“Take them to Government House or Aso Rock”: Community receptivity to reintegration of Operation Safe Corridor’s deradicalised Ex-Boko Haram members in Northeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: Boko Haram (BH) insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria has been extensively studied but much scholarly attention has not been given to Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Yet, it remains the most significant non-kinetic approaches to BH insurgency. This study examines the deradicalisation programme of OPSC, communities’ receptivity to reintegrated ex-BH members (BHMs) and its effects on OPSC objectives and overall efforts at ending BH insurgency in Nigeria. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed for the study. Result revealed that OPSC has attracted demobilisation of BHMs. However, communities are unwilling to accept the ex-BHMs back due to the problems of distrust and widespread perception that government is prioritising the welfare ex-BHMs above the victims of their atrocities. In response, communities are attacking, stigmatising, keeping incommunicado as well as enforcing socio-economic blockade on the ex-BHMs reintegrated into their communities. In turn, reintegrated ex-BHMs are abscording communities and

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Managing disengaged Boko Haram (BH) members is a subject of concern to governments in Lake Chad region. In Nigeria, it is of more significance because of the rate of disengagement of ex-BH members (ex-BHMs). Military-led Operation Safe Corridor was established in 2016 to spearhead the deradicalisation of disengaged BH. However, the major challenge remains community acceptance of deradicalised ex-BHMs because of the heinous atrocities they had previously committed in their communities as well as community perception of government unconcerned disposition towards their plights while giving so much attention to the ex-BHMs. It is recommended that government should seek the buy-in of the communities and address the plights of victims of BH attacks. It is also recommended that community-level transitional justice and reconciliation programmes should be set up to reconcile the ex-BHMs with those who are victims of their attacks. This will help heal wounds and aid community acceptance of ex-BHMs.
rejoining insurgents, frustrated into committing crimes and this is dis-incentivising BHMs who are willing to demobilise. This trend will make BH retain its deadliness and this will enhance the perpetuation of insurgency and insecurity in Nigeria. It is recommended that government should give more priority to victims of BH attacks as this may encourage community acceptance. It is also recommended that community-level transitional justice and reconciliation programmes should be set up to reconcile ex-BHMs with victims of their attacks.

Subjects: Social Sciences; Development Studies; Development Studies; Development Studies; Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Sociology; Social Sciences; Criminology and Criminal Justice

Keywords: Operation Safe Corridor; Deradicalisation; Boko Haram; Terrorism; North East Nigeria; Insurgency

1. Introduction

The security architecture of modern state since the end of the Cold War has changed. Armed conflicts are no longer between sovereign states but within sovereign states; they are triggered by elements within state against the state. The most prevalent manifestations of this “new” form of armed conflict are terrorism and insurgency. Because of the challenge they constitute to the state monopoly of legitimate use of force, the state have to use all means available to curtail the activities of the group. As Owonikoko and Danjibo (2019) noted, failure of the use of coercive power of the state against terrorist organisations is currently giving way to the use of non-coercive approach. One of the most adopted non-coercive approaches is organisation of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes. For more than a decade, Nigeria has been containing the terrorist activities of Boko Haram (BH) and its breakaway factions in the North East (NE). One of the Nigerian state’s responses to the group’s threat in recent time is the establishment of military-led deradicalisation programme called Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). This study examines activities of OPSC in NE in relation to community receptivity to reintroduction of ex-BH Members (ex-BHMs) and its implication for the overall aim of ending terrorism in NE Nigeria. Four research questions guided the study. They are: What is the nature of the operation of OPSC in the deradicalisation of BHMs? How do communities affected by BH insurgency perceive the deradicalisation programme of OPSC? How does their perception of the programme impinge on the counter-insurgency operations against BH in the NE? and what should government do to improve community acceptance of the deradicalised BHMs?

2. Review of related literature

Violent non-state groups (VNSGs) play significant role in the challenges of security in the contemporary world. Therefore, contemporary security architecture of modern state is hinged on how effective states can engage VNSGs in their territories. Where the state finds it difficult to engage VNSGs in its area, peace may become elusive; where the state effectively engages these groups, peace reigns. Owonikoko and Danjibo (2019) observe that there are three basic approaches usually adopted by state in response to the security challenges posed by VNSGs in the contemporary world. One involves the use of coercive power of the state, in which case the security forces of the state, especially the army, are deployed in repelling the group’s uprising against the state. The second approach is the use of non-coercive approach in which the state relaxes its instrument of coercion but activates “soft-power” options in engaging VNSGs. This may involve dialogue, negotiation, granting of amnesty, implementation of deradicalisation programmes or application of any other forms of political solutions. While the former is called “hard-power” approach, the latter is called “soft-power” approach. The third approach involves a blend of both coercive and non-coercive approaches, engaging both simultaneously. This eclectic response to the VNSGs is usually referred to as carrot and stick approach.
The coercive approach has, since the 9/11 attack against the United States of America (USA), been the most popular among the state’s response to VNSGs. This is especially so because only the modern state is expected to possess the monopoly of legitimate use of force. Therefore, any element within the state posing a security challenge contests the monopoly of the legitimate use of force with the state, and such element should be crushed and flushed out. While this approach helps to project the state as “no nonsense” entity, the approach has proven to be bloody with the potential to escalate violence and facilitate grave humanitarian cost on civilians. The approach may also drive VNSGs underground and propel them to use guerrilla tactics against the state security agents. This often makes the approach counter-productive in the long run. On the other hand, non-coercive approach can prevent the possibility of facilitating grave humanitarian cost on the civilian but when it is not properly conceived and implemented, it may send an unintended message to the people, projecting the state as being weak especially when dialoguing or negotiating with VNSGs. Several studies have thus recommended non-coercive approach over the use of coercion in engaging VNSGs (Audrey, 2008; Crenshaw, 1996; Dudouet, 2010; Hofman & Schneckener, 2011; Seth & Martin, 2008; Stedman, 1997). As Owonikoko and Danjibo (2019) observe, modern states are now reducing the use of coercion on VNSGs and adopting non-coercive approach.

Nigerian state has always used coercive approach in its engagement with armed groups, and the use of coercive approach against armed groups in the country seems to have increased since the return to democracy of the Nigerian state in 1999. However, the failure of the coercive approach has often led to the adoption of subtle non-coercive approach. The case of militant groups in the Niger Delta is a case in point. After the state had waged ferocious war against the militia in 2018, the state adopted a non-coercive approach by implementing the amnesty programme (Owonikoko, 2016). Similarly, since the outbreak of BH insurgency, the Nigerian state has responded in diverse ways straddling coercive and non-coercive approaches. Successive military operations in code names have been formed to address the activities of the BH group—Operation Restore Order, Operation Boyona, Operation Zaman Lafiya, Operation Lafiya Dole and Operation Hadin Kai. Besides these, various other bodies, such as voluntary policing outfits like Hunters Association/Professional Hunters Association, Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), Vigilante Group of Nigeria and even multinational regional security force, Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF), have been formed to address the nefarious activities of the group in Nigeria and beyond. There are, however, problems with the use of military approach to fight BH insurgency. One of the problems with coercive/military operation is that too much money is voted to security and defence at the detriment of other critical sectors of the state. Since the outbreak of BH attack, Nigeria’s defence expenditure has increased significantly. For instance, from 2009 to 2018, Nigeria’s defence spending stood at $19176bn (Onuoha et al., 2020). Meanwhile, other critical sectors such as education and health are severely underfunded. The diminished provision for these two sectors became conspicuous when Covid-19 Pandemic struck Nigeria. Stemming from overspending on the military is the problem of corruption especially in the procurement of hardwares (Njoku, 2020; Onuoha et al., 2020). Another major problem of the coercive/military operation is the inescapability of civilian casualties. The bombing of internally displaced persons (IDPs) camp in Rann, Borno State mistakenly taken as BH camps in January 2017 in which at least 115 persons died and over 100 injured (Adeniyi, 2017; Ibrahim, 2017), and the accidental bombing of the Sokotuko village in Damboa leading to the death of 17 persons, including children and elders, (Owolabi, 2020) are the two recent cases in point.

Apart from the coercive military approach of the state, several other non-coercive efforts have been made by the state. In 2011, the Nigeria’s National Assembly promulgated the Terrorism Prevention Act (TPA) which was amended in 2013. This Act defines act of terrorism and also establishes the framework for investigation and prosecution of suspects of cases of terrorism. Organisation of deradicalisation programmes for the insurgents is another non-coercive approach employed by the state in the engagement of BH terrorist group. There are three forms of deradicalisation programmes that have and are still being implemented in Nigeria. One is the
prison-based deradicalisation programme organised by the Nigerian government in 2014 in Kuje Prison to deradicalise convicted or awaiting trial BH fighters (Atta & Bryans, 2016). The second is community-based deradicalisation programme organised by Neem foundation in 2017 for women, children and young people associated with BH through the provision of psychosocial, behavioural and reintegration training for them. The programme lasted for only one year. The last, which is the focus of this study, is the Nigerian government sponsored Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). This programme which is established in 2016 is sited in a temporary facility in Gombe State. It is meant to deradicalise BH combatants who have surrendered or are captured (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019).

Since the onset of BH insurgency, cutting-edge research has been conducted around the activities of the group and government responses. Studies have investigated the origin and activities of the group (Mohammed, 2014; Onuoha, 2012, 2010) as well as the various aspects of government responses such as military (Bappah, 2016; Onuoha et al., 2020), promulgation of Terrorism Prevention Act (Eji, 2016) and so on. Meanwhile, the establishment of OPSC which has evolved as a vital component of the Nigerian government’s strategies for addressing BH insurgency and also important for achieving sustainable peace and normalcy for the people of the northeast Nigeria (Centre for Democracy and Development, n.d.) is yet to be given serious attention of scholars. However, in recent time, studies have started to examine the activities of OPSC. One of the first major studies on OPSC was carried out by Felbab-Brown (see Felbab-Brown, 2018). The study titled The Limit of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism: Nigeria Case Study observed that the OPSC programme is narrowly conceived and could jeopardise the attempt to reduce the intensity of the BHcrisis in the NE. Bukarti and Bryson (2019) is another major study on OPSC. This study discussed OPSC as a model of deradicalisation programme for the Lake Chad Region countries. The study observed that while OPSC is an instructive case study for neighbouring Lake Chad countries, integration of fighters is a key challenge. Another very important study on OPSC is Akum et al. (2021). This study basically discussed the nature and process of deradicalisation programmes in the Lake Chad countries, with Nigeria’s OPSC also included. These three studies are very important in explaining the trajectories of the development of OPSC as Nigerian deradicalisation programme. A number of challenges to the programme were identified and recommendations were proffered. However, these studies did not discuss how communities perceived the programme. Where it was discussed as in Felbab-Brown (2018), it was speculative and based on conjectures. This is because, although the study was based on empirical data collected from the field, the period covered by these research works was a developing stage of OPSC. However, recent studies have begun to examine Nigeria’s OPSC vis-à-vis community receptiveness to the reintegration of ex-combatants. Three of the most recent studies on this are Ike, et al. (2021); Ike, et al. (2021) and Ugwueze et al. (2021).

Ike, et al. (2021) examined how communities perceive former terrorists and militants and their reintegration in Nigeria. In this study, the examples of reintegrated Niger Delta militants and BHM were examined. In doing this, review of literature sought from data base was used; no empirical data were sourced other than those taken from the studies reviewed. Ike, et al. (2021) advanced the discussion forward by specifically examining how communities perceive former BH combatants. This study is very important in that it gives a clue into community level of receptiveness to reintegrated BHM. However, areas sampled hardly have community of people who have had first-hand experience of BH attacks. The samples for the study were picked from Plateau and Lagos when the hotspots of BH activities are Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States. Similarly, Ugwueze et al. (2021) examines evolution, design and delivery of OPSC, progress and pitfalls of the programme as well as the challenges of reintegrating rehabilitated ex-BHMs. The paper concludes that OPSC may succeed in terms of the number of ex-BHMs that are turning in for the programme but may find it difficult to ensure those graduating from the programme are effectively reintegrated into the communities. The conclusion of the paper is a pre-eminent public notion of the programme. Many repentant BHMs have passed through the programme and have been reintegrated. According to the report of the Nigerian Army as at 2020, about 893 ex-BHMs have passed through the programme, rehabilitated and have been reintegrated (Omonobi,
2020). Since this magnitude of ex-BHMs has been reintegrated, it is good to move away from speculative research on OPSC into critically investigating how victims and communities are dealing or reacting to reintegrated ex-BHMs as well as the reactions of reintegrated ex-BHMs to this. Therefore, there is a need to further explore this and particularly relating it to how that may affect the overall efforts at ending BH insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria.

3. Methods

3.1. Study settings

The setting of the study is NE region of Nigeria. NE is one of the geo-political zones making up the Nigerian state (Nyako, 2016). The region is one of the most diverse in terms of ethnic composition. Adamawa State alone accounts for close to 100 tribal groups (Fakuade, 2020). However, the major ethnic groups in the area are Kanuri and Fulani. The region is made up of six states—Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Bauchi, Gombe and Taraba State. Three states were purposively selected from the six states of the region for the purpose of the study based on their experience and encounters with BH insurgency. The three states purposively selected from the region were: Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States. These three states have suffered BH insurgency more than any other Northeastern States since inception.

There is no official population of these states at present. However, population census conducted in Nigeria in 2006 put the population of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States at 4,171,104; 3,178,950; 2,321,339, respectively. Using the percentage change of +2.94%, it was also projected that the population of the state in 2016 would be 5,860,183; 4,248,436, and 3,294,137, respectively. Using same +2.94 percentage annual change projected by the National Population Commission, it is reasonably estimated that Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States’ population in 2021 should be 6,721,620; 4,882,956 and 3,778,375, respectively (see Table 1). Although, the population of the states may have been affected by BHinsurgency which led to population displacement, most of the displaced persons are still within the metropolitan areas of their state or region; thus making the metropolis in the region congested. From these three states, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) each were purposively selected for the study. The local government purposively chosen were picked due to their experience of BH insurgency and reintegration of deradicalised ex-BHMs. LGAs selected were—Jere and Konduga LGAs in Borno State, Michika and Madagali LGAs in Adamawa State and Geidam and Gujba LGAs in Yobe State.

| States    | 2006 Population | Projected population in 2016 based on +2.94% change | Estimated population in 2021 based on +2.94% change* |
|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Borno     | 4,171,104       | 5,860,183                                      | 6,721,620                                     |
| Adamawa   | 3,178,950       | 4,248,436                                      | 4,882,956                                     |
| Yobe      | 2,321,339       | 3,294,137                                      | 3,778,375                                     |

Table 1. Estimated Population of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe in 2021

Source: https://Nigeria.opendataforafrica.org/ffpxbd/state-population-2006

*The estimated population in 2021 is calculated by author based on the project population in 2016 and the 2.94% annual change projection.
3.3. Population, sample and sampling technique

Population of the study included ex-BHMs, personnel of OPSC, especially the management personnel, as well as those involved in the deradicalisation programme, community leaders as well as members of the communities affected by BH attacks, non-governmental organisation workers present in the focal states as well as members of security agencies, especially Nigerian Armed Forces. A total of 261 respondents were sampled for the study. A combination of simple random, purposive as well as snowball sampling techniques was deployed in the selection of respondents for the study. While simple random sampling technique was used in the selection of respondents for questionnaire in the communities chosen from the purposively selected LGAs, simple random, purposive as well as snowball sampling techniques were used in picking respondents for interviews. For instance, the help of some military officers, NGO workers as well as OPSC official were sought in locating ex-BHMs to interview for the study. Furthermore, some NGO workers also provided useful references for communities and community personnel to interview.

3.4. Data collection

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected for the paper through key informant interview (KII) as well as administration of self-developed questionnaire. A total of 21 respondents sampled from NGO workers, OPSC personnel, Nigerian Armed Force Officers, deradicalised ex-BHMs and community members were interviewed (see Table 2). Different interview guides were developed for the respondents depending on the nature of information they have capacity to give. Thus, three different interview guides were developed. One was deployed to collect data from the personnel of OPSC, especially the key management personnel of OPSC. This basically asked questions around the origin and conduct of OPSC. The second interview guide was developed and utilised to interact with repentant BHMs who underwent deradicalisation programme and were awaiting reintegration. The interview guide basically asked questions around why and how they joined the BH group, why they decide to demobilise from the group, their experience at OPSC and expectation from the communities they will be reintegrated to. The third interview guide was developed and utilised to interact with key members of the communities affected by BH insurgency in the focal states—Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. The questions in the guide basically revolved around how people in communities are responding and will respond to reintegrated ex-BHMs.

Apart from Key informant interviews conducted, data were also collected through the use of questionnaire. The questionnaire was deployed basically for members of communities in LGAs selected for the study. Forty (40) copies of the self developed questionnaire were distributed among community members in each of the six (6) LGAs selected for the study. Thus, a total of 240 copies of questionnaire were administered. However, only 235 which constitute 97.9% out of the administered copies could be retrieved at the end. Table 3 gives the breakdown of copies of questionnaire administered and retrieved in the selected LGAs. The questions in the questionnaire were divided into two sections. Section “A” asked questions related to the bio-data of the respondents. Table 4 presents the bio-data of

| Table 2: Shows details of the interview conducted |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Respondents                      | Number interviewed | No. interviewed as a % of the total number |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|
| OPSC Personnel                   | 3                 | 14.3%                                    |
| NGO Workers                      | 5                 | 23.8                                     |
| Nigerian Armed Forces            | 2                 | 9.5                                      |
| Ex-Boko Haram Members            | 3                 | 14.3                                     |
| Community Members                | 8                 | 38.1                                     |
| Total                            | 21                | 100                                      |
respondents. Section B asked substantive questions; the questions were categorised into two sets. The first set of questions relates to the respondents' experiences with regard to BH attacks in their localities. The second set of questions relate to their perception of OPSC’s deradicalisation of ex-BHMs and whether they would accept the repentant ex-BHMs back to their communities.

Apart from the data collected from questionnaire administered and interviews conducted, the study also benefited from secondary data and information such as handbook of OPSC.

3.5. Data analysis
Data collected were analysed in two different ways. Data collected from KII were transcribed and edited. They were then organised into themes that reflect the research questions explored for the study. They are presented in summaries and direct quotations where necessary to make emphasis. Data collected from administration of questionnaire were analysed using bar chart.

3.6. Ethics
High ethical standards were maintained in the collection and analysis of the data for the study. Verbal consents of the respondents were obtained before interviews were conducted as well as before questionnaire were administered. Permission of the respondents was also sought to record the interviews so that it would be easy for the researchers to analyze. Furthermore, for the purpose of protecting the image and identity of the respondents, names of the respondents were coded during the analysis of qualitative data.

4. Result

4.1. The origin and activities of the operation safe corridor
There are many theories and conjectures on how the idea of OPSC was conceived, nurtured and birthed. One of the common conjectures is that the idea of OPSC was sold to the presidency by international organisations who are interested in seeing the end of BH insurgency. Another conjecture on the origin of the programme is that the idea was borrowed from other war-torn countries where similar programmes have been introduced and it enhanced the containment of terrorism. Moreover, there is also the inference that the programme borrowed from the Niger Delta amnesty programme which began in 2009. Further, another argument has it that the programme is Nigerian government’s spontaneous response to BH insurgency and that it was solely informed by the context of the insurgency in the region. During interview with one of the key leaders of OPSC and questions relating to how the programme was arrived at were asked, his response suggested that government did not borrow any idea of setting up the programme from anywhere or anybody and neither did government take cues from other countries. He

| Table 3. Breakdown of the Administration of Questionnaire in the selected LGAs |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **State** | **Local Government Area** | **No. of Questionnaire Administered** | **No. of Questionnaire Retrieved** | **% of Questionnaire retrieved over distributed** |
| Borno | Jere | 40 | 38 | 95% |
| | Konduga | 40 | 38 | 95% |
| Yobe | Geidam | 40 | 40 | 100% |
| | Guja | 40 | 39 | 97.5% |
| Adamawa | Madagali | 40 | 40 | 100% |
| | Michika | 40 | 40 | 100% |
| **Total** | | 240 | 235 | 97.9% |

for OPSC.
suggested that it was a deliberate response of government to the crisis of BH terrorism considering the context.

OPSC is a DDR cum amnesty programme. Therefore, the origin of the programme must be traced to the attempt to grant amnesty programme to BH. After severally rejecting the call to grant amnesty to BHMs on the basis that the group was “faceless” and had refused to communicate with government unlike the Niger Delta militants, President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan later announced to grant amnesty to BH on 5 April 2013. Unfortunately however, the amnesty offer was turned down by the scribe of the group. In a video released by the sect after the announcement was made by President Jonathan, the leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau rejected the offer, saying “The Nigerian government is talking about granting us amnesty. What wrong have we done? On the contrary, it is we that should give you pardon.” This ended the move to grant amnesty to the sect under the Jonathan administration (Owonikoko, 2020a). However, national security strategy which called for an expansion of soft power approach to countering violent extremism was established. This strategy has the basic components: counter-radicalisation, communication and deradicalisation. Insecurity further degenerated and this contributed to the inability of President Jonathan to secure second term in
2015 presidential election. President Muhammadu Buhari rode on the back of insecurity, especially BH insurgency among other trending issues in the country, to win the presidential election in 2015.

Since the inception of the President Muhammadu Buhari-led administration in 2015, he has continually reiterated its intention to negotiate and offer amnesty to repentant members of the BH sect. With the inauguration of President Buhari’s regime in 2015, offensive operation against BH was intensified by the military. This was aided by the activities of voluntary policing groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). This did not only prevent the BH group from having field day, it also led to the liberation of many forcefully conscripted persons. Furthermore, lack of field day, diminished supply routes and internal wrangling within the group led to members of the group surrendering themselves to the military (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019; Owonikoko, 2020b). In order to effectively manage the BH defectors and to encourage more fighters of BH group to surrender, OPSC was established in 2016. Therefore, OPSC is a de-radicalisation programme that is hinged on disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and reconciliation (DDRR) of surrendered BHMs. Figure 1 show the process leading to a surrendered BHM undergoing deradicalisation programme of OPSC. The process leading to undergoing deradicalisation programme of OPSC by ex-BHMs normally begins with contact with soldiers, either through capturing or voluntary surrendering. They are then screened and profiled by the personnel of Operation Lafiya Dole (now Operation Hadin Kai), a military operation established to fight against BH insurgency in the NE. The screening is carried out with the intention of determining the extent and level of risk that the surrendered BHM posed and to ensure that any ex-member of BH who is about to be deradicalised is not among the 353 members of the group sternly wanted by the state. Through interrogation and cross-checking of information, the operation profiles the person. If such repentant member is not found to be “too risky”, he is admitted into OPSC’s DRR Programme and his data and personal information, including medical records, are collected and stored for usage. A key informant interview with a major stakeholder buttressed this point well when he said thus:

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**Figure 1. How an Ex-Boko Haram member may end in OPSC.**
Source: Developed by the Author from fieldwork

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Ex-Boko Haram Member surrenders or he is captured

Taken to Giwa Barrack for screening, profiling, documentation and Classification

High Risk Ex-Boko Haram Members

Arraigned and prosecuted for terrorism in court

Convicted and jailed

Release or finished jail term

Low Risk Ex-Boko Haram Members

Discharge and acquitted

Send to OPSC for DRR
Once you surrender as an ex-combatant of Boko Haram, you will go with your ammunition to the military checkpoint or base close to where you are in the bush. You will then be taken to Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri where you will be registered and profiled by people in charge of that. After this, then you are ready to be taken to OPSC for deradicalisation (Interviewee 4, OPSC Major Personnel, 45 years, July 2020, Maiduguri, Borno State).

This does not imply that even the “too risky” captured or surrendered members of BH cannot be admitted into the deradicalisation programme. However, they must face court trial. If they are acquitted or when they have concluded their jail term (depending on the court’s verdict), they can be admitted into the OPSC’s deradicalisation programme (Interviewee 3, OPSC Major Leader, September 2020, Yola, Adamawa State). The handbook of OPSC aptly captured this when it says:
OPSC was designed to deradicalise, rehabilitate and reintegrate surrendered willing repentant insurgents. However, as the management of the conflict in the North East dictates, the eligibility for the programme was expanded to include the following (a) released convicted associated persons ... (b) Discharged associated persons ... (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020, p. 20)

There are five processes involved in the reformation of ex-BHMs in OPSC as shown in Figure 2. The first stage is the arrival of ex-BHMs to the camp. The next stage is the debriefing and buy-in stage,
where members are orientated on why they are at the camp and are debriefed with the aim of building trust of the ex-combatants in the programme and staff of the programme. Experts of the OPSC engage the clients in a large auditorium to explain the aim of the programme, the role of all stakeholders in the programme and the need for them to see benefits in the programme. This is followed by team-to-group engagement in which a group of experts engage with lesser number of ex-combatants, to personalise the process for greater interaction and better observation of the clients and their needs. In doing this buy-in, the role of the clergymen especially the imams is very
significant particularly in seeking the trust of the ex-combatants in the programme and engaging ex-fighters who had been radicalised by religious reasons to join BH.

Figure 9. Respondent’s opinion on the deradicalisation and reintegration programme.

Figure 10. Respondents’ view on why they considered deradicalisation of BH members a bad initiative.

Figure 11. Respondents’ view on whether they would accept that deradicalised Boko Haram members who were members of their communities be reintegrated to their community.
Third in the stage is deradicalisation. This is engaged simultaneously with the fourth stage—rehabilitation. These two stages address purging ex-BHMs of radical ideology and re-orienting them to be better members of the society. Three key areas are targeted in the de-radicalisation and rehabilitation stages. These are: religious ideology, structural/political grievance and post-exit trauma. Focus on religious ideology set to refute BH's religious ideology used by the sect to brainwash its members. In doing this, the imams develop counter narratives from Islamic textual materials and also engage the ex-members on Islamic and religious concepts. Addressing structural/political grievance such as poverty, unemployment, marginalisation and literacy, clients are trained in vocations of their choice by officials of the National Directorate of Employment. The essence of this is to ensure that the ex-member of BH gets an alternative livelihood after reintegration. This aspect of the OPSC is considered very vital because it provides economic empowerment for ex-combatants, which enables them to settle down well in their communities after reintegration. With this, the chance of returning to insurgency will be slim. Furthermore, they were to be taught basic literacy, numeracy and civic education. The content of civic education is to imbue in the ex-BHMs patriotism and loyalty to their country rather than BH. Post-exit trauma seeks to address trauma faced by the ex-combatant while in the jungle of BHMs. This involved giving of therapies such as psychotherapy, psycho-spiritual counselling, social therapy, etc.

The last and the most important in OPSC’s process of reformation of ex-BHMs is the reintegration and reconciliation. This stage does not only ensure that ex-combatants are re-admitted into their communities but they are reintegrated and reconciled with their communities that may have been aggrieved because of the heinous act of the ex-combatants. At this stage, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) plays a very important role along with state governments, especially Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. While the ex-combatants are being prepared to go back to their communities to be better citizens, the communities are also prepared in many ways to receive the ex-combatants back. There are processes involved in the reintegration and reconciliation stage. The process usually starts with asking the de-radicalised ex-combatants the most preferred places they would want to restart their lives. Often time, ex-combatants would usually
prefer their former communities to restart than a new one. There are two factors that may be responsible for this. One is because starting life afresh in the communities where they grew up may not be as daunting as relocating to new communities they have never known or been to before. In-depth interview with an ex-combatant confirmed this fact:

It is always good to restart from the community you are familiar with than a new area. It will always take time to understand a new area before one then starts to blend; but for a community you are familiar with, it is like starting from where you stopped; picking up will be rapid (Interviewee 1, ex-Boko Haram member, 24, January 2020, Gombe, Gombe State).

Second is family factor. Most ex-combatants would want to return to their family. This, however, is sometime difficult because of the challenge of acceptance in contexts where ex-combatants have committed heinous acts against the society, their communities and families. When ex-combatants decide to relocate to their former communities, International Organisation on Migration (IOM) team will first visit the communities to prepare them ahead of the coming of the ex-combatant by notifying them of the change in the attitude of the ex-combatant and notifying them of the return of the ex-fighters. Where the communities accept, quick win projects will be implemented for the communities. Where communities reject them, the ex-combatants will be informed so that another community apart from theirs can be chosen for relocation. A key informant explained the above thus:

Deradicalised ex-combatants are not just reintegrated to their communities after deradicalisation programme. Before they are reintegrated to their communities, the outreach team of IOM will visit their communities notifying them of impending reintegartion of deradicalised ex-members of Boko Haram in the community. This is done to prepare the mind of the communities to accept them and where the community reject them, they will be relocated to another community since they are Nigerians and they have the constitutional right to live anywhere within the country (Interviewee 05, NGO worker, 44, May 2020, Yola, Adamawa State).

However, the predominant explanation from members of communities interviewed in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States where ex-BHMs have been reintegrated is that the opinion of the people in the community is often not sought before ex-BHMs are brought back to the community. As one of the community leaders interviewed said:

We have been having feelings that one of the notorious Boko Haram members that killed many people in our community will be brought back but we did not believe until when we saw him accompanied by soldiers to our community. They told us he has now repented and he wants to come back to the community but they did not seek our opinion as to whether we want him back or not. And we could not even protest because the soldiers that accompanied him are well armed. Who knows what they would do if we protest? (Interviewee 10, traditional ruler, 67, December 2020, Maiduguri, Borno State).

This in essence means that there is significant discrepancy in the theory and practice of the OPSC deradicalisation and reintegration. It ought to be a programme that seeks the buy-in of the community members, at least, before the reintegration of the deradicalised BHMs into communities but in the real sense this is not done. This has significantly affected the image of the programme among the community people.

5. Public perception of the activities of operation safe corridor
This inquiry of the study into public perception of the activities of OPSC began with questions on the length of time respondents have stayed in their community. This is to enable the researcher understand the level of experience of the respondents with regard to events in their communities.

Findings from Figure 3 revealed that majority of the respondents have lived in their communities more than 10 years: 85.5% have lived more than 10 years while 8.9% lived between 6 and
10 years. Furthermore, 5.5% and 0.9% have lived in their communities between 1–5 years and less than a year. This outcome on the length of stay in their community is so because the research specifically targeted community leaders such as opinion leaders and traditional leaders. Those kinds of people do not really leave their communities. Most of them were born and raised in their communities. This shows that majority of our respondents have lived a long period of time in their community and therefore should have robust knowledge of events and happenings in their communities.

Another question that was asked in the questionnaire was whether their community had come under attack before. Findings from Figure 4 revealed that 94% of the respondents answered in the affirmative while only 6% answered in the negative. This shows that beyond the local governments selected for the interview, most of the communities of the respondents have come under BH attacks as well. Arising from this, the researcher sought to know the frequency of attack of BH in their communities. This was taken from the 221 respondents who answered in the affirmative as whether their community has come under attack of BH before.

Figure 5 revealed respondents’ view on the frequency of BH attack against their communities. Findings revealed that 16.3% of the respondents expressed that their communities had been attacked by BH for 1–3 times. Similarly, 39.3% also expressed that their communities had been attacked 4–6 times. Furthermore, 19% expressed that their communities had been attacked before, 7–9 time. Finally, 25.3% expressed that their communities had been attacked 10 times and above. This shows that communities of the respondents have suffered multiple attacks of BH. The researcher also sought to know if the respondents have witnessed any of BH attacks in their community before.

Findings from Figure 6 revealed that of the 221 respondents, 205, which constitute 92.7% of the respondents, answered in the affirmative; while 16, which constitute 7.3%, answered in the negative. This means that majority of the respondents have physically experienced attacks of BH in their communities. The next question sought to know their perception of the magnitude of BH attack in their communities, especially against persons (men, women and children), community traditional institutions, community infrastructure and government/social infrastructure.

Findings from Figure 7 revealed that most of the attacks were devastating on persons, infrastructure and traditional institutions. This is so because most of the BH attacks in communities were targeted at key figures and infrastructure (Albert, 2017; Ibrahim et al., 2017). It is therefore most likely that such dedicated attack will be very devastating in impact.

The next section of the questionnaire sought to understand respondents’ perception with regard to the activities of Operation Safe Corridor in the deradicalisation, reformation and reintegration of repentant BHMs. The first question asked sought to know the level of awareness of the existence of such programme. As Figure 8 shows, majority of respondents answered in the affirmative. Two Hundred and thirty-two (232), which account for 98.7% of the respondents, answered in the affirmative that they are aware of such programme. However, 3 persons out of the 235 said they were not aware of the existence of such programme. This means that a significant number of respondents are aware of the existence of the OPSC DDR programme for former BHMs. The next question sought to know their opinion on the programme.

As Figure 9 shows, 25 respondents out of the 232 that answered in the affirmative regarding the level of their awareness of the deradicalisation programme expressed that the programme is a good initiative. This constitutes about 10.7% of the respondents. However, 201 out of the 232 expressed that the programme is a bad initiative. This constitutes about 86.7% of the 232. Similarly, 6 persons expressed indifferent in their opinion to the programme. They constitute about 2.6% of the respondents. This means that majority of the respondent did not adjudge the
programme to be a good initiative. The next question sought to know the reason for the opinion, especially those who are of the opinion that the programme is a bad initiative.

As Figure 10 above shows majority of the respondents feel that the deradicalisation and reformation programme for ex-BHMs prioritised reformation of insurgents over communities and victims that suffered attacks of the insurgents. Majority of those who also expressed that the programme is a bad initiative also hinge their point on state's weakness in handling insurgents, inadvertently rewarding insurgents and that such programme could also serve as an incentive for more youth to join the insurgents.

From Figure 11 above, it is revealed that only six (06) respondents which constitute about 2.6% of the respondents answered in the affirmative that they would accept reformed BHMs back to their communities. However, 229 which constitute about 97.4% of the respondents answered in the negative. This means that majority of the community members are objecting to the reintegration of BHMs back to their communities. This view of the respondent synchronises with poll conducted by Premium Times in March 2020. Premium Times had conducted an opinion poll to know the view of Nigerians on the proposed bill to create an agency for rehabilitation of repentant BHM. The poll, which was conducted on Facebook, Twitter and the website of the organisation and participated by 22,148 in a space of five days, revealed that over 90% of respondents rejected the establishment of such agency (Iroanusi, 2021). This rejection is a reflection of the public acceptance of reintegration of deradicalized ex-BHMs. The last question is about why the people would reject reintegrated ex-BH. Figure 12 shows the response of the respondents.

Figure 12 above shows that majority of the respondents expressed doubt concerning the true repentance of ex-combatants; this doubt informed their rejection of ex-combatants from reintegration into their communities. About 210 (about 92%) of respondents out of 229 who answered in the negative (Figure 11) agreed that doubting the genuineness of their repentance is a major factor for rejecting their acceptance for reintegration. Further, 151 respondents which constitute about 66% of respondents responded in the negative in Figure 11 expressed that possibility of radicalising other innocent youths in the community into violent extremism is a major factor. Similarly, communication of impunity by the acceptance is also considered a major factor in rejecting their reintegration as 158 respondents which constitute about 69% of respondents who answered in the negative in Figure 11 agreed to this. Moreover, 225 which constitute about 98% of the 229 respondents who answered in the negative (Figure 11) expressed that the perception that government gives more attention to insurgents than their victims is a reason for objecting to the reintegration of the ex-combatants into the communities. However, only 45 (19%) respondents who answered in the negative in Figure 11 expressed the belief that reintegration of ex-combatants may attract BH attack to their communities is a major factor in their rejection of the reintegration of ex-combatants.

From Figure 12 above, two reasons came out very strong for why people will not accept deradicalised BHMs back to their communities—doubting true repentance of the ex-combatants and government giving more attention to the insurgents much more than the victims of their attacks. All 15 community stakeholders interviewed also affirmed these two reasons as why community members would not accept reformed BHMs back into their communities. As a community leader interviewed in Madagali explained:

The decision of government to bring back Boko Haram members into our community after they have reformed them is not suitable to many of us. We have suffered their attacks and the scars of the attacks are still there. Many of our people are yet to overcome the trauma of their attacks. Now government is saying they have repented and they have now been reformed. How are we sure that we can sleep with our two eyes closed when these people come back to our midst? Even if we can, how comfortable can we be when we see people responsible for terrible attacks against us returned back to us by government even better
than us that suffered their attacks all in the name of reconciliation? It adds to our trauma... (Interviewee 07, Community Leader, 72, May 2020, Madagali, Adamawa State).

The above expression is similar to the rejection of reintegration of ex-BH in Borno State, captured by The Cable. After the deradicalisation of 602 ex-BHMs in July 2020 and plan of their reintegration into their communities, one of the residents in Borno State was reported to have said thus:

From day one, Maiduguri people have never liked the idea of reintegrating the terrorists back to the community ... How do you expect us to live with the killers of our parents? Those who attacked us and burnt down our houses ... It will not augur well for our fragile peace in the town and city centres. It is fine if the authorities are so magnanimous to forgive their heinous crime and it is also fine for the victim who they wreaked a monumental havoc to not forget them. Therefore, the government should integrate them into government houses and the Aso Rock Villa but not our society (Cited in Owolabi, 2020: Para 5-16).

The fear of the people about genuineness of repentance of the exBHMs came out open when hundreds of ex-BHMs rioted in their camp at Maiduguri to demand the right to slaughter cows for meet. The riot prompted residents of Maiduguri to lay siege to the camp with swords, daggers and clubs and threatening to kill any ex-BHM who left the facility (Sahara Reporters, 2021). Similarly, during the reintegration seminar held by the Centre for Peace and Security Studies in April 2018, participants, who are community leaders drawn from areas affected by insurgency in Borno and Adamawa States, rejected reintegration of ex-BHMs back to their community on the ground that they, who are victims of the attacks of BH, have been neglected by government while priority is given to the insurgents who have wrecked horrendous havoc on the them. The community leaders said even if they accept, they are not sure that they can convince their people to do so (Momodu & Owonikoko, 2018). Studies have shown that community acceptance of reformed terrorists is always very difficult owing largely to these two factors, even in the context of BH insurgency in the NE Nigeria (Felbab-Brown, 2018; Ike, et al., 2021; Toogood, 2016).

6. How communities have shown rejection to the reintegrated Ex-Boko Haram members

6.1. Physical attacks

One of the possible outcomes of the rejection of ex-BHMs, especially where they are forcefully re-injected into the community that rejected reintegration, is that the community youth who are not happy with the reintegration may organise an attack against such people. This has also been envisaged by ex-BHMs undergoing deradicalisation with OPSC. One of the ex-BHMs interviewed said:

With what we have done in our communities, it will take the intervention of Allah (God) for the people not to be angry or attack us. We are all afraid that we may be attacked, especially by the youths (Interviewee 2, ex-Boko Haram member, 31, January 2020, Gombe, Gombe State).

A new repentant BH identified as Modu Malaram also exhibited this fear when he was explaining why they surrendered to the Nigerian troops recently. He explained that they were forcefully conscripted and even though they knew that BH “is evil”, they could not do anything to escape because they would be killed as those who attempt it were brutally murdered. He therefore expressed pessimism that “Even though I, my wife and my child have surrendered, I am not sure if the people in our village would trust us again.” (Oluokun Ayorinde, 2021:para 6).

The fear of the repentant BHMs is already playing out in some places. In some communities, reintegrated ex-BHMs are being attacked. A typical example of this was seen in Shehuri South Community (SSC) in Borno State. Shehuri South is located at the eastern part of Maiduguri, Borno State (International Alert, n.d.). This community is largely inhabited by Kanuri tribe. The community came under intense attack of BH leading to the destruction of the social fabric of the community
(International Alert, n.d.). After undergoing deradicalisation programme conducted by OPSC, one of the ex-BHMs identified as Malam Yawu (Owolabi, 2020) was to be reconnected to Shehuri South community as part of the 601 deradicalised ex-BHMs ready for reintegration in July 2020. A day before the reinsertion of the ex-BH member into the community, BH had gruesomely executed five humanitarian aid workers for allowing themselves to be “used by unbelievers to convert people into infidels” (The Cable, 2020: Para 3) One of the illustrious sons of Shehuri South, Abdulrahman Bulama, was part of those gruesomely murdered. Therefore, the community was thrown into mourning when the ex-BHM was brought into the community for reinsertion. According to eyewitness’ account, when the security personnel left, community youth pounced on the ex-BHM. He was saved by community leaders who quickly intervened and transferred him to Dalori internally displaced persons’ camp where they believe security personnel will be able to provide security for him (Interviewee 9, NGO Worker, 37, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 2021).

Similarly, in Gonge community, Jere LGA, the ex-BHM reintegrated into the community was attacked by angry youths. The youth were angry that during the hot days of insurgency, the reintegrated ex-BHM had led other BHM to attack people who were doing morning prayers in the mosque which led to the death of about 40 people while other 10 people were severely injured. Only about five people were able to escape. The attack on the ex-BHM made him severely injured and was taken to the hospital. In the process, he died (Interviewee 13, NGO worker, 46, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 2021). There are also cases of violent attacks against reintegrated ex-BHMs in Ngala, Monguno, konduga and so on. In Adamawa State, while there are no reports of attack against reintegrated ex-BHMs yet, interviews with some stakeholders in some of the communities revealed that there are threats of attack against them if they are reintegrated. An interviewee whose parents were killed by BH expressed what he would do to any BHMs reintegrated into his community thus

Boko Haram killed my father. The trauma of my father’s death killed my mother. So Boko Haram killed my father and my mother and since their death, life has been difficult for me as a person and government has not come to my aid other than supports that non-governmental organisations give me. Everybody in our community has one story or the other to tell about what they suffered from Boko Haram attack against our community. And now government wants to bring them back to our community because they believe they have deradicalised them. If they bring anyone to our community, we will kill him! (Interviewee 14, Community Youth Leader, 35, Madagali, Adamawa State, August 2021)

This expression represents the minds of most of the communities where BHM had attacked previously. Even where people are not talking about attacking reintegrated ex-BHMs, they held the belief that attacking them is justifiable.

6.2. Stigmatisation
Stigmatisation involves calling them names that tend to remind them of their connection with BH. This is done with the intention of demoralising the ex-combatants and to make their stay in the community difficult for them. Some of the names they are often called include: “Sambisa Boys”, “Shekau Boys”, “Annoba7”, “Boko Haram blood”, “bad blood”, “bastardised” (Felbab-Brown, 2018; Toogood, 2016).

6.3. Keeping them incommunicado/Ostracised
Another way the community members have shown their rejection is keeping the ex-combatants incommunicado from the rest of community. This is done mainly by refusing to communicate or engage with them. For instance, they are supposed to be members of youth, men and women associations with the communities. However, where they are rejected, they are kept away from interacting with these different groups within the community.
6.4. Enforcing socio-economic blockade
This involves refusing to involve the reintegrated ex-members in socio-economic activities involving them and members of the community. Even when they have been trained in a particular vocation, community members simply refuse to patronise, thereby affecting their sales and consequently folding up. There are reports of many reintegrated ex-BHMs who are no longer engaging in what they have been trained to do while they are in OPSC camps to earn a living when they are reinserted into their communities (Interviewee 9, NGO Worker, 37, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 2021). Most of these are due largely to enforcement of socio-economic blockade on them in their reintegrated communities. This is related to keeping them incommunicado/ostracising but they are not same.

7. Effects of community rejection on reintegrated Ex-Boko Haram members

7.1. Absconding from communities to rejoin insurgent group
One of the outcomes of community hostility to reintegrated repentant BHMs is that such reformed ex-combatants abscond from their community, to team-up again with members in the bush. Few reintegrated ex-BHMs have been reported from some communities to have absconded (Interviewee 9, NGO Worker, 37, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 2021). Although, the reason for absconding is still yet to be known, there is a possibility that it may arise from difficulty in living in their community as a result of rejection.

7.2. Frustrating them to commit further crimes after reintegration
Another effect of community rejection is that it frustrates them into committing further crimes. There are reports of where reintegrated ex-BHMs have been alleged to have killed members of the communities. For instance, a research reported widespread fear arising from reintegrated girls murdering their parents and other members of their communities (Toogood, 2016). The thinking of members of the community is that their extreme ideology is still at play; this may not be entirely so. Some may have exhibited this character owing to frustration resulting from the way they were treated by communities and family members after reintegration. Frustration-aggression theory gives us a clue into this more properly. Aggressions are not just displayed as a natural reaction or instinct as biological theorists have explained. Rather, it is an outcome of frustration. Where the legitimate desires of an individual is denied directly or by indirect consequence, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person to express his anger through violence targeted at those s/he holds responsible or people who are directly related to them. In some places, reintegrated ex-BHMs have been alleged to be involved in stealing, burglary and other petty crimes (Interviewee 14, NGO Worker, 32, Yola, Adamawa State, June 2021). This may also result from frustration arising from keeping them incommunicado, especially where keeping incommunicado affects their socio-economic conditions and well-beings.

7.3. Disincentive for Boko Haram members who want to demobilise from the group
One of the reasons for introducing OPSC is to encourage BH insurgents to surrender (Interviewee 10, key Management staff of OPSC, 51, Yola, Adamawa State, September, 2020). In doing this, rank and file members of the group will be dried up. This may weaken the group and contribute significantly to its end. BH has used different methods to recruit people in order to swell its rank and file. Onuoha (2020) identified eight different BH methods of recruitment which include: open preaching/proselytisation, marriage, birth, infection, incentivisation/enticement, force contagion, abduction or force conscription and jailbreak. Arising from this, membership of BH can be classified into three. There are the volunteered members: those who wilfully join the group based on the fact that they do believe in the ideology of the group. There are also the forced members. These are people who are coerced to join through force contagion. The third is yoked membership. This involves people who become members of the group through family relationship such as birth, marriage (either forced, voluntary or without a knowledge that the people is a member of BH). A significant portion of BHMs were forced or yoked into the group and they will be willing to leave the group. Even those who volunteered to join are willing to leave the group because they were brainwashed to join. They have now known better after joining the group.
In a report released by Institute for Security, it is indicated that there are many members of BH who are ready to relinquish their membership of the dreaded group because of disillusionment. There are many who joined the group because of promises of socio-economic ascension, justice and protection but were soon disappointed by the difficult conditions within the group. This situation was amplified by the fact that religions recruitment messaging of BH end up contrasting with their daily practice (Akum et al., 2021). To this people, they were coaxed into joining the group but they have now realised that the group does not actually stand for what it professes. There were also so many who were forcefully conscripted to the group because of the special need of the group that they found in them (Owonikoko, 2019). Another factor which has increased the readiness to disengage from the group is the continuous weakening of the group as a result of military onslaught against the group since 2013. This has led to a situation whereby the group has deteriorated with regard to chronic scarcity of food, split within the group and so on. In the process, some members of the group have become disappointed in continuing to be a member of the group. Particularly, constant fear of being killed drives many to want to surrender. In the midst of these, sensitisation activities, call for surrender and promise of amnesty across the Lake Chad countries have further encouraged many to demobilise from the group. These kinds of members of BH are looking for slight opportunity to disengage from the violent group. Due to the conflict between BHMs and Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), over 1000 BHMs may have disengaged from the group between June and August 2021 (Obi, 2021; Parkinson & Hinshaw, 2021). However, communities’ refusal to accept them back may constitute very significant impediment to their disengagement from the group. One of the ex-members of BH interviewed buttressed this fact when he said:

There are many members of Boko Haram who are willing to leave the group. They are tired of continuously fighting for the group but they do not trust that government mean well for them or whether their community will accept them back after the atrocities they committed. They prefer to stay back and die as a member of the group instead of coming to surrender (Interviewee 2, ex-Boko Haram member, 31, Gombe, Gombe State, January, 2020)

Community rejection will definitely affect the willingness of these people to disengage from their group because it becomes a kind of double tragedy for them—their community is not accepting them back and their fellow insurgents in the jungle are not happy with their demobilisation and are therefore willing to kill them. The example of BH attack against a reintegrated ex-BHM in Konduga earlier this year is a case in point. BHMs had trailed him to his community, carried out an attack in the community simply to kill him and ran back into the jungle (Interviewee, 13, NGO worker, 46, Maiduguri, Borno State, June, 2021).

8. How the perception affects success of the programme and effort at ending Boko Haram insurgency in North East

8.1. Swell in rank and file of Boko Haram membership
Following from the de-incentiveness from the resistance of community to accepting the repentant BHMs back to their communities, they will continue to remain in the group to perpetrate their heinous activities. While membership of their group remains un-depleted, BH and its rival group, ISWAP, are going on membership expansion drive. In April 2021 when ISWAP attacked Geidam, 20,000 Nigerian Naira was distributed from one household to another to encourage more people to join the group (Kunle, 2021). This shows that the group continues to populate its rank and file in order to make it more formidable against the Nigerian state. Community rejection of ex-BH will disincentivised the members of the group who may wish to demobilise from the group and this will contribute significantly to swelling the membership of the group.

8.2. Stronger insurgent group/greater threat
Swelling the rank and file of BH insurgent group will mean that the group is made stronger. One of the factors that have contributed to the resilience of the group over time is the ability to maintain
its pool of adherents. If OPSC that is meant to depopulate the group fails in this line, the group will therefore remain stronger and more threatening.

8.3. Continued/increasing Boko Haram insurgency/insecurity
The resultant effect of community rejection and increase in BH membership is that the group will continue to maintain its insurgency and perpetrate insecurity. This would then mean that ending BH will be a mirage.

9. Discussion of findings
The core vision and objective of OPSC is to encourage defection within the ranks of BH terrorist group and its rival group- ISWAP (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020)—with the aim of depopulating the groups and weakening them within. This programme is expected to have significant impact on the counter-insurgency operation and the general efforts at ending BH insurgency in North Eastern Nigeria. Truly depopulating BH/ISWAP is significant in Nigeria's counterterrorism/counterinsurgency campaign. BH has lasted for over 10 years and still continues to wax stronger because of the large pool of members it has and it has been able to use this for its resilience for over a decade now. For instance, since the emergence of ISWAP in 2016, it has focused more on attacking military formations in Borno State. In carrying out this task, the group has always made good use of its enormous membership population. Apart from attacking the bases when guards are relaxed, the group usually study the personnel capacity of the particular military base they want to attack and mobilise their members in multiple of personnel capacity of the base. With this tactics, only very few bases have not been overrun in Borno State. This has shown how population is very important to the group and any attempt at invading communities is always an opportunity to recruit more members to swell their group as seen in Geidam recently (Owolabi, 2020). Therefore, any programme that targets reduction of the membership of the group is very important to ending the violence of the group. A publication of the programme affirmed this more fervently thus:

The OPSC DRR Programme, which is being conducted along other Kinetic lines of operations, has evolved to be a strategy for de-escalating the insurgency in the North East because its methods, practices, procedures, tactics and techniques have continued to provide alternatives for BH/ISWAP associates particularly the low risk members, some of whom are themselves victims of circumstances (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020, p. 28)

It concludes that:

Since the establishment of the programme by the President C-in-C, President Mohammadu Buhari, willing low risk BHT/ISWAP fighters have continued to surrender to the military and other security agencies within and outside Nigeria thereby reducing the fighting strength of the insurgents and de-escalating the conflict (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020, p. 28)

When the population of the group is decimated, it will be very easy for the group to be militarily defeated and when they are militarily defeated, political solution is much easier to carry out (Owonikoko, 2020b). However, as this study has shown, the major obstacle to the programme is community acceptance of repentant BHMs. Lack of community acceptance will lead to attack against the reintegrated ex-members of BH. This will invariably serve as disincentive for ex-BHMs who may wish to demobilise from the group. The implication therefore will be increasing membership of BHT/ISWAP and increasing insurgency and security.

However, the challenge of community acceptance is not insurmountable. Government, especially the Federal Government needs to prioritise the welfare of victims of BH as much as, if not much more, the priority government is giving to repentant BHMs. There is a huge perception among members of communities, especially those affected by BHMs, that government is much more concerned with the welfare of the repentant BHMs than the people who suffered their attacks. This is one of the major reasons people have rejected their reintegration into their
community. The publication of the OPSC corridor also acknowledged this as a major challenge when it said “… There is a narrative in the public domain that, the FG and AFN are pampering ‘perpetrators’ at the expense of the victims” (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020, p. 29). This perception is born out of the fact that relics of BH attack abound in most of the communities while persons who have suffered attack of BH are still suffering from trauma of their experience. Most of the interventions they have received are from international and local non-governmental organisations. Government therefore need to prioritise reformation of victims as much as those of the repentant BH. This will pacify them and ameliorate rejection. It will also make the programme more impactful.

10. Conclusion
OPSC is a noble idea towards resolving the protracted BH insurgency crisis in North Eastern Nigeria. The acceptance of the programme by other Lake Chad countries after Nigeria had begun the operation of the programme shows how the programme has become a regional approach to ending BH insurgency. A major impediment to the programme in Nigeria is community rejection of the rehabilitated ex-BHMs. The rejection is borne out of distrust and deep perception that government is prioritising welfare of ex-BHMs over the victims of their attacks. With increasing number of combatants of BH who are willing to demobilise, community rejection of reintegation of ex-BH will definitely affect the maximum benefits that OPSC may bring to counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency operations in NE. The most assured way to make this programme more impactful is for government to address the plight of victims of attacks of BH. This will not only reduce their trauma, it can also be utilised as a measure to launch community acceptance of repentant ex-BHMs. Furthermore, there is a need to set up community level transitional justice and reconciliation panels to reconcile the repentant BHMs who are now being reintegrated with those who are victims of their attacks. This will go a long way in healing the wounds of the victim and preparing their minds to accept the repentant BHMs back. If community rejection of reformed ex-BHMs continues, many combatants of the group who may want to demobilise may not have the incentive to do so and this can serve as force multiplier for BH insurgency in North Eastern Nigeria.

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Notes
1. During an interview session with key leader of OPSC on September, 18, 2020 in Yola, he confirmed that so far, OPSC has deradicalised about 1000 ex-combatants of Boko Haram in about three tranches since 2016 and have been handed over to their respective governors to reintegrate. He also explained that there are thousands of Boko Haram members who have been profiled or undergoing profiling at the headquarters of Operation Lafiya Dole in Maiduguri after which they will be brought for deradicalisation as OPSC.
2. The remaining five regions are: North Central, North West, South East, South South and West South.
3. Although, all of these LGAs do not have same population, it is very difficult to determine or ascertain the number of inhabitants in each of the selected LGAs because of Boko Haram insurgency which has led to the displacement of many within and outside Nigeria. Thus it was decided that same number of questionnaires should be distributed in all of the selected LGAs.
4. Boko Haram dismisses amnesty offer. See video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_f3MIVWPUU.
5. Determining the extent of risk that a surrendered ex-Boko Haram member poses is a subject of intense debate. For extensive discussion, see Idayat Hassan, “The Danger of a Better-Behaved Boko Haram,” IRIN, 21 August 2018, https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2018/08/21/opinion-Nigeria-military-peace-boko-haram.
6. The programme has been castigated for lacking the buy-in of stakeholders. See Ugweue et al (2021).
7. This mean “forbidden” or “rejected” in local parlance.

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