



An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor

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What's new? Operation Safe Corridor, Nigeria's home-grown program for providing recruits with a voluntary exit route from Boko Haram, has had some success. But it still faces resistance among the political class and ordinary citizens alike. It also suffers from serious problems that are testing donors' confidence and likely deterring potential defectors.

Why does it matter? Operation Safe Corridor reflects Nigerian authorities' growing recognition that they cannot beat Boko Haram by military means alone. Improving the program would serve the federal government's objective of facilitating the defection of recruits. But unless its problems are fixed, the program could lose external support and domestic viability.

What should be done? Authorities should improve intake procedures to filter out civilians who do not belong in the program. They should take urgent steps to ease conditions of confinement and do more to smooth program graduates' reintegration into society while winning more public support, including by prosecuting some jihadists captured by security forces.

I. Overview

Operation Safe Corridor was established by the Nigerian government in 2016 to receive voluntary defectors from factions of the jihadist group Boko Haram. Part of a national strategy to degrade militant activity in the country's north east, the program faces problems. Authorities channel into Safe Corridor far too many civilians fleeing Boko Haram areas, unjustly mislabelling them jihadists, clogging the system and putting off donors. More troubling are accounts from program participants who have seen sometimes deadly conditions at the facilities they pass through on the way into Safe Corridor – both a concern in its own right and a deterrent for those who might follow their path. Despite improvements, the reintegration of defectors into society can be bumpy. The program is also controversial, with critics arguing that it amounts to amnesty for terrorists. For Safe Corridor to thrive, the government will need to better screen out civilians, protect participants and more effectively reintegrate graduates into society. It should also work harder to persuade the public of the program's merits.

The Nigerian government created Safe Corridor in 2016 after concluding that it would not be able to defeat the Boko Haram insurgency, which it has been battling since 2009, by military means alone. The program's core target group is low-level jihadist recruits who perform combatant and/or non-combatant roles and are important to the daily functioning of Boko Haram's two main factions – Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, or JAS) and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). There is ample reason for these recruits to seek an exit. When defectors leave the jihadist factions, it is normally due to mounting scepticism of the insurgency's prospects, exposure to atrocious violence, the danger posed to them and their families, aversion to the factions' unfair and brutal internal politics, the lack of material gain after years of service and, for some, the desire to escape a movement they were coerced into joining.

But while some donors and officials hope the program might be able to facilitate thousands of defections, it has struggled to bring in the right people. To date, of the hundreds of individuals who have gone through or are currently in the program, many are not from the target group. Rather, they are civilians who threw off Boko Haram's yoke and who, after detention by security forces, were mistakenly categorised as militants and channelled into Safe Corridor. The program has also been something of a catch-all for a wide range of other individuals, including minors suspected of being child soldiers, a few high-level jihadists and alleged insurgents whom the government tried and failed to prosecute and who say they have been moved into the program against their will. Some donors, worried Nigeria is not spending their money on the target group, are therefore cautious about further investment in the program.

Even more jarring are allegations regarding the terrible treatment that many program participants experience after they enter Nigerian government custody. Many former Safe Corridor internees have reported enduring horrific conditions, particularly in the network of detention centres where they were held prior to reaching the program's facility, Mallam Sidi camp in Gombe state. Some of those who voluntarily defected found themselves held in government facilities for as long as three years in total and often without any contact with family members for long periods of time. Some died in confinement. Even at Mallam Sidi, where conditions are better than at regular internment sites, former internees report that they were sometimes left short of food and given no certain timeline about when they might be integrated back into society.

The program could also do more to help graduates reintegrate into society after they leave Safe Corridor. When it first launched, authorities had given little thought to this matter, leaving many former internees without a smooth path back into civilian life. State and local authorities have since become more actively involved with their reintegration. Some returnees still face suspicion from communities and local security forces, however. The program also has yet to overcome continuing public hostility and opposition from some prominent politicians, who characterise it as providing amnesty and support to terrorists or criminals who should instead be punished.

To strengthen the program, the authorities, with donor support, should:

- ❑ Fix screening systems so that they more effectively identify Boko Haram recruits who are in the program's target group. Civilians who have escaped from Boko Ha-

ram areas, who are more likely than former recruits to find immediate acceptance back home or in displacement camps, should be screened out quickly and moved through separately so they can make a speedy return to society.

- ❑ Accelerate work to improve detention conditions, adding better safeguards to protect internees from abuse after surrendering and creating better systems to move defectors swiftly out of interim detention centres and into the Mallam Sidi camp. The camp leadership at Mallam Sidi should tighten up management of food supplies so that internees are well nourished and secure more resources for the training and psycho-social support key to internees' return to society.
- ❑ Augment efforts to coordinate the return of Safe Corridor graduates with state authorities and local security services to help smooth their arrival back into society. Working with donors, they should also intensify plans to offer material support to host communities and their members, in order to give them incentives to accept former Boko Haram recruits into their fold.
- ❑ Beef up public awareness campaigns to persuade Nigerians of Safe Corridor's merits and to overcome any hostility to the idea of rehabilitating former Boko Haram recruits. In doing so, the government should strive to balance the assistance it is giving to former jihadists to start new lives with initiatives that can afford comfort and a measure of justice to victims of Boko Haram atrocities, notably putting on trial captured militants such as high-level commanders or those involved in atrocities.

II. Creating an Exit from Jihad

Operation Safe Corridor is the result of several years of discussions within the Nigerian government about how to encourage voluntary defections from Boko Haram. As early as 2013, four years into the insurgency, the authorities started to recognise that a military response alone would be insufficient to dismantle the group.¹ In September 2015, soon after his electoral victory, President Muhammadu Buhari set up a committee led by the defence chief to develop methods to persuade insurgents to defect. In 2016, federal authorities established Safe Corridor, a military-run and now partly donor-funded program providing a way out for Boko Haram recruits.² Its fa-

¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Nigerian security official, Abuja, 6 December 2019 (concerning authorities' realisation of the usefulness of defections). With respect to the terminology used in this briefing: Boko Haram (generally translated from Hausa as "Western education is forbidden") is a derisive designation used by Salafi critics of the jihadist organisation operating in north-eastern Nigeria and along the borders with Niger, Cameroon and Chad. In 2016, this group split into two factions, JAS and ISWAP. This briefing uses the familiar term Boko Haram to refer both to the group before the 2016 split and to the ISWAP and JAS factions collectively since then. For background on Boko Haram, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°213, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014; and N°168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010.

² Operation Safe Corridor has received indirect financial support from donors such as the European Union, UK and U.S. via the International Organization for Migration, a UN agency with experience in reintegrating former combatants into society. See "DHQ creates centre for repentant B'Haram members", *Punch*, 6 April 2016. For further background, see, for instance, Vanda Felbab-Brown,

cility is at Mallam Sidi in Gombe state, adjacent but not too close to the insurgency's epicentre in Borno state.³ There, for what is supposed to be a period of six months, internees receive what the state calls "deradicalisation" instruction, as well as other education, vocational training and psychological support.⁴

The targets of Safe Corridor are low-level insurgents, both combatant and non-combatant recruits integral to supporting Boko Haram factions' operations.⁵ While casting a broad net, the program aims to draw in only those recruits who are not so tainted by atrocities that their reinsertion into society would cause backlash from those who might accuse the government of handing out amnesties to war criminals. In doing so, it aims essentially to strip Boko Haram of as many of these men as possible, while military operations continue against the hardline core.⁶ Mallam Sidi's camp commander General Musa Ibrahim insists that Safe Corridor is "a non-kinetic approach to warfare, not an amnesty program".⁷

The program has evident potential. Its very existence provides an incentive for Boko Haram recruits to defect from a fight that many of them have come to consider futile. Several graduates interviewed by Crisis Group explained that Safe Corridor public information campaigns via radio broadcasts or leaflets dropped by Nigerian military aircraft were critical factors in pushing them to defect, an option they had not previously considered, fearing they would be executed by security forces upon turning themselves in.⁸ Knowing that there was a way out persuaded a number of those who were disillusioned by endless war, the violence committed by the factions to which they belonged, the danger of internal purges and punishments, and the injustice and poverty they experienced while jihadist leaders and their protégés enriched themselves.⁹

Many of those who have passed through Safe Corridor told Crisis Group that they value the program, although there were differences in opinion as to how much they benefited from the various types of education and services they received. Graduates especially appreciated literacy classes, as well as the psycho-social sessions offered to

"In Nigeria, We Don't Want Them Back': Amnesty, Defectors' Programs, Leniency Measures, Informal Reconciliation and Punitive Responses to Boko Haram", United Nations University, 2018.

³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Major General Bamidele Shafa, head of Operation Safe Corridor, 11 February 2021. Mallam Sidi was the site of a National Youth Service Corps camp until 2016.

⁴ Safe Corridor designates the people it takes in as "clients" while they are in the facility and as "graduates" upon their release. But rights groups such as Amnesty International point out that Mallam Sidi is a de facto detention facility as its "clients" are not really given the choice to go there or not. This briefing uses the term "internee" to describe those who pass through Safe Corridor.

⁵ This briefing is based primarily on interviews with former Safe Corridor internees. In gathering information on the topic, Crisis Group interviewed 23 former internees, thirteen of whom were active Boko Haram recruits. Research was supplemented with interviews with government officials, employees of NGOs or international organisations and diplomatic and donor sources in Abuja with an active interest in the program. Most interviews with graduates took place in Maiduguri in November-December 2019 and February-March 2020.

⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Nigerian security official, 14 November 2020.

⁷ Victoria Bamas, "Repentant Boko Haram': A look at Operation Safe corridor deradicalisation and rehabilitation camp", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 1 November 2020.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, November-December 2019 and March 2020.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, November-December 2019 and February-March 2020.

them, which helped them prepare for the difficulties of reintegration into society.¹⁰ Civic education and training about drug abuse were also generally well received. While most internees also liked the vocational training in skills such as carpentry and shoe-making, a few, notably those who had held positions of higher status in Boko Haram, felt demoralised by the idea of taking up such humble trades.¹¹

Graduates did not praise all aspects of the curriculum, however. Some thought the “deradicalisation” classes pointless, given that they had defected and abandoned Boko Haram thinking anyway.¹² Several also questioned the commitment and expertise of the religious specialists – often military chaplains – who came to teach.

Notwithstanding any misgivings, those former Boko Haram members who do leave Safe Corridor with a good experience – and Crisis Group spoke to several – can become useful advocates for the program. But getting members of the target group safely into and out of the program has proven an elusive goal. To date, entering and moving through the corridor has been a haphazard, difficult and often dangerous affair.

III. Missing the Target

The number of low-level insurgents who have passed through Safe Corridor is low. So far, of the 920 people admitted into the program, only a small portion have been in its target cohort, thereby barely affecting the strength of the two Boko Haram factions, which control thousands of people at any one time.¹³ Indeed, 23 former Safe Corridor internees interviewed by Crisis Group stated that at most one quarter of the cohort at Mallam Sidi are from the low-level but committed jihadist recruits who form the program's target group of defectors.¹⁴

Most of the others in the program at Mallam Sidi are civilians who fled areas controlled by Boko Haram and whom authorities then mistakenly categorised as jihadists and detained before sending them into Safe Corridor.¹⁵ Locals in Boko Haram-controlled areas refer to these civilians as *awam*, a word derived from the Arabic for “commoners”. While some *awam*, if only to ensure their own survival, become local officials under the group's authority or can perform minor support roles, notably as

¹⁰ One internee said the psycho-social support “was excellent. They explained the environment and thinking of the community [about Boko Haram]. The issues. I saw all that they had told us [after release]. So, I had control over it”. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 2 March 2020.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2019 and March 2020.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 29 February 2020; Crisis Group telephone interviews, NGO workers, 16 December 2020.

¹³ Since the small pilot batch, three main batches of internees have been admitted so far, as well as several smaller groups. So far, 872 graduates have been released from Safe Corridor. Crisis Group telephone interview, Major General Bamidele Shafa, head of Operation Safe Corridor, 11 February 2021. In 2018, U.S. officials estimated that the two factions of Boko Haram together could field 5,000 fighters. Ryan Browne, “US warns of growing African terror threat”, CNN, 19 April 2018. On the various batches, see Annex B.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020. The term *rijal* refers not only to low-level recruits but also to all those who are considered members and have pledged allegiance to the leaders.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

traders, they are normally passive subjects of Boko Haram rule.¹⁶ With Mallam Sidi packed with *awam*, the camp has thus largely become a refuge and exit ramp for innocent civilians fleeing Boko Haram – a worthy outcome since it at least secures their release from prolonged captivity and forced labour under the militants' thumb. But the program is by contrast struggling to draw in *rijal*, a word derived from the Arabic for "men", and which the low-level recruits use to describe themselves.¹⁷

Former Safe Corridor internees say this outcome is due to authorities' poor screening procedures for those fleeing territory under Boko Haram's control, flaws that are reportedly exacerbated by custodial abuse. Once they have escaped from Boko Haram territory, both *rijal* and *awam* run into security forces or pro-government militias, who take them into custody and introduce them into a circuit of detention sites.¹⁸ They are finally brought together at the notorious Giwa Barracks military detention centre in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state. At Giwa (discussed further below) the inductees are screened by a Joint Investigation Committee consisting of intelligence officers from various security services. Based on its determination of the risk each inductee poses, the Committee recommends one of three resolutions to his case: release, "deradicalisation" in Safe Corridor or referral to the judicial system.

At this point, at least in theory, the Committee distinguishes actual Boko Haram associates (a category more or less corresponding to *rijal*) from civilians, with only the former going to the Safe Corridor camp, but in practice it often does not work this way. Coercion appears to be a big part of the problem. By this stage, former internees told Crisis Group, security officers have beaten and intimidated many inductees into saying they are Boko Haram associates.¹⁹ For this reason, the Committee wrongly labels many *awam* as Boko Haram associates. In any case, however, the Committee may struggle to determine who is *rijal* and who is *awam*. It is not always an easy call to make. Men in Boko Haram-controlled areas occupy a complex variety of roles, including non-fighting sympathisers, opportunistic traders or providers of key services (notably mechanics or welders). Some may also be linked to Boko Haram through kinship or marriage.²⁰ Also, the authorities sometimes simply lose interview slips as they shuffle detainees through the chain of custody, leaving the Committee

¹⁶ Most of the *awam* interviewed by Crisis Group were simple farmers.

¹⁷ Even some Safe Corridor staff have reportedly acknowledged that many internees are not associates of Boko Haram in any meaningful sense. One former recruit said a senior Safe Corridor official told him: "You are not Boko Haram, we know. But stay quiet". Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 11 March 2020. In some cases, civilian internees at Mallam Sidi are not even from Boko Haram-controlled areas. Four former Safe Corridor internees interviewed by Crisis Group in Maiduguri in March 2020 insisted that neither had they had any association with Boko Haram nor had they lived in Boko Haram-controlled areas. Two claimed that malevolent neighbours had denounced them as jihadists. Another two said they were just picked up by suspicious security officials in towns under government control.

¹⁸ Information provided by all the *awam* and *rijal* interviewed by Crisis Group.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020. Abuse at detention sites is also documented in "Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military", Amnesty International, June 2015. Security officers seem to operate on the assumption that all adult men coming from Boko Haram areas are supporters of the movement. Fear and the desire for revenge may also play a part in the abuse.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

with the task of having to make an assessment without access to previously collected information.²¹

Compounding these problems, some donors express concern that authorities have sometimes treated the program as a catch-all for individuals who do not belong there.²² For example, the first batches of internees included teenage boys who were suspected of having been child soldiers in Boko Haram.²³ Authorities had also sent to Mallam Sidi individuals previously suspected of belonging to Boko Haram but whose prosecutions had been dismissed during judicial review.²⁴ The lawyer representing one of them argued, with no success, that a stay in the camp would amount to unlawful detention.²⁵ On at least two occasions, authorities sent to Safe Corridor small groups of Boko Haram defectors that included senior jihadists who had negotiated freedom in exchange for intelligence cooperation and were thus outside the target group of low-level recruits.²⁶

IV. A Brutal and Tortuous Path

Given that so many defectors keep in touch with those who stay with the insurgency, it is critical that those who find their way into Safe Corridor have a positive experience so that they can persuade more *rijal* to leave the jihadists' ranks. While the services provided to internees at Mallam Sidi are certainly appreciated by many who pass through the system, the experience of getting from the point of defection to the camp itself is often extraordinarily brutal, protracted and dangerous. The poor detention conditions raise humanitarian concerns and threaten to taint the program in a way that could put donor funding at risk.

Former Safe Corridor internees, both *rijal* and *awam*, interviewed by Crisis Group testified to a long journey through a network of often gruesome detention facilities. Their ordeal began once they left Boko Haram-controlled areas to turn themselves in. They were first taken to detention centres, often prisons within the nearest local military barracks, for screening. There, almost all of them were subjected to threats, beatings and torture while being interrogated by security officials or members of pro-government militia groups, notably the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).²⁷

After some time in these initial detention centres, internees were moved to other detention facilities, again often for long periods of time. Most of them eventually reached Giwa Barracks, the military detention centre in Maiduguri, where Nigeria's

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, March 2020.

²² Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Abuja, March 2020.

²³ They were eventually extracted from the group, and minors are no longer inducted into Safe Corridor. Crisis Group telephone interview, international expert, 6 December 2020.

²⁴ "Nigeria: Flawed Trials of Boko Haram Suspects", Human Rights Watch, 17 September 2018. Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, March 2020.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, March 2020.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, November-December 2019 and February-March 2020.

task force fighting Boko Haram is headquartered.²⁸ Transport conditions on the way to this notorious facility could be brutal, with people bound so tightly some still bear scars.²⁹ After undergoing screening by the Joint Investigation Committee in Giwa, a few detainees were eventually sent to detention centres run by the Nigerian Correctional Service, for instance at Kainji (in Niger state, in the country's north west) or Kuje prison in Abuja.³⁰

Conditions of confinement in some of these facilities were abysmal, and unlucky internees could spend several months – and sometimes almost a year – in detention from the moment they defected to the moment they entered Safe Corridor.³¹ Indeed, interviewees report that poor conditions, including the lack of food, air, water and hygiene, killed many at Giwa and Kainji while they waited for final transfer to Mallam Sidi.³² “Conditions were so bad that people died every day. In our cell, it was two or three people a week who died”, says one former Giwa Barracks detainee.³³ Several interviewees say they would have thought twice about defecting if they knew the prolonged hardship they would have to endure just to get to Mallam Sidi.³⁴

Even in Mallam Sidi, described by many former Safe Corridor internees as a very comfortable place by comparison to the previous camps, conditions could be difficult and the stay lengthy.³⁵ Many former internees claimed that food was at times scarce in the camp; they said they believed that some camp officials were misappropriating or withholding food. As a result, they said, a handful of people died from malnutrition.³⁶ While no interviewee mentioned being the victim of physical abuse at Mallam Sidi, other credible sources report the recent unexplained disappearance of at least one Safe Corridor internee.³⁷ (Safe Corridor officials acknowledge that some former

²⁸ Among the Safe Corridor graduates interviewed by Crisis Group, two *rijal* said they were able to avoid spending time in Giwa Barracks and that they had already negotiated their direct transfer to Mallam Sidi.

²⁹ Conditions at Giwa are notoriously bad and have been documented by various NGOs. See, for instance, “Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands”, op. cit.; and “My Heart is in Pain’ – Older People’s Experience of Conflict, Displacement and Detention in Northeast Nigeria”, Amnesty International, 8 December 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, December 2019 and March 2020.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, November–December 2019 and March 2020.

³² Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, November–December 2019 and March 2020.

³³ Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 29 November 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, December 2019.

³⁵ One former Safe Corridor internee said: “Among all the detention centres that I know, the only one that is a bit fair is [Mallam Sidi in] Gombe”. Crisis Group interview, Maiduguri, 4 March 2020. While Mallam Sidi is technically not a detention centre, many internees see it as such. That said, many internees were relieved to have space to lie down, in actual beds, and to have facilities for washing and opportunities to exercise.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Maiduguri, December 2019 and March 2020. Safe Corridor graduates confirmed to a social worker that food remained an issue in Mallam Sidi well into 2020. Crisis Group telephone interview, social worker, 18 January 2021.

³⁷ Two sources in touch with former internees from the last batch, who were released after Crisis Group’s field research, were told that an internee who had challenged the camp authorities had subsequently disappeared from the facility and was still unaccounted for. Crisis Group telephone

internees have died, but they insist that the deaths resulted from accidents or pre-existing medical conditions.³⁸) Other internees expressed frustration at being held for so long at Mallam Sidi, especially after being held in other detention camps, and losing contact with their families. Some internees have gone as far as to go on hunger strike to protest their prolonged stay in the camp.³⁹

While stories of internees enduring hardship continue to emerge, there are signs that things are improving. Partly as a result of pressure from local human rights defenders and global organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, conditions for Boko Haram detainees have improved overall, although they still have far to go. Wardens in Giwa Barracks have at least begun placing those they think should be sent to Safe Corridor into a separate cell, away from the other detainees, which at least lowers the chances they will suffer abuse while they are awaiting transfer to Mallam Sidi.⁴⁰ Following the cases of hunger strikes at Mallam Sidi, administrators also sped up the release of batches of internees from the Safe Corridor program.⁴¹

Major General Bamidele Shafa, who has headed Safe Corridor since 2016, told Crisis Group that he has wanted to step up a campaign to sensitise security forces on how to treat defectors humanely and channel them into his program, in order to make it more effective.⁴² This is a welcome idea, though implementation is uncertain as the new chief of defence staff has recently implemented a major shake-up in the officer corps and it is not yet clear that General Shafa will stay in charge of Safe Corridor.⁴³

V. Reintegration: Out of the Corridor

For those who make it safely into and out of Operation Safe Corridor, the next challenge is reintegration into Nigerian society. While civilian life is not always easy for Safe Corridor graduates, the same is true for many in impoverished, conflict-affected north-eastern Nigeria, and for the most part graduates seem to survive with the little they have, without returning to the life of an insurgent.⁴⁴ In many cases, returnees are welcomed back into their communities, which are often camps for displaced people in Borno's main towns. None of the *awam* interviewed mentioned problems

interview, social worker, 5 November 2020; Crisis Group electronic communication, NGO worker, 20 January 2021.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and international experts in touch with Safe Corridor officials about this matter, Abuja, March 2020. Reported causes of death included poisoning resulting from the unsafe use of chemicals during training for the fabrication of cosmetics.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

⁴⁰ On improvements resulting from Red Cross involvement, see Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 29 November 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internees, December 2019 and March 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, 11 February 2021. Two relatively recent defectors told Crisis Group that they made it through the program quickly and without violence, getting what they both called "VIP treatment". Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

⁴³ "Major shake-up as Army redeploys 120 generals, others", *Premium Times*, 6 March 2021.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Nigerian security official, 6 March 2021; Crisis Group electronic communication, development worker involved with Safe Corridor, 7 March 2021.

reintegrating and their stay in Mallam Sidi, when known, raised no alarm.⁴⁵ Most *rijal* also reported finding a degree of acceptance in society.⁴⁶

In Safe Corridor's early days, the process of reintegration was messy. When the first batches of graduates were released from the program, the Borno state government had to improvise, setting up graduates at the Umaru Shehu rehabilitation camp in Maiduguri, a facility run by the Borno State Women's Affairs Commission and hosting women and children formerly associated with Boko Haram. There were reports that some graduates applied pressure on female internees for sexual favours.⁴⁷ Returnees were then sent on to their communities or to displaced persons' camps around Maiduguri with little to no preparation.⁴⁸ In some cases, graduates encountered public hostility when they arrived. In one famous episode, authorities tried to bring a large group of graduates originally from Gwoza local government area to a Maiduguri displaced persons' camp and then to their homes, but in both places residents protested, forcing authorities to send the graduates again to Umaru Shehu, until they could be relocated again.⁴⁹

Things have improved since then, with authorities taking a greater interest in ensuring that those who leave Mallam Sidi have a softer landing in society. In advance of releasing them, authorities have stepped up efforts to connect those who will soon graduate with family members and with local officials, facilitating telephone calls as well as visits by relatives and local authorities to Mallam Sidi. A separate transit centre for Safe Corridor graduates, managed by the Borno State Women's Affairs Commission, has now opened in the Shokari neighbourhood of Maiduguri with the

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, former Safe Corridor internees, Maiduguri, March 2020.

⁴⁶ Of the thirteen *rijal*, only three mentioned suffering from ostracism by their own families. Some *rijal* say they knew their communities would not welcome their return and thus preferred to stay in displacement camps or in Maiduguri. For example, one former internee mentioned that his association with Boko Haram was known in his hometown. Rather than go back to his family house, he chose to stay in the neighbouring displacement camp, where he is not known. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 5 March 2020. Another *rijal* said that even though his family knew he was impressed into Boko Haram, he was still ostracised by his relatives and his wife's family, who are keeping his wife from him. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 7 March 2020. A number of *rijal* seem to have chosen to stay in Maiduguri, a big city where they can more easily forge new lives. Interviews related to marriage of *rijal*, however, show that authorities and communities can be flexible when it comes to reintegration. One *rijal* interviewed by Crisis Group said he was able to marry since his release, which demonstrates a degree of openness by his community to his reintegration. He told his future in-laws about his history of association with Boko Haram, but he was still given the go-ahead. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 8 March 2020.

⁴⁷ These reports concerned Batch 1, sent to Umaru Shehu in August 2018. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°275, *Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram*, 21 May 2019, p. 8.

⁴⁸ When each cohort of internees finishes the program at Mallam Sidi, Safe Corridor hosts a graduation ceremony, at which graduates recite an oath of allegiance to Nigeria and receive a number of documents, including an identity card (a crucial document in Borno, where presenting identification to security officers is often required), a set of certificates (attesting to their oath of allegiance, attendance at the Safe Corridor program and completion of vocational training), and a separate plastic card with a barcode for identification.

⁴⁹ Authorities eventually set up a "reconciliation committee" with community leaders leading to some graduates returning to where they had come from. Crisis Group telephone interview, international expert, 6 December 2020.

support of some international partners, precisely with a view to avoiding a reprise of the allegations levied against them at Umaru Shehu. A government protocol adopted in 2020 details the respective responsibilities of Safe Corridor, which is a federal program, and of the states, which are responsible for handling reintegration.⁵⁰

As for material support, earlier batches of graduates received a small amount of money from Safe Corridor (20,000 nairas, about \$60 at the December 2018 rate) upon exiting Mallam Sidi, and a bit more from the Borno state government (5,000 nairas, about \$15) upon exiting Umaru Shehu, as well as foodstuffs and basic necessities (clothes, cooking utensils, a mat and a tarpaulin). Borno state authorities also gave the first graduates sewing machines to help them earn a living, but only one per grouping of three graduates; many sold the machines and split the money, as it was often impractical for them to start a business this way.⁵¹

Over time, donors have tried to step up the support graduates receive and to attend to the communities into which they integrate. Since the end of 2019, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has begun giving graduates individual business kits to help them set up retail booths, shoemaker's shops or hair salons.⁵² To improve acceptance of graduates, IOM is working on a plan to distribute two additional kits to civilians in the receiving community for every kit issued to a graduate who takes up residence there. IOM is also working on establishing vocational training centres in host areas.⁵³

Meanwhile, some security forces, including the CJTF militia, have taken an interest in returnees, often monitoring their progress and behaviour.⁵⁴ In some cases, the militia offers returnees the option of recruitment into its ranks.⁵⁵ Some of the *rijal* graduates report feeling that they enjoy a level of protection from military authorities and the militia. As one of them put it: "The military in [my community] warned everyone – and people are afraid of the military – that they [the military] will do something to them if they [hostile civilians] do something to us".⁵⁶

There are cases, however, where returnees face problems with security services. For example, local military officials refused to accept the abovementioned graduates from Gwoza even after the Borno state authorities had negotiated the entry of a number of them with the community itself.⁵⁷ In another case, the local military unit expelled a group of Safe Corridor graduates who had just returned to Dikwa, another

⁵⁰ Crisis Group electronic communication, international expert, 5 February 2021.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 5 March 2020.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, international expert, Abuja, 13 March 2020.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Abuja, March 2020; Crisis Group telephone interview, international expert, December 2020.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Offers were made in Mallam Sidi by visiting CJTF officials, or when the former internees were admitted back into their community. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 1 December 2019. One graduate said he refused the offer, arguing that he had to take care of his family as its sole surviving male member. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 8 March 2020. Another former Safe Corridor internee reported that he was keen on joining, but said he was turned down, possibly because he was deemed to have been too engaged with Boko Haram to be trusted. Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 5 March 2020.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, former Safe Corridor internee, Maiduguri, 8 March 2020.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, international expert, Abuja, 13 March 2020.

town in Borno.⁵⁸ Resistance by locally deployed military officials may be due to institutional friction between the army, of which they are a part and which is in charge of anti-Boko Haram operations, and the defence staff, which supervises Safe Corridor. But it may also be caused by the revulsion that many military officials feel seeing Boko Haram associates brought back into society.

Returnees also face a larger problem, which relates to opposition, from both senior politicians and the broader population, to the idea that any former Boko Haram recruit should benefit from government forgiveness and donor support, especially at a time when jihadists have been escalating their attacks. “The current arrangement where the repentant insurgents are granted amnesty without apologising to the victims and the state cannot bring about the required peace”, said Senator for Borno South and Chairman of the Senate Committee on the Army Ali Ndume in September 2020.⁵⁹ This kind of opposition is likely to intensify following still more militant attacks, such as ISWAP's March 2021 assault on a UN base and humanitarian aid hub, which has fed popular frustration with the military's inability to contain the jihadists.⁶⁰

In another blow to Safe Corridor, Borno State Governor Babagana Umara Zulum has called for a review of the program, stating that he believes that some of those who passed through it have rejoined Boko Haram factions.⁶¹ Some Safe Corridor graduates think the governor has based his comments partly on the reported arrest of a small group of Safe Corridor graduates in the Borno town of Banki on suspicion of engaging in trade with insurgents.⁶² Crisis Group has not investigated these allegations in depth, but it has confirmed only one instance of a Safe Corridor graduate returning back to a Boko Haram faction.⁶³ A number of Nigerian officials as well as policy experts involved with Safe Corridor, who were interviewed after Zulum's allegations surfaced, share the view that virtually all the program's graduates have remained civilians. They also have found only one solid case of someone who had passed through the program taking up arms once more.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, social worker, 18 January 2021.

⁵⁹ “Ndume disagrees with granting amnesty to Boko Haram”, *Sahel Standard Magazine*, 14 September 2020.

⁶⁰ “Jihadists attack UN base in Nigeria, trapping 25 aid workers”, *France 24*, 2 March 2021.

⁶¹ “Zulum: ‘Repentant’ Boko Haram members end up as spies for the insurgents”, *The Cable*, 5 March 2021.

⁶² Crisis Group electronic communications, former Safe Corridor internee, 5 March 2021; development worker involved with Safe Corridor, 7 March 2021.

⁶³ See also “Ndume disagrees again with FG on rehabilitation of repentant Boko Haram members”, Channels TV, 11 November 2020. The one graduate tracked by Crisis Group has contacted fellow graduates to negotiate his way back out of Boko Haram. Crisis Group electronic communications, former internee, international expert, 9 December 2020. By contrast, a number of female Boko Haram associates who had been through rehabilitation or reintegration programming eventually chose to return to the jihadist fold. There are reasons to think that Safe Corridor graduates are less likely to go back than the women. Many of the women who went back to Boko Haram had in fact not defected but had been captured and taken into custody or into internally displaced persons camps by the military. Once free to move, many returned to be reunited with their relatives in Boko Haram-controlled areas, where they felt they may be safer than as stigmatised women in displacement camps in government-controlled areas. For more on women in Boko Haram, see Crisis Group Report, *Returning from the Land of Jihad: The Fate of Women Associated with Boko Haram*, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, March 2021.

VI. Repairing the Corridor

Operation Safe Corridor has the potential to play a central role in getting the number of Boko Haram defectors to rise. As noted, interviews with graduates make clear that the existence of the program was itself a reason for them to defect and suggest that many more in Boko Haram factions' ranks are ready to abandon their posts as well. It is also clear that Nigerian authorities have been trying to address some of the program's failings. But further work needs to be done.

First, Nigerian officials need to improve the screening of *awam* and *rijal*. Too many people who are not *rijal* – the core target group of Safe Corridor – are ending up at Mallam Sidi, which has led some donors to question what they are paying for. All those who flee Boko Haram areas voluntarily and are picked up by security services should be immediately set apart from other detainees in detention centres and screened separately. Security forces should ensure that officials carrying out the screening have a background working with this population and understand the difference between *awam* and *rijal*. Nigerian authorities have been slow to recognise this distinction because of a propensity to treat all males emerging from Boko Haram-controlled territory as jihadists.⁶⁵ Those who are identified as *awam* should be released promptly and receive social support they may need at home. The *rijal* should be moved directly and as quickly as possible to Mallam Sidi. To ensure appropriate screening, the government should boost the teams with select former *rijal* and staff who have worked in the Safe Corridor system.

Secondly, authorities should (with donor support) redouble efforts to tackle systemic detainee abuse problems and take concerted steps to protect Safe Corridor inductees as they move to Mallam Sidi. The experience of many internees continues to be poor, with many enduring dangerous conditions of confinement at the network of facilities that they travel through on their way to the camp. These conditions are deeply troubling from a humanitarian perspective and also pose reputational risks to a program whose success will partly rely on word of mouth among the *rijal*. Addressing this challenge means minimising the period of time during which internees are at transitory detention centres like Giwa before they reach Mallam Sidi and improving conditions at all such facilities.

Nigerian authorities should also aim to improve the situation at Mallam Sidi, where conditions, even if better than in transit camps, have been substandard. Authorities should examine allegations regarding the misappropriation of camp food, ensure that internees' food needs are being met, and ramp up livelihood training and counselling. They should ensure that internees are able to contact their families who may have defected with them, to allow them to keep up morale and plan their reintegration together. The authorities should also abide by the six-month timeline for releasing internees. If the government can show that it is working effectively to achieve these objectives, it may find itself in a better position to request donor assistance to

⁶⁵ See "Stars on Their Shoulders, Blood on Their Hands", op. cit.

improve food, living conditions, psycho-social support, education and training for Safe Corridor.⁶⁶

Third are steps to minimise the problems graduates face in being accepted by local authorities once they return to civilian life. Officials who manage Safe Corridor internees and graduates should coordinate better with local security services and with Borno state authorities, which are in charge of reintegration in Borno, to help ensure that those who reintegrate into local communities are welcomed and not harassed by any local security services. Graduates who know that they are not welcome and thus move away from home should still be eligible for some form of assistance. Donors, meanwhile, should ramp up support for host communities to raise their incentives to receive Safe Corridor graduates into their fold.

Finally, key both to Safe Corridor's domestic viability and its ability to attract donor funds is to convince Nigeria's public and political class to accept a program that many would argue gives jihadists amnesty and rewards them on top of that. The federal government should accordingly intensify its public awareness campaign through mainstream media to sensitise citizens to Safe Corridor's benefits. As part of this effort, the authorities should try to inform the public that those who join Boko Haram and its factions in the impoverished north east of the country often do so because they lack opportunities or are outright coerced and are therefore not inherently enemies of the state. At the same time, authorities should address the legitimate demand for justice from the public and Boko Haram's victims. They could take a step in this direction by setting up a task force of dedicated judges to try a number of high-level captured (as opposed to defecting) Boko Haram associates through fair and well-publicised prosecutions that are based on solid evidence – a step that would be worthwhile irrespective of Safe Corridor's fate.

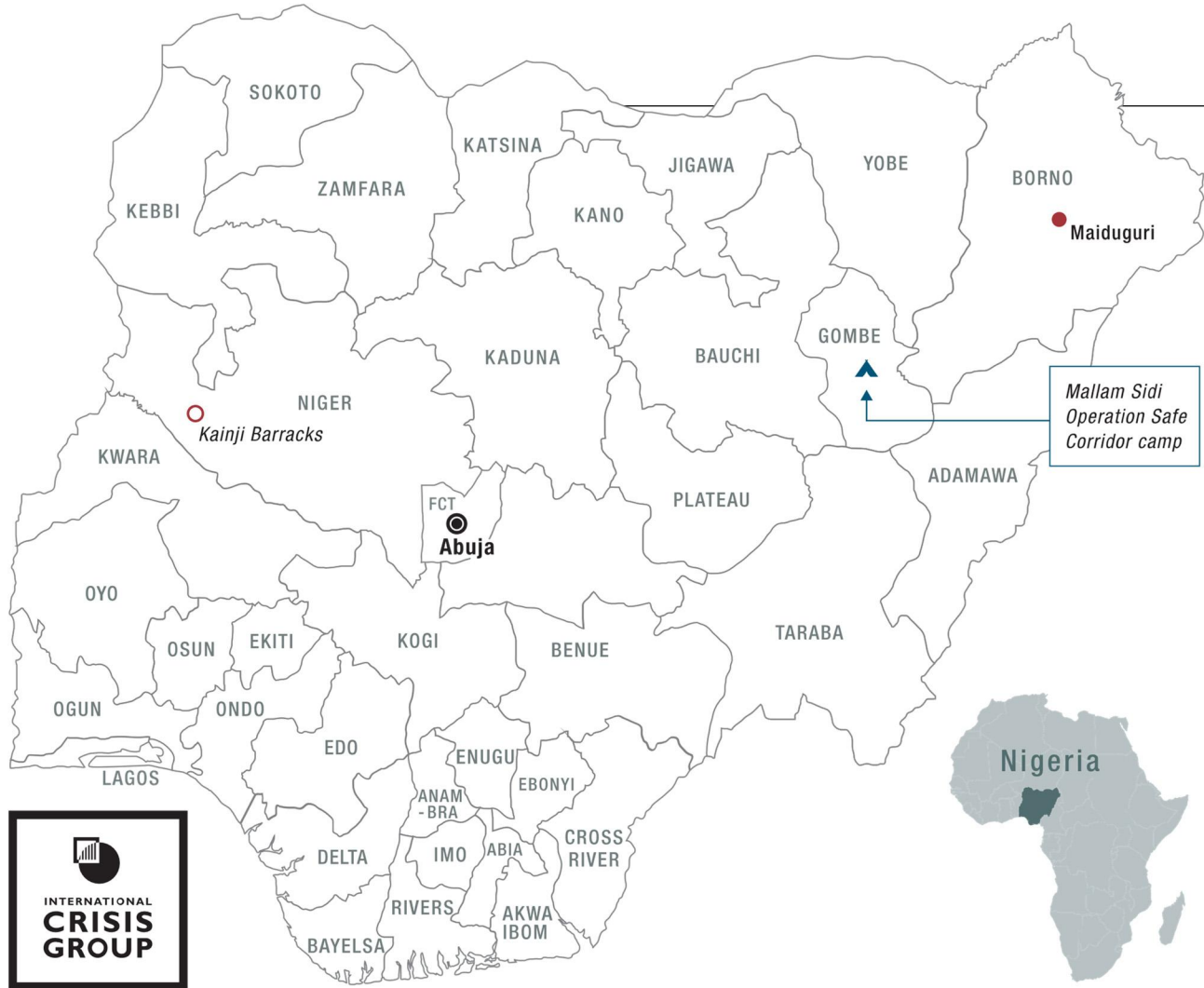
VII. Conclusion

The creation of Operation Safe Corridor was a welcome acknowledgement by the Nigerian government that, by itself, a military response to Boko Haram will not be enough to adequately degrade the jihadist group. Nigeria needs other tools. Yet Safe Corridor appears to be far from reaching its potential. In order to persuade low-level Boko Haram associates to defect in sizeable numbers and attract significant international support, the Nigerian authorities will need to demonstrate that the program can guide internees to graduation and reintegrate them back into society safely and securely. To date, Safe Corridor falls short of being able to offer those kinds of assurances with sufficient credibility. Improved screening procedures, detention safeguards, investments in reintegration and a public relations campaign to win political and popular support can make the program more attractive to both donors and potential defectors. The relevant branches of the Nigerian government should all invest the resources and attention that the program requires lest this vital corridor become a dead end.

Dakar/Maiduguri/Brussels, 19 March 2021

⁶⁶ Crisis Group has spoken to a number of diplomats in Abuja who have pointed to Safe Corridor's shortcomings and said their governments have voiced reservations about continuing to fund the program. Crisis Group interviews, Abuja, March 2020.

Appendix A: Map of Nigeria





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