

Nigeria cuts phone services

MAIDUGURI NIGERIA: Balama Mali Gubio lost phone contact with his relatives 10 days ago, like many residents in this region of Nigeria caught between a military offensive and Islamist extremist attacks.



"I don't know what is happening to my parents, my brothers, my sister," the 62-year-old spokesman for a forum of prominent local elders told AFP in the garden of his expansive home in the city of Maiduguri.

The military cut mobile phone services more than a week ago in much of the country's north-east, where it has launched an offensive against Islamist insurgents, leaving families out of touch and forcing hospitals to buy radios.

A senior security source told AFP the phone network was frozen as part of "the operational strategy" to defeat Islamist extremist group Boko Haram, known to co-ordinate attacks by phone and text messages.

While the mobile cut has presented hardships, with landline services virtually non-existent in Nigeria, Gubio and others said they can cope if it leads to peace.

"If it can help, let it continue, even for three months. I don't care," said Gubio, who has previously been a fierce critic of tactics used in the north-east by Nigeria's military, accused of major abuses in its fight against Boko Haram.

Frequent disruptions

Maiduguri residents have grown accustomed to life amid conflict, which has crippled commerce and led to rolling curfews.

Suicide blasts, gun attacks, roadside bombs and soldiers' heavy-handed raids have become almost routine. The conflict is estimated to have left at least 3,600 people dead since 2009, some killed by security forces.

Boko Haram's insurgency has been underway since then and Maiduguri was its initial home base.

Recent attacks in other areas of the region led to warnings that Boko Haram had become further emboldened, claiming control in remote parts of the north-east near the borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

On 14 May, President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in three states, Adamawa, Borno and Yobe. Maiduguri is the capital of Borno.

His declaration led to the ongoing offensive, involving air strikes and several thousand ground troops. It is aimed at re-establishing Nigeria's "territorial integrity", the military has said.

Nobody knows what's happening

The military offensive seems to have been concentrated outside Maiduguri in more remote areas, with the military saying it has destroyed Boko Haram camps in a forested area some 60km outside the city.

The military has described the insurgents as being in "disarray", but the claims have been impossible to verify. Rescue organisations such as the Red Cross have not yet visited affected areas.

With the phone network shut down, civilians impacted by the fighting have been unreachable.

"Nobody can tell what is happening," said Gubio, who said many of his relatives live in an area south of Maiduguri where the military reportedly carried out air strikes on Boko Haram camps.

The chief medical director of the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital, Abdurrahman Tahir, said he has seen no rise in the number of casualties brought to the hospital since the offensive was launched, suggesting the conflict has been concentrated far from the city.

Communication breakdown

Tahir said the communication breakdown has made running a hospital more difficult, especially an emergency service which relies heavily on mobile phones.

"We are in the process of acquiring radios," he told AFP, saying the hospital was "coping" well enough under emergency rule.

With the state of emergency imposed, activity in Maiduguri has slowed in places, including the normally bustling Kolo market, a popular spot to eat chips and grilled fish.

But life carries on with apparent calm in other neighbourhoods, with crowds pouring towards a mosque in the densely populated Post Office neighbourhood for midday prayers last Friday.

The military briefly imposed a 24-hour curfew in parts of Maiduguri considered Boko Haram strongholds. It was later relaxed, allowing residents to venture out in daytime hours.

While the phone shutdown has affected everyone, Haruna Mamuda, 30, has perhaps felt the impact most directly: he sells mobile phone recharge cards and not surprisingly, the market has dried up.

He said life was difficult as a result, but, like Gubio, added that he was willing to make the sacrifice.

"If it helps end the insurgency, I am happy with it," he said in the Hausa language used widely in the region.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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