



Spaces for Youth Development and Social Change

Spaces for Change (S4C)

press statement

June 12, 2012

Just Released: DEMOLISHING FOUNDATIONS OF PEACE

SPACES FOR CHANGE's just-released research study, "Demolishing Foundations of Peace" documents and critically examines the systematic pattern of forced evictions and house demolitions in Nigeria, perpetrated by both city planners and security forces, in the name of "improving national security". Across many states of Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country, buildings where improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and other dangerous weapons were found have been punitively demolished, following violent military raids. Mere suspicion of harboring the members of the dreaded Islamic fundamentalist sect, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, also known as Boko Haram have consistently been used to justify arson and the habitual burning of private residences, properties and businesses of citizens. Areas inhabited by the poor are often labeled as hideouts of Boko Haram, and are on that basis, demolished without recourse to due process, inflaming the population of un-housed and inadequately housed persons in Nigeria. These security-linked demolitions continue to occur in many northern states, especially those areas where the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency.

Recognizing that tough choices have to be made and resolute action must be sustained in the name of security, SPACES FOR CHANGE notes with great concern, the involvement of the constituted anti-terror security outfits, notably the Joint Task Force and Special Task Force (JTF/STF) in widespread human rights violations in the volatile states. The JTF and STF have executed, and continue to execute extremely violent demolitions and forced evictions in the name of countering terror attacks. In unguarded exercise of power and discretion, armed security forces have attacked, burnt and demolished private residences in contravention of state, national and international due process provisions. Families who lose their homes to punitive demolitions are not given the right to rebuild their homes even after an error of the demolishing act has been established.

Generally speaking, security officials perceive human rights as obstacles to effective intelligence, police and military action, resulting in the current procedures to fight terrorism in a "war" mentality. "Persons who allow their surroundings or frontage to be used by the Boko Haram sect to attack people or security agencies would be considered as collaborators, and will be treated as criminals, says the JTF. On point, people whose homes or fences have been used (with or without their knowledge) to launch terrorist attacks have been viciously killed, and their homes demolished. Grippled by the fear of being unfoundedly labeled off as militants or collaborators of the Boko Haram sect, hundreds of thousands have fled their homes and businesses, a situation which has further pushed the majority of the city's impoverished populations deeper into poverty. The massive exodus from the north has destroyed businesses, deterred future investments, while rapidly increasing the number of internally displaced persons which currently towers above 200,000 persons.

SPACES FOR CHANGE's study found that these punitive house demolitions have curiously, and in a baseless manner, justified attacks on women, children and the youth across the volatile states. **At present, North East Nigeria is the most dangerous place in the world to be a youth, especially a male teen. From Borno, to**

Kano, Jos, and Bauchi, young people have been disproportionately targeted with violence. Slum neighbourhoods and other areas with very high concentration of youth populations are often criminalized, and on that basis, raided repeatedly under the cover of manhunt exercises for Boko Haram members. Frequent house-to-house searches conducted without warrants, often serve as preludes to demolition exercises, followed by indiscriminate arrests or shootings of young people.

Our study found no evidence showing that house demolitions effectively deter terrorist groups. Instead, evidence shows that the counter-terror demolitions increase local population's support for terrorist groups, while fuelling hatred and animosity towards security forces. SPACES FOR CHANGE's regular feedback from, and interactions with local residents in the volatile states reveal that the greater the force employed by the JTF in the areas designated as military targets, the greater the sympathy affected communities have for the Boko Haram sect, to the extent that majority of locals are hesitant, or unwilling, to provide information to security operatives that may enhance anti-terror activities.

"For every home demolished, the foundations of peace are further threatened", says Victoria Ohaeri, executive director of SPACES FOR CHANGE who led the research team and compiled the report. Continuing, she said that, "punitive house demolitions frustrate gains made towards closing Nigeria's housing deficit currently towering at about 16 million housing units. It clogs the wheel of progress in multi-sectoral efforts aimed at improving the housing stock in a sustainable fashion. Furthermore, such demolitions constitute major violations of the right to adequate housing enshrined in several standard-setting human rights instruments voluntarily ratified by the Nigerian government.

As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has so clearly stated, "the very object and purpose of anti-terrorist initiatives in a democratic society is to protect democratic institutions, human rights and the rule of law, not to undermine them". Accordingly, we urge the Nigerian government to end the violence, particularly by halting the ongoing demolition and violent raids on homes, Islamic schools, communities and the accompanying destruction of lives and properties. We are also demanding an independent investigation into the allegations of excessive use of force and extra-judicial killings by members of the Joint Task Force and Special Task Force and bring those who are alleged to have perpetrated crimes to justice. We further demand for the establishment of complaint mechanisms and grievance procedures that allows the evicted, the injured, or aggrieved persons affected by counter-terrorism operations to express themselves freely and demand redress, without fear of reprisals or arrests.

Importantly, we urge the Nigerian government and the various state governments to reform the juvenile and criminal justice systems to better prepare youth for second chances. While acknowledging the bravery and commitment of the Nigerian security forces toward containing the mounting insecurity and fundamentalism witnessed in the northern part of the country, concrete steps must be taken to integrate respect for human rights into their engagement strategies, peacekeeping and peace-building efforts.

Signed:

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