

# THEY TOOK OUR HUSBANDS AND FORCED US TO BE THEIR GIRLFRIENDS

WOMEN IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA STARVED AND RAPED  
BY THOSE CLAIMING TO RESCUE THEM



AMNESTY  
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## INTRO

**Internally displaced women in north-east Nigeria have experienced violence and abuse from the Nigerian military that amount to war crimes and possible crimes against humanity. These women are demanding justice, accountability, and an end to these violations.**

**They want to be able to feed their families; they want to be reunited with their husbands and other male family members; and they want to be safe.**

Since 2015, the Nigerian military has recaptured large parts of territory in north-east Nigeria that had been under Boko Haram control. But instead of “freeing” hundreds of thousands of people who had been living or trapped in these areas under the armed group’s brutal rule, the military has treated them with suspicion and neglect, in some cases attacking and abusing them.

Women have been affected in specific, and in some cases worse, ways because of their gender. With many of their husbands and male family members arbitrarily detained by the military, women and their dependents have often been restricted to camps, have struggled to provide for their families and have often been at risk of rape and sexual exploitation. Many women continue to face ongoing discrimination.

Amnesty International has outlined these concerns in a comprehensive research report, titled: *‘They Betrayed Us’: Women Who Survived Boko Haram Raped, Starved and Detained in Nigeria* (May 2018). The organisation continues to call for the Nigerian authorities to address the war crimes and potential crimes against humanity being carried out in the conflict and in displacement, and ensure all those affected can realise their rights.



*Kusam (not her real name) March 2017.*  
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### “KUSAM”\*

Thirty-year-old Kusam (not her real name) said that she and her family fled their home following advice on a radio announcement. On arrival in Bama town, they were taken to Bama prison for a “screening” operation.

“We had been living in Gala Kura [village]. Boko Haram told us to leave and go to the bush [with them]. We didn’t want to because we had done farming and were waiting for the harvest. We said we couldn’t go until then. But Boko Haram kept telling us that we had to.

[W]e heard on the radio that the government was saying that everyone had to leave their homes and come to the camps. They said everything is ready and waiting for us – that there will be food and shelter... From our town, we went to Ombasheer [a town in Cameroon]. The [Cameroonian] soldiers there took us to Banki [a town in Nigeria], then from Banki, the Nigerian soldiers took us to Bama prison. We were there for three days [for ‘screening’]. Then they took me and the children to the camp in Bama. My husband was with us until Bama prison. Then he didn’t come with us [to Bama Hospital camp]. I do not know where he is. We were a large group coming to Bama prison from our village. I don’t know how many altogether, but I know it is 43 men in detention from our village as I made a list. They took all the young men between 14 and about 40. We really suffered in Bama [Hospital Camp], they gave us food once a day in the morning and then nothing from then.”

\* Not her real name. The names of all people quoted in this Digest have been changed to maintain their anonymity. The people depicted in photographs throughout this document are not necessarily those who have been interviewed.





## BACKGROUND

From late-2015, the military has established so-called “satellite camps” in remote towns that they recaptured from Boko Haram and turned into fortified garrisons, especially in the north-eastern state of Borno. As the conflict has continued in surrounding areas, hundreds of thousands of people have fled from rural areas (that are or have been under Boko Haram control) to these satellite camps, each for different reasons. (The term “satellite” was used to distinguish these camps from other camps that were established in areas that were firmly under the government’s control).

While many fled to the satellite camps to escape Boko Haram controlled areas or due to generalised insecurity, others went to the camps because they had been attacked by the military or were afraid they would be if they remained in their homes. Scores of internally displaced people (people who are forced to flee their homes but who stay inside their country’s borders) reported to Amnesty International that the military had attacked their village indiscriminately, killing remaining residents regardless of whether or not they were Boko Haram members, and burning down

homes. Others said they fled because they were afraid they would otherwise be attacked, after seeing what the military had done in neighbouring villages.

The military and an allied militia (called the Civilian Joint Task Force – Civilian JTF) subjected everyone arriving in or taken to the recaptured towns to a “security screening”. These screenings were often carried out over a period of several days in a brutal manner, involving torture and other ill-treatment. The military also arbitrarily detained thousands of men and women during this process, transferring them to military detention facilities where they have been held for months or years without charge or trial. Only those who “passed” the security screenings were allowed to proceed or were taken to the satellite camps.

Men and boys were most at risk of being selected for prolonged detention. In some areas, such as Bama town (once the second largest town in Borno) and nearby Banki town (on the border with Cameroon), the vast majority of men aged 14-40 were detained and transferred to military detention facilities for prolonged periods of time without any individualised assessment of wrongdoing – they were selected simply



*Internally displaced people sit waiting to be served with food at Dikwa Camp, in Borno State in north-eastern Nigeria, on February 2, 2016.*  
© STRINGER/AFP/Getty Images

because of their age and because they had fled areas that had been under Boko Haram control. Most of these men and boys have not been seen since they were detained.

Mass detention of men and boys has led to separation of families and resulted in many “female-headed-households” in the camps. In general, the camps are disproportionately made up of women and girls because so many men and boys have been detained.

Women arriving at the camps unaccompanied by men were at particular risk of being detained and transferred to military detention facilities. These women were accused of having Boko Haram husbands “back in the bush”. From 2015, around one thousand women were detained in Giwa barracks, the main known military detention facility in Borno state. Most, but not all, have since been released after spending months or years in detention without charge or trial.



## RAPE OF STARVING WOMEN IN THE SATELLITE CAMPS



*Women collect water from a water point at the Internally displaced people camp, in Bama, on December 8, 2016.*  
© AFP/Getty Images

Many women (and some men) told Amnesty International that the military and Civilian JTF have been raping and sexually exploiting women in the satellite camps. They described how soldiers and Civilian JTF members have used force and threats to rape women and girls and taken advantage of the conditions in the camps to coerce women into becoming their “girlfriends”.

Women often told Amnesty International that they have been at particular risk of sexual violence because their husbands and male family members had been detained and were therefore not present with them or able to provide for them, and because they were confined in the camps, unable to escape the abusive situations. Inadequate humanitarian assistance also exacerbated the power imbalances between security officials and those living in the camps.

Rape and sexual exploitation in the camps was particularly pervasive between late-2015

(as people started arriving in the satellite camps) and mid-2016 (when humanitarian aid and presence was increased).

Fifteen women from one camp alone – Bama Hospital camp – told Amnesty International that they had been forced or coerced to have sex with soldiers or Civilian JTF officials, in many cases as a condition to access food to avoid starvation. Some of these women said that they were forced to have sex with soldiers or Civilian JTF members to access enough food to survive, or to keep their families alive. Some said that the soldiers or Civilian JTF members demanded sex and they were too terrified to say no, especially after the officials had shown their ability to arbitrarily detain their family members. Others reported that the soldiers or Civilian JTF members had used physical force to attack them.

The coercive environment that was created and taken advantage of by the soldiers and

Civilian JTF meant that consent to sex was impossible. As such, each of these sexual acts constituted rape, even in the cases where women succumbed to demands to be the ‘girlfriends’ of soldiers or Civilian JTF members.

Women further described how security force officials created an organised system to inflict sexual violence on women, where Civilian JTF members would select women in the camp and take them to soldiers for sex.

## THOUSANDS OF HUNGER AND SICKNESS DEATHS IN THE SATELLITE CAMPS

The conditions across the satellite camps have been terrible, resulting in thousands of deaths due to lack of food, water and health care. Amnesty International’s findings indicate that the actions and/or inaction of the authorities, particularly the military, contributed to these deaths.

Between late-2015 and mid-2016, the conditions in many of the satellite camps





were famine-like. In some cases, people were effectively locked in the camp.

Those who spoke to Amnesty International consistently said that 15-30 people died every day from hunger and sickness between late-2015 and mid/late-2016 in Bama Hospital Camp. Hundreds, if not thousands, of displaced people died in this camp alone during this time.

Scores of women told Amnesty International that they received no more than a small plate of rice each day which they had to share with their families. Many also said they were beaten, and in some cases raped, at water and food distribution points by soldiers and members of the Civilian JTF, who accused them of being “Boko Haram wives”. Scores of displaced people reported selling their jewellery and spare clothes they had brought with them to soldiers and Civilian JTF for additional food or other items. They consistently reported that they were prohibited from leaving the camp during this time, either to return to their homes, search the surrounding area for food or firewood, or to relocate to other areas.

More than half of the women Amnesty International interviewed that lived in Bama Hospital Camp during this period said that one or more of their family members had died, including many who said that one or more of their children had died.

Over the same period, displaced people who lived in satellite camps in other recaptured towns – including Banki, Dikwa, Monguno, Rann and Benisheikh towns – likewise described high numbers of daily deaths due to hunger and sickness from lack of food, water and health care.



*A 15-year-old mother cries next to the body of her six-month-old daughter at their home in Banki, on 28 September 2016. Her daughter was brought into the MSF clinic suffering from severe malaria, as well as malnutrition. Hours later she passed away in need of a blood transfusion that was too complicated for the clinic to perform.*  
© Jane Hahn



*Aiya (not her real name) March 2017.*  
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## “AIYA”

“When the army approached [our village near Banki town, in late 2015], they opened fire and killed everyone who was running in panic. They didn’t care who it was, and that we were not Boko Haram. They killed five people, four died instantly and one died the next day. The dead included my husband and one of my daughters....

I fled with my surviving family and others in the village to Cameroon. The Cameroonian army... transferred us to Banki [town]. From here, the Nigerian army took us women separately and transferred us to [Bama Hospital camp in] Bama town. They took 30 women, no men. We don’t know what they did with the young men, we haven’t seen them again.

There was no food in Bama Hospital camp. If we were still there [in those conditions], we would all be dead. The treatment by the Civilian JTF was also very bad towards people in the camp. I have many marks on my body from where they beat me when I was trying to get water. If you want to get water, you will get beaten. That is the price for water. The Civilian JTF don’t like

the women collecting water. This is because they want to collect the water for themselves, and then they sell the water... and they give the water to their girlfriends.

**“If you want to get water, you will get beaten. That is the price for water”**

If you say you are a woman and that you will stay with your family [and not have sex with the

soldiers or Civilian JTF members], you will die and your children will die... There is no food or water unless you are a girlfriend of the Civilian JTF...

The hunger killed so many people. I lost my mother, my father, my older brother, my aunt and daughter. I lost others in Banki camp too.”

Aiya was finally able to leave Bama Hospital camp in mid-2016, when a humanitarian organisation started visiting the camp and arranged a medical evacuation for her and her surviving family, as three children she was looking after had severe malnutrition.



*Women and children in Bama Hospital Camp, 5 December 2015. Hundreds of displaced people died in this camp.*  
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*Ama (not her real name) March 2017.*  
© Amnesty International

## STILL AT RISK

### ONGOING HUNGER

From June 2016, humanitarian assistance began to increase to the satellite camps, and the mortality rate decreased. However, people living in these satellite camps (especially women) still face barriers to accessing adequate food and continue to live under severe movement restrictions.

In early 2018, a number of women gave Amnesty International consistent accounts of large numbers of daily deaths from hunger and sickness in two satellite camps in Dikwa town. In both locations, displaced people (especially women), faced continued movement restrictions. While they were allowed to visit the state capital of Maiduguri, they were not permitted to relocate there and risked being stopped from leaving the camps if they tried to travel with their children.

In other satellite camps such as Bama Secondary School camp (which replaced Bama Hospital camp in December 2017), women reported facing days of hunger between distribution cycles as they were

### “AMA”

Ama told Amnesty International that she was raped after accepting food from a Civilian JTF member after she first arrived in Bama Hospital camp in late 2015/early 2016, who then felt entitled to “payment.” She said:

“They [the soldiers and Civilian JTF] will give you food but in the night they will come back around 5pm or 6pm and they will tell you to come with them... one [Civilian JTF] man came and brought food to me, he came back in the evening, but I hid myself. The next day he said I should take water from his place [and I went]. He then closed the tent door behind me and raped me. He said I gave you these things, if you want them we have to be husband and wife.”





*Survivor of sexual violence feeding her children, 2017.*

© Amnesty International

not provided with enough assistance to last from one cycle to the next. The situation for women without husbands was particularly bad - many described facing discrimination accessing the food, and others reported that security officials only allowed men to leave the camp to collect firewood, while women were not permitted to do so. They also reported being prohibited from relocating to other locations.

In August 2018, the humanitarian NGO Medicine Sans Frontières raised concerns about an intensification of the humanitarian crisis in Bama Secondary School camp, following the arrival of 10,000 additional people to the camps in the previous four months. MSF reported that there was inadequate food, water and healthcare in the camp and that children in particular were at risk after already arriving in a critical state. Between 2 and 15 August 2018, 33 young children died in the camp.

## ONGOING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Soldiers and members of the Civilian JTF have continued to rape and sexually exploit women in the camps. Amnesty International has received recent reports of soldiers and the Civilian JTF abusing their power and taking advantage of ongoing impunity and a context in which women are, for the most part, still confined and hungry.

### “YEZA”

28-year-old Yeza told Amnesty International how women in the Bama Secondary School camp remain at high risk of sexual violence. Other women gave similar accounts.

“Even now, eighty per cent of us women in the camp don't have husbands. Most of our husbands are in detention. Some [women] left their husbands in the villages. Some don't even know where their husband is. ... We need support to get what we need to live. And the soldiers and Civilian JTF they know this. So, when they see you, if the lady is very young and beautiful the soldiers and the Civilian JTF will start helping you. So then when they give you help you know you have to pay for it, so you will go and sleep with them. From there the relationship starts.

If you didn't say ok to them, you wouldn't get anything, any benefit [available in the camp] you wouldn't get. They will say you are a Boko Haram lady, a Boko Haram wife. They will harass you. You won't be able to go near them. You will have to keep away from them, near your own family. If you are not going to them, you should stay in your house. Otherwise there will be trouble.

The soldiers and CJTF are going anywhere searching for girls [for sex]. On our first arrival to the government secondary school camp [in December 2017], the soldiers asked us who doesn't have a husband, and they screen those people aside. They will keep you away from your in-laws, so they can't complain you are their son's wife.

[The soldiers] are coming day and night. Even they are coming to the camp with motorcycles. We can hear the motorcycles come in to the camp at night, they take the girl and go away.

Seventy-five per cent of the young women in the camp have a boyfriend. Because no-one will give you soap, detergent, jobs unless you become their girlfriend. Without this, you can't live.”



**Knifarmovement @ Knifar2017 · Mar 9 ·**  
On 7 March we sent this letter to @NGRPresident - yesterday we received a call from the Presidency. We have made ourselves heard, but pray it will be followed by action: the release of our 1269 husbands, sons and daughters from # Giwa and investigation into our suffering in Bama.

## KNIFAR MOVEMENT

Knifar is a movement of an estimated 2,000 displaced women and girls from north-east Nigeria. Many members of this activist group have survived atrocities by both Boko Haram and the Nigerian military.

Knifar campaigns for the release of their husbands and relatives, over 1660 of whom are in arbitrary detention. They also campaign for accountability from Nigerian authorities for the starvation and sexual violence they have endured, and in some cases, continue to endure.

The group has collected a list of names of people from their villages who died in displacement in Bama Hospital camp in the months after their arrival. They have reported sexual violence involving the military and the civilian militias present in this camp.

Knifar members have raised these concerns with the Nigerian National

Human Rights Commission, the National Assembly, the International Criminal Court, the President, and with the Presidential Investigation Panel (set up by the President in August 2017 to investigate the conduct of the military, including in the course of the conflict with Boko Haram). They have also drawn domestic media attention to their concerns.

By September 2018, the group's list of men, women and children who had died in the camp (mostly in the period between October 2015 and June 2016) had reached 879, based on information gathered from women who had lived in the camp. The women continue to reach out to people in developing the list.



See entry, 9 March 2018, "On 7 March we sent this letter to @NGRPresident - yesterday we received a call from the Presidency. We have made ourselves heard, but pray it will be followed by action: the release of our 1269 husbands, sons and daughters from #Giwa and investigation into our suffering in Bama." at: [twitter.com/Knifar2017](https://twitter.com/Knifar2017).



See entry, 12 September 2017, "Knifar submitted to the #PresidentialInvestigationPanel: 1,230 names of our relatives in military detention and 466 deaths in Bama #IDP camp", at: [twitter.com/Knifar2017](https://twitter.com/Knifar2017).

## LOVED ONES STILL MISSING: IMPACT ON WOMEN

Scores of women expressed great sadness and pain to Amnesty International because they had not seen their husbands and other male relatives since they were detained and taken away by the military and the Civilian JTF during the "security screenings".

None of the women Amnesty International spoke to had received any information from the authorities about the status of their family member(s) in detention, which has exacerbated their anguish. These women often heard about their husbands when trying to fend off sex with a soldier or member of the Civilian JTF. They would say that they were married, to which they were told that their "husbands had been taken to Giwa detention facility and would not come back."

In practice, women can only find out information about their husbands and family members from released former detainees. Some women had thought their husbands or other family members were dead, until they received news they had been seen alive in military detention – mostly in Giwa detention facility where they were being held without charge or trial. Other women found out through former detainees that their relatives had died in detention.

All of the women interviewed by Amnesty International described how, in addition to the psychological harm caused, the detention of their husbands and other family members had left them struggling to care for their families alone, and at greater risk of violence, rape and sexual exploitation. The vast majority of women that Amnesty International interviewed said that their biggest hope for their future was that their husbands or other male family members would be released.





## “ZARA”

Zara, who is living in Bama Secondary School camp, told Amnesty International that she had tried to find her husband at a rehabilitation centre in the Borno state capital of Maiduguri, after hearing a rumour that many men who had been detained at Giwa barracks had been released there. She was unsuccessful and then faced reprisals for her efforts.

“I went back to the rehabilitation centre and they said no, no-one has been brought here from Giwa barracks. They sent me to the maximum [security] prison. When I got there, there was a security man with a gun. He asked me what I was doing, I said I had come to see my husband. He said, ‘get out’. Then an army man came by, I said I came to see my husband, but this man is refusing me... [After a while] I saw a man going through. I was crying. I said why you let the man through but not me a woman. I will not cooperate [by leaving]. From there they told me to calm down and go to [two different camps for internally displaced people] as they have released the men there. So I went. But when I got there [to the camps], I asked and [other internally displaced people said] there was no one there released from Bama.”



*Members of Knifar waiting to testify in front of the Presidential Panel to Review Compliance of the Armed Forces with Human Rights Obligations and Rules of Engagement on 30 October 2018 in Abuja.*

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After several days of fruitless searching, Zara had to go back to Bama Secondary School camp – as the pass she had received to visit Maiduguri expired. After talking to Knifar women, she decided to work to support Knifar’s list of names of relatives still in detention.

“So from there [back in Bama Secondary School camp], I prepared myself and made a list of 40 people. Then, I said to the camp managers I want to go back to find my husband [and requested a permit to visit Maiduguri again]. The camp managers said no, last time you went to roam about so we don’t want you to go there again. Because last time you were disturbing people. I went eight times to get a permit but they would not give me. So later I stopped.”

After over a year of being prohibited from leaving Bama Hospital camp, Zara was able to leave the camp for a visit to Maiduguri in mid-2018.




### “KUSAM”

“I don’t believe there will ever be justice for this, but there should be. We are married. They took our men to Giwa barracks, and then the CJTF and army force the women to be with them.... The most important thing is that my husband comes back. It is also important that the army recognises what happened to us. Some of us were forced into this for years with the CJTF and army. They should apologise that they took advantage of the women when the husbands weren’t there.”

### “HAUWA”

“We are still tired. We still don’t know where our husband and children are. Men have been taken away and the women are made pregnant. This is a calamity in the camp.”

↑  Two leaders of Knifar sign the group’s first petition/letter to the National Assembly asking for the release of their husbands. April 2017.  
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### “FANTA”

“I don’t know why they did this to us. They told us to come to the camp, we came, they arrested our husband, and then didn’t give us food. They said there was everything. They said there will be all arrangements in the camp. We don’t know what we have done to them. We have suffered so much, and our husbands are still in detention.”





## AUTHORITIES' RESPONSE

Amnesty International shared the findings of its investigations with the Nigerian military and relevant Ministers in the government before publishing a comprehensive research report on the topic in May 2018. Amnesty International asked detailed questions to ensure the authorities could respond to each issue raised in the report, but in all cases, the authorities either referred questions to other arms of government or did not engage.

Since publication of the report, both the military (in a statement by the Defence Headquarters) and the office of the President have denied the findings of the report and refused to take action to protect the rights of displaced women. In the days after the report was issued, representatives from the Defence Headquarters went to several camps with journalists, and publicly asked women to come forward if they had been raped by soldiers. The women, who were terrified, stayed silent.

Knifar made a statement at the time (though their Twitter handle @Knifar2017) saying "The military came to Dalori [camp] with journalists to ask us displaced women if we were raped. Before the visit, the women were told to say everything is fine,

that there are no issues. Is this the way our complaints are handled? One of our members was there. She has an 18-month-old son, fathered by a soldier. Too scared and intimidated to speak, she said nothing. No one spoke."

Subsequently, on 6 June 2018 the Nigerian Senate set up an investigation into the alleged rape and abuse of women in the satellite camps by the Nigerian military and members of the Civilian JTF. In the same month, the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission also announced it had constituted a Special Investigation Panel to conduct a public hearing on allegations of abuse of internally displaced people in the north-east of the country. The commission stated in a letter to Amnesty that it had been directed to investigate by the Federal Ministry of Justice.

While these initiatives are welcome, Amnesty has continued to raise concerns regarding the authorities' failure to release the final report of a Presidential panel of



*Knifar women line up to try to testify in front of the Presidential Investigation panel September 2017*  
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*See entry, 10 August 2018, "It's now five months ago since we wrote to @NGRPresident but apart from one phone call we have heard nothing. Our husbands: still in detention. We struggle to feed our children, but will not give up until we see our loved ones. People must hear what injustice has been done to us.", at: twitter.com/Knifar2017.*

investigation (The Panel to Review Compliance of the Armed Forces with Human Rights Obligations and Rules of Engagement), which was set up in August 2017 to investigate the conduct of the military including in conflict with Boko Haram. Among those anxiously awaiting the release of the investigation's outcomes are the Knifar women, who bravely testified in front of the panel.



**Knifar movement** @Knifar2017 · Aug 10

It's now five months ago since we wrote to @NGRPresident but apart from one phone call we have heard nothing. Our husbands: still in detention. We struggle to feed our children, but will not give up until we see our loved ones. People must hear what injustice has been done to us.



← In a Maiduguri camp for internally displaced people, one of Knifar's leaders speaks at a meeting as they plan advocacy efforts for their husband's release and for justice for the abuse they have suffered. March 2018.  
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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the government of Nigeria:

- Investigate the reports of violence, abuse and arbitrary detention committed by the military in towns recaptured from Boko Haram, camps for internally displaced people and detention facilities in north-east Nigeria, including those documented by Amnesty International, other human rights and humanitarian organisations, and survivor-activist groups such as the Knifar women. Identify and address the factors that leave women at risk of

sexual violence, and bring to justice perpetrators in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty.

- Release the report of the Panel to Review Compliance of the Armed Forces with Human Rights Obligations and Rules of Engagement to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Ensure that all internally displaced people, including female-headed-households, can equally access adequate levels of food and other forms of assistance, and step up efforts to combat corruption in access to food and other forms of humanitarian assistance.

- Lift all movement restrictions imposed on internally displaced people unless these are in line with international human rights standards.

- Immediately close all unofficial and secret places of detention. Release all detainees unless they are charged with a criminal offence provided in law and given a fair trial in line with international standards, and ensure families are reunited. Ensure that an up-to-date, centralised register of all people arrested and detained in the context of the conflict is maintained and is made accessible to the relatives and lawyers of those detained.

**Amnesty International** is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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Cover image: A woman walks as she holds a container at the Internally displaced people camp, in Bama, on December 8, 2016.  
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