

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64 Ibid.

65 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 26.

66 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 106.

67 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.



Civilians wait for medical care at a makeshift primary school clinic, which was turned into a camp for internally displaced persons.  
Center for Civilians in Conflict

“Many respondents spoke of how integrated yan gora members were in their communities, how they are ‘our children’ and ‘part of us.’”

areas, people had noticed that yan gora members would provide quick, impartial, fair, and satisfactory solutions to disputes without charge and were able to get amicable outcomes compared to the police who would refer the case to court. According to respondents interviewed, people had lower levels of trust in traditional institutions compared to the yan gora due to perceptions of inactivity and selfishness on the part of those in traditional institutions. Moreover, reporting cases to traditional leaders requires the payment of a token amount of money, which people no longer had access to due to declining commercial and livelihood activities. Furthermore, women and young people have limited access to these institutions and can only raise concerns to them if older men in their families are willing to do so. Many IDPs also felt unable to go to these traditional institutions for help and support. Meanwhile, the yan gora had gained status within the communities for facing JAS and their time spent with the military. People felt the yan gora had tacit approval from military authorities as they were “working hand in hand” with them, according to many people interviewed.<sup>70</sup> These changes were seen to have caused “envy, disagreement and conflict between the CJTF and the traditional leaders who believe it is culturally their own responsibility to resolve conflicts” according to a Maiduguri-based civil society activist.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, the CJTF were seen to be involved in serious criminal matters, such as cases of rape, acting outside their mandate in cases that should rather be handled by the criminal justice system.

## Serving the community in other ways

Respondents gave examples of how yan gora members had assisted them and their families in ways that may not have contributed to physical protection but were still needed. One man from Gwoza spoke of how they would assist women during childbirth,

transporting them to health facilities. He also spoke of how they would gather children to teach civic education and coach them on how to play football.<sup>72</sup> Another man from Gwoza spoke of how they were ensuring fairness in food distribution, “the CJTF has met and said [they] will not allow anyone to cheat in camps during [food] delivery. If they divide food items, some people would not get food but due to help from CJTF, everyone in camp [gets] food successfully. This is the most important thing CJTF has done for us.”<sup>73</sup> A man from Ngala spoke of how yan gora members went to collect the corpses of those killed by JAS on the request of family members so they were able to give them a proper burial.<sup>74</sup> A woman from Bama spoke of how, when there was an attack on Giwa Barracks, even though people living nearby left their homes to seek refuge in the city center, some yan gora members went to help soldiers while others stayed guarding homes to prevent robberies, an usual occurrence when attacks happen.<sup>75</sup>

## A force for community cohesion

In many places, the yan gora was seen as a group that brought people from different ethno-linguistic and religious backgrounds together and aimed to safeguard all members of the community. For example, in Jere, where the group is seen as multi-ethnic, religiously integrated, and with both women and IDPs, young people and yan gora members were more likely to mingle with people of other ethno-linguistic groups than others in the community.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, in Biu, not only did Christians and Muslims come together to form the yan gora, but also they jointly protected places of worship from attack during times of prayer. This practice has protected civilians and led to increased community cohesion and determination to stand together in the face of attempts to divide.

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 107.

## HARMING CIVILIANS

While respondents interviewed were appreciative of the ways in which yan gora members had protected them, all of them pointed to concrete ways that members harm civilians. The commission of civilian harm is acknowledged by many members and leaders with whom CIVIC has spoken. At our roundtable in November 2016, one leader spoke of the ways “some of our over-zealous members try to get more powers to themselves.”<sup>77</sup> One former dan gora from Marte was very clear that action needed to be taken, asking for a code of conduct, “in other words rules and regulations to govern our activities and punish offenders for those that misbehave...There is code of conduct but they [need] to be applied like [that of] the other security agencies...so that the bad eggs among us will be punished.”<sup>78</sup> While they may provide protection and safety and behave in towns where security forces are present, yan gora are viewed as sometimes ‘losing control’ once they go out on patrol without the military. As will be examined below, there have been cases of extrajudicial killings (sometimes at the request of soldiers), sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse, and extortion of money. These developments leave civilians with few avenues for help and diminishing hope. As one man from Gwoza said, “We run from Boko Haram then our CJTF is again punishing us, where do we go?”<sup>79</sup>

### Assaulting and killing those suspected of association with armed opposition groups

As mentioned above, in Biu, one of the ways in which yan gora members sought to safeguard communities was by going house to house, asking people to give up their own children if suspected of association with JAS, burning their houses if they did not do so, and killing those suspected. The level of proof they required before taking these actions is unknown. A woman interviewed talked of how they beat many people in Monguno because they could not differentiate JAS members from inhabitants. When she intervened, they also beat her. A former dan gora from Bama spoke about parents passing on information to children associated with armed opposition groups and a dan

gora with the title of ‘discipliner’ going to their home to tell them not to do so. While he did not talk about physical force being used in these cases, it is known that this has been used elsewhere against families of suspected fighters. Those from areas outside LGA headquarters are particularly likely to face suspicion. One man from Gwoza spoke of how many people from his village would be searched and arrested upon entering Gwoza town then handed over to soldiers who killed some of them, saying they must be JAS members if they lived outside the town. He asked, “If these people [JAS] come, they are killing us. If we come inside the local government [town], the CJTF are killing us. Where do we go to?”<sup>80</sup> There have been cases of yan gora members not always accepting women associated with JAS, and some instances where members kill these women.<sup>81</sup> In at least one instance, this practice led to a father refusing to accept his daughter, abducted by JAS and later rescued, back into his home, as he was afraid yan gora members would think he is sympathetic to the group.<sup>82</sup> It is important to note there have also been cases of assault and murder of civilians, even when the person concerned is not suspected of association with any armed opposition groups.

### Restricting freedom of movement out of IDP camps for security reasons

Respondents complained about how yan gora members would not allow them to leave camps to seek their livelihoods as they suspected they would “connive with Boko Haram and come with a bomb.”<sup>83</sup> Many IDP camps have a system where people require passes, only available at certain times and to certain people, to leave and re-enter the camp. In some camps, yan gora members charge for these passes as they wish to restrict movement and use the money collected to buy materials needed for their work. IDPs have told CIVIC how these restrictions on freedom of movement are linked to SEA with those who have ‘boyfriends’ in the yan gora able to freely enter and leave the camp as opposed to those who do not.<sup>84</sup> They have also told CIVIC that yan gora members at the gate in some camps collect bribes to allow people inside, and that they felt unsafe as someone who wishes to do harm may use this method to enter the camp and attack them.<sup>85</sup>

77 Notes of CIVIC roundtable on civilian protection and harm mitigation held with yan gora members in Maiduguri in November 2016.

78 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 C. Nagarajan, ‘Gender Assessment of Northeast Nigeria,’ (June 2017).

82 According to members of the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations of Nigeria who worked on this case.

83 Respondents speaking during interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

84 Notes from protection workshops held with IDPs in December 2016; Respondents speaking during interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

85 Ibid.



Maggie Hallahan/US Government Work

“Urgent action, in terms of both policy implementation and programming work, is necessary to mitigate current harm, ensure the yan gora prioritize civilian protection, and guard against future harm.”

## Intimidating civilians

Many respondents spoke about how some yan gora speak very harshly to civilians and intimidate them. One man from Marte said, “Because of the obedience of the people, we comply with what they say. We fear CJTF authority. Most of the children and women obey the CJTF more than the men even.”<sup>86</sup> That yan gora members instill fear, particularly in women and children, was confirmed by others. A man from Gwoza spoke about how, “in more cases the children fear them because of the harsh nature of how they confront people.”<sup>87</sup> In addition, a woman from Bama said that they talk to women more harshly than to the men saying, “They think they are stronger than women with physical strength, and men are equals” and linked this perception with sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse.<sup>88</sup> While some respondents spoke about how yan gora members continued to be friendly and open, relations with civilians seem to be changing. “People are scared of them, people don’t interact with them because of that...They don’t have respect for anybody... In most cases, they deal harshly and bully people...We are just patient with them in the community because they are harsh... Confrontation leads to fights...If people are not patient with them, they’ll be no peace,” according to another man from Gwoza.<sup>89</sup> Changing relations between communities and the yan gora will be explored in more detail below.

## Employing punitive justice measures and being used to settle personal scores

As outlined above, communities have turned to the yan gora for dispute resolution and reconciliation. While reports of their adjudication skills were mostly positive, respondents spoke of cases where they were used to settle scores and employed overly punitive and violent methods to dispense justice. One woman from Bama said, “when there is a dispute between two people, if one knows the CJTF, I may or may not be at fault, but I may go and meet him and tell him ‘you did that so and so to me’... And because he knows me, we grew up at the same place, he may avenge for me... And I may have been at fault, so they have taken actions into their hands, and they may beat you up which is not right.”<sup>90</sup> There have been reports of civilians being tied up the same way that the yan gora tie up members of armed opposition groups. These individuals lost the

feeling in their hands and some became paralyzed as a result. According to a man from Gwoza, “Some people they’ll just paralyze. Many of our youth now, they have now paralyzed. They’ve tied their hands beating them. Before we rush them to a hospital, all their hands are not working again.”<sup>91</sup> Another man from Gwoza spoke about how yan gora members in Bakassi camp separated two teenage boys who were fighting and, as one boy refused to go, beat him until the boy lost consciousness.

## Committing extortion and theft, including the diversion of humanitarian aid

Respondents spoke of how, while some yan gora members are motivated by patriotism, others are motivated by money. They gave examples of yan gora members collecting booty during operations in the form of animals, including cattle and chickens, food products, and valuable items. They also spoke of yan gora members stealing people’s property, for example after curfew. One woman from Bama spoke about how the yan gora offered to go back to Bama to retrieve people’s items and money and bring them back to Maiduguri. Her aunt told them about where she had buried her jewelry and gold. When they returned, they told her they could not find these items, but when the woman went to Bama she found the area had been dug up, and it was confirmed that yan gora members dug these items out. Respondents also spoke about yan gora taking money and goods from people by force, including by beating them, or forcing people to sell items to them at a lower price than their worth. In Kaga, it has been reported that yan gora members ask traders bringing goods into the community for ‘tax.’ This ‘tax’ was seen as a necessary source of income generation given yan gora members do not receive any regular source of income but also caused frustration and conflict with the traders concerned.<sup>92</sup> As with other actors, ranging from the military and police to politicians, civil servants, and traditional and religious leaders, yan gora members have been accused of diverting humanitarian aid from intended recipients. Respondents said yan gora members take the food and property of IDPs and force them to give them money for the items. They also spoke of yan gora members taking “food from you if you are leaving the IDP camp to go outside and grind it, saying that you will sell it.

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86 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 117.

They do not give it to NEMA or SEMA,<sup>93</sup> they will keep it and sell it themselves.”<sup>94</sup> In Dikwa, CIVIC heard reports of yan gora members stealing food distribution cards from volunteers who then take food collected to sell in the market.<sup>95</sup> There, they are accused by community members of causing confusion during food distribution in order to steal these cards. This chaos then results in excessive use of force by security forces to ‘control’ the crowds, leading to injury and, in some cases, death.

## Committing sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse

Almost every respondent had heard of cases of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse committed by yan gora members. These abuses ranged from the use of physical force in the form of beatings and rape, to reprisals when women refused, to conditioning freedom of movement and access to food for sex. As one woman from Askira Uba said, they “may decide to love a woman but she declines and they can use force to fight them, i.e. beat them when they refuse or take some form of revenge. They will indirectly punish women in other ways when they decline them... In some situations where a woman declines a man, they will use their power to stop them from going out of the camp or in some instances where they come back late, they will argue with them because they rejected them even if they are letting others enter.”<sup>96</sup> In December 2016, IDPs from Gwoza told CIVIC about how a girl who complained about not getting any food during distribution was told to come to the room of a dan gora. She later reported the case “saying she was hungry and there was nothing else she could do.” Sexual exploitation is seen to be more common among unaccompanied girls under the age of 20 who did not have parents to provide for them, and among widows who had many children to feed. A woman from Bama said, “When you are with a CJTF, you get access to a lot of things.... They use that as an opportunity, the CJTF. Because at that time they were given a share of food, so when you have a boyfriend, a CJTF member, he makes sure you get it. That is why most were giving in at that time, it was not as if they were really interested in such relationships.”<sup>97</sup> In Dikwa, a civil society activist who works in the area spoke about how

women and girls who were IDPs and lacked financial resources would go out at night to sell sex, and that yan gora members would allow them to be out after curfew in exchange for sex. He was worried not only about the sexual exploitation in the area, but also the potential that these women and girls may face other dangers, such as being trafficked or killed for body parts.<sup>98</sup> A female respondent from Monguno recounted the forced marriage of her 13-year-old daughter.<sup>99</sup> A yan gora member took a liking to the girl, and would take her to his place regularly, during which time her mother would not see her. After this had happened a few times, her neighbors advised her to marry her daughter to him, given that he was taking her away anyway. She felt her daughter was too young to be married but she had no other choice. The dan gora is now physically violent. She is worried for her daughter’s continued safety and feels she has nowhere to turn.<sup>100</sup>

## Trading drugs

The incidence of drug use has increased significantly over the course of the conflict, with many civilians attempting to find ways to forget what they have experienced and suppress pain or hunger. The absence of good medical care or food provision and the increased availability of drugs are two other factors exacerbating drug use.<sup>101</sup> Some respondents felt yan gora members not only take drugs, which diminishes ability to protect communities, but also were involved in bringing drugs into camps.

## Opportunities for redress?

Where respondents reported some mechanisms for redress when civilians were harmed, these seemed largely due to NGO intervention and confined to a particular locality. For example, IDPs in Bakassi camp told CIVIC in December 2016 that they had no ways to report or stand up for their rights, for if they tried to do so, camp officials and security personnel could send them out of the camp, using the CJTF, or accuse them of being associated with armed opposition groups. A year later, respondents from Bakassi spoke about how people were more aware of their rights, mobilized and no longer accepted abuses. The change was credited to increasing enlightenment, and the ability to report

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93 NEMA is the National Emergency Management Agency and SEMA is the State Emergency Management Agency.

94 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

95 Conversation in Dikwa with civilians and security agents in February and March 2017.

96 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 The woman was referred to an appropriate women’s rights organisation which has undertaken to help her.

100 For more on sexual exploitation and abuse in IDP camps in Maiduguri, please read: Human Rights Watch, ‘Nigeria: Officials Abusing Displaced Women, Girls,’ 31 October 2016.

101 A. Mukpo, ‘Out of the Shadows: Adopting a Peacebuilding Approach to the Social Effects of Drug Use in Nigeria,’ (Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme and International Alert, 2017).

cases to the National Human Rights Commission and the Nigerian Bar Association. These cases were subsequently investigated, and the people concerned prosecuted. Even without such programming, civilians have been able to get help from government authorities. A woman from Monguno, who had been beaten when she intervened to stop yan gora members beating her son, took her case to the police station. The police warned those concerned to stop beating people. While this case does not show any form of restitution per se, the woman concerned was happy with its outcome. When cases have been reported to soldiers, they have reported them to their superiors who then either move the dan gora concerned to another location or discharge them from their work. There have also been cases reported to the CJTF leaders who have warned and punished their members accordingly. In many instances however, respondents said there were no ways to report harm caused by yan gora members. They felt that, as yan gora members were working closely with security agencies, any attempts to report harm would not be resolved but rather security agents would simply apologize and ask the respondent to forget. As one woman from Bama said, “Nothing happens to them, you can only report to them, you know they walk hand in hand with the soldiers, so they are likely friends, so how can you report someone’s friend to him, you know that’s not possible. It is like fighting the government and that’s not possible.”<sup>102</sup>

## HOW PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CJTF HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME

Attitudes of all respondents towards the yan gora have significantly deteriorated over time. At the beginning, they were praised for acting voluntarily and sacrificing their lives to protect the community. They were seen as deserving a large part of the credit for the level of peace Borno enjoys today in its state capital and many LGA headquarter towns. As a woman civil society activist said, “they were real heroes, I celebrate them. Because when they started the whole thing it really had so many positive impacts on the community and Borno.”<sup>103</sup>

However, with time, levels of civilian harm, exploitation and human rights abuses by yan gora members have increased. Many respondents said the change happened when some people were selected to be part of the BOYES and receive monthly stipends. They said the group had been corrupted by becoming integrated into the system. This led to members becoming more relaxed and not working as hard or with as much focus as before. As will be described below, they are now seen as more politically rather than civilian protection focused.

People contrasted the initial yan gora, who were seen as performing well, with those who joined BOYES later. They said that the initial yan gora had jobs and so were not interested in receiving money for this work, but the ones who joined later took drugs, were jobless, and had no incentives to look for jobs as they received a salary from the government. This latter category of members was seen as doing the work for their own (monetary) interests rather than to protect civilians. At the same time, the original yan gora members became disheartened and stopped working, as those who were doing less work and taking less risk were being compensated, and they were not.

A woman from Bama summarized the situation: “I even like it [more] then compared to now. The selected few are not competent ones and they were given uniforms. Most of the CJTF I know before were not given the uniform and they were very active CJTF, they did a very good job, a very great job to the community and yet they hadn’t been chosen so that [is] why I say [the selection] is kind of political. If the whole community will be allowed to be CJTF, it is even better because then they did a very good job. Back then, nobody would say it is not my work, I don’t receive a salary so I won’t do that, it’s not my job as nobody was collecting salary. From 13 years on, they would start gora and would do

102 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

103 Ibid.

a good job. When the government started selecting and it turned out to be something political, this created problems and made people discouraged. These days, people don't even care. They say this is not my job, I'm not a soldier, I am not a CJTF. What will you be doing if you were not chosen, you will be reluctant of course, you will be doing nothing even if you can do something. You know this mentality of we human[s], let them do it since they are being paid."<sup>104</sup>

The yan gora were compared negatively with the yan banga and kungiyar maharba. The kungiyar maharba were seen to follow a code of ethics and to have discipline. In Dikwa, soldiers told CIVIC in March 2017 that they had stopped working with CJTF members but preferred to work instead with kungiyar maharba and yan banga. They were seen as older, more mature, controlled and less interested in money, less prone to abuses, and very knowledgeable about the terrain. In Biu, while members of the yan banga are seen as friendly and consisting mostly of older people, the yan gora are seen to be "out of control sometimes," containing a high number of drug addicts, accused of extra judicial killings, and with members "seeing themselves as army or uniform men, addressing you anyhow and feeling they can do you any harm."<sup>105</sup>

## FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

Every single respondent said they were worried about what would happen to the yan gora if urgent action was not taken. They are seen to have had training and access to guns, and experienced power and respect through the role they have played, even if this 'respect' is tinged by fear. For young men in particular whose usual routes to community respect, in the form of income generation and marriage, are blocked, there are powerful incentives to try to hold on to this 'respect' by any means necessary.<sup>106</sup> People perceived many members as having to take drugs to be able to put themselves into dangerous situations and worried what would happen if the source of these drugs and the money needed to buy them dried up. As one woman from Bama said, "they're used to taking drugs. They don't have money to buy these drugs. They can take money from people to buy drugs, it can happen."<sup>107</sup>

People in Maiduguri and CJTF leaders have been warning of what the future may hold if action is not taken soon. A male civil society activist spoke of hearing threats from one of their prominent sector commanders, stating, "He was saying, we brought peace to this state but we have not been rewarded so if nothing is done to reward us, the community, the state, the country, will suffer hostility that will be worse than Boko Haram."<sup>108</sup> Indeed, increasing dissatisfaction expressed against the state for lack of recognition and remuneration is one of the factors increasing the potential for this conflict to escalate into violence.

All respondents stressed the need for action and said that members should be incorporated into security agencies, be assigned to ministries and given jobs, even if they are not adequately qualified. As one man said, "Without government jobs for the CJTF, what we will face will be more dangerous than the current situation. They already know war things. They know how to operate war things. The government should create jobs for them. The government has to save us."<sup>109</sup>

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104 Ibid.

105 C. Nagarajan and H. Matfess, 22.

106 C. Nagarajan, 'Masculinities, Conflict and Violence in Nigeria,' (NSRP/ V4C, 2016).

107 Respondent speaking during an interview conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

## Increasing politicization and mobilization around elections in 2019

There is a history of the use of groups by politicians in Borno. In the period after the transition to democracy, what was called ECOMOG, a “private militia of young women and men” used to “do the bidding of their political masters.”<sup>110</sup> Respondents spoke about how yan gora members were already close to politicians and worried about the implications of this for future elections. As one Gwoza man said, “Now, as time goes on, they have started politicizing their activities and some have become political thugs. Instead of protecting the common man’s lives they are running after politicians. For example, whenever Senator Ndume is in town, they are always coming behind him.”<sup>111</sup> In the 2015 elections, they escorted politicians to and from rallies and events. Many politicians asked them to provide security and subsequently the group became part of their entourage. When there were disturbances during rallies or events, it was said they would beat up people, including on Election Day. As one man said, “They are thinking they are part of the government of the day so they can do anything to protect that government.”<sup>112</sup> A female civil society activist spoke about how she observed yan gora members in one IDP camp pressuring people on how to vote and checking for whom they voted. People spoke about how yan gora members are already becoming more politically focused in the run up to the 2019 elections. A male civil society activist who tries to engage with them spoke of how leaders would leave workshops aimed at determining their needs when they heard the Governor was coming to town so they could go to meet him. He said, “I think, it’s a time bomb just waiting to explode. I’m really concerned that the wave of violence may increase, God forbid...they can also be used to attack political opponents and if that happens, the politicians who are in power may also give protection to them and if they are protected, the impunity will continue. Knowing they are protected they can do anything, particular when they are under the influence of drugs.”<sup>113</sup>

## Shifting focus away from protection

Respondents also spoke about how they saw yan gora members as less concerned about protecting civilians and safeguarding communities compared to how they were in the early days. Now, they are seen as more focused on making money and becoming involved in politics and, as a result, are more lax about security matters. As one man from Gwoza said, “Some of them are following politicians to get something from them, financial support. They leave their positions to do so and pursue politicians and anything may happen. This creates security vulnerabilities...they should not follow politicians but concentrate on what they were doing before, i.e., saving life and property. Let them mobilize and enlighten them. For them to stop following the politicians. If not, anything can happen. [Armed opposition groups] will start infiltrating into the community again without the CJTF carrying out their responsibilities.”<sup>114</sup>

## Becoming (more) involved in criminality and gangs

Many respondents spoke about their fears that yan gora members, if left without any jobs, would turn to criminality and form gangs. As a woman from Bama said, “They have been given too much freedom, too much priority, and that makes them feel they can do anything, at any time. And so, when all this, hopefully, insurgency, is over, and I told you, they don’t have jobs, they’re not interested in looking for jobs. I think they cannot be contained later, they cannot be controlled. When this insurgency is over, they must have jobs... If there is no action taken against them now, we will have to contain them later.”<sup>115</sup> A man from Gwoza said, “if Boko Haram crisis ends and they leave these people like this, it is very bad. All these things will be on our head. There will be more terrorism. We won’t enjoy our lives. Even if we farm, they’ll pick all the things we have. I worry they will kill people in their homes, stop and rob cars on the roads, take more intoxicants, teach children to be terrorists. If they continue like this, the community will spoil. It will become more dangerous than it is now.”<sup>116</sup>

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110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

## **Increasing tensions within the yan gora and with the yan banga and kungiyar maharba**

As described above, people selected to be part of BOYES have received some training and are paid a monthly stipend whereas the volunteer CJTF, the kungiyar maharba and the yan banga do not receive money regularly from government. While the BOYES and volunteer CJTF claim they are now united, there are underlying tensions and grievances held by those who are not receiving money. Some individuals are unhappy with the BOYES selection process and not being compensated when they feel they face more risk. At the same time, while the CJTF are recognized by the international community, and the kungiyar maharba and yan banga are recognized by communities, the BOYES are not necessarily viewed as highly by most people. Fears were expressed as to the future trajectories of the groups, particularly given the resources and power young people have gained through membership. There have also been reports of tensions in some areas between the yan gora and yan banga and between the yan gora and youth groups which feel completely left out.

## **Derailing processes of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR)**

Many yan gora are vehemently opposed to any suggestions of reintegration of those associated with armed opposition groups. The way people associated

with armed opposition groups are seen and treated adds to their sense of hopelessness about the future and discourages them from trying to leave the group, as they fear they will be targeted and killed by yan gora members. While some women associated with armed opposition groups have been living in communities for a while, the government is planning to release the first batch of graduates from its Operation Safe Corridor, a deradicalization program for those who chose to leave armed opposition groups.<sup>117</sup> These former members will be sent to communities that are unprepared for this, and where many yan gora members are fundamentally opposed to their release and reintegration. It is unclear what will happen next, but the prospects for reprisals and counter reprisals seem likely.

## **Developing into a new phase of the conflict**

Beyond the future trajectories outlined above, there is a risk that the yan gora may contribute to a new phase of the conflict. One potential risk is increased tensions between and within the yan gora, yan sanda and kungiyar maharba. For example, groups may adopt political allegiances that are at odds with one another. In addition, the return of armed opposition group fighters to communities coupled with incomplete and ineffective DDRR could lead to new challenges. For example, new groups may form comprised of former armed opposition group fighters and some of the groups that once fought against them.

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<sup>117</sup> According to conversations with programmes and NGOs working with the government on DDRR processes.

## CONCLUSION

The yan gora have played an important role in the conflict in Borno. As many respondents stated, without their involvement, the majority of Borno territory and significant parts of neighboring Adamawa and Yobe states, and neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, may well still be under the control of armed opposition groups. Additionally, without the help of the yan gora, these groups may have been able to further spread their influence and territorial control. The yan gora have been instrumental in creating improved security conditions in the state.

While the yan gora have positive and far-reaching impacts on civilians' lives, they also pose specific challenges for the Nigerian government, security agencies, and civilian communities. Through association with the yan gora, thousands of young people have been exposed to and experienced violence and have become accustomed to power and fighting with little to no regulation.

Communities tend to view members of the yan gora more positively than they view state security forces, and many are thankful for their role in defending and protecting communities. Yet, they are also concerned about the civilian harm they commit and worried about the group's future. Their concerns are heightened by widespread dissatisfaction in the ranks of current members due to selective remuneration, and lack of

recognition by the military and other state actors, for the role they have played and the sacrifices members have made, increasing politicization, the widespread availability and knowledge of arms, high incidence of drug use, and the 'taste of power' acquired. Given the changing conflict dynamics, declining reliance by security actors, varying levels of trust and increasing concern on the part of civilians, and the increased strategic and proactive engagement of ISWA with communities to build support, the role and effectiveness of the yan gora is likely to continue to be in flux.

Urgent action, in terms of both policy implementation and programming work, is necessary to mitigate current harm, ensure the yan gora prioritize civilian protection, and guard against future harm. CIVIC will undertake a fuller research study that looks at the yan banga and kungiyar maharba, as well as the yan gora, examines the situation outside Maiduguri and includes perspectives of those involved in these groups as well as security agents, government officials and civilian populations. CIVIC is also an active member of the Northeast Peace and Security Network, a group of Borno-based actors focusing on and interested in conflict mitigation and peacebuilding, which is currently developing a joint policy influencing strategy and recommendations for action by leaders of these groups, NGOs, federal and state governments, and security agencies.



**RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.**

**T** +1 202 558 6958  
**E** [info@civiliansinconflict.org](mailto:info@civiliansinconflict.org)  
[civiliansinconflict.org](http://civiliansinconflict.org)