

Boko Haram insurgency takes economic toll on Nigeria's neighbors

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(The Christian Science Monitor) Waza National Park used to brim with tourists this time of year, with the dry season driving elephants, giraffes, gazelles, and hyenas to the few remaining watering holes to drink water and shade themselves from the sun.

Located in the Far North Region, Waza is Cameroon's largest game reserve, drawing several thousands tourists a year.

But rising insecurity from the threat of Boko Haram has caused a steady decline in visitors, most visible now during the high season. As the Islamist insurgents scale up their murderous attacks on Cameroonian territory, the Central African country has not only been counting the deaths of its citizens, but also the economic costs.

The crisis has brought the once thriving economy of the Far North Region, which borders Nigeria to the west, to a halt, hampering tourism, agriculture, and trade with Nigeria. The significant shift in its local economy is also threatening the financial infrastructure of Cameroon.

Though unable to give precise numbers, Tourism Ministry spokesman Serge Eric Epoune said that "they used to come in thousands, but today, not even one visitor goes there. People are fearful for their lives."

With 7,000 troops deployed to fight Boko Haram, Cameroon is spending close to \$800,000 per month in the anti-terror campaign.

"It's a very costly exercise for the state," said Fondo Sikod, professor of economics in the University of Yaoundé. "What happens is that significant resources are diverted to fuel the war, and other sectors of the economy are bound to suffer."

When Boko Haram first struck targets inside Cameroon two years ago, its attacks were small. Fighters would cross from Nigeria to kidnap foreigners for ransom, raid

markets, and steal food.

But when the African Union decided to commit more troops to fight Boko Haram last month, the group escalated its violence, not only in Nigeria, but also Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, which are feeling the economic fallout as well. The Diffa region of Niger, for example, has long benefited from its proximity to Nigeria. But after the border was recently closed for security reasons, traders lost their main source of income. The closure adds pressure at a time when the population has tripled in a year as refugees flee Nigeria, and the region enters a third year of drought.

The fishing industry in Lake Chad, where the borders of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon meet, has especially suffered, with the fish shortage being felt for hundreds of miles within each country.

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau warned the neighboring countries in a video last month that joining the counterinsurgency campaign would make them targets.

“Your alliance will not achieve anything,” he said. “Amass all your weapons and face us. We welcome you.”

Declining economy

The Far North Region used to contribute 20 percent to Cameroon's national GDP, said Emmanuel Nganou Djoumessi, the minister of economy, planning, and regional development.

“Today, that contribution is negligible,” he said in an interview, though he had no exact number.

In part, that is due to the drop in tourism.

The Waza National Park “has lost its former glory,” said Col. Nouma Joseph, the commander of a specialized military unit tasked with fighting Boko Haram. “I won’t advise anyone to go on a safari tour to the Waza National Park without military cover, because you have a 50 percent chance of being kidnapped.”

In 2013, Boko Haram kidnapped a family and a priest from France who were visiting the park. The incident took an almost-immediate toll on tourism, in which French visitors figure prominently. Cameroon later negotiated the release of the hostages, but details of how it did so have never been released.

In January, the French ambassador to Cameroon, Christin Robichon, cautioned French citizens to leave the Far North Region.

“Given the rather high risk of kidnappings and attacks,” she said, “all French citizens who still live in this zone are required to leave within the shortest possible time.”

Boko Haram has also paralyzed trade between Nigeria and Cameroon, said Rene Emanuel Sadi, minister of territorial administration.

The customs department in the region used to collect about \$8.64 million per year. That figure has dropped almost 30 percent, to \$6.2 million.

“The rising insecurity led us to close down the border custom posts of Fotokol, Kolofata, Dabanga, Limani, and Blame,” said Jean Marie Wetondieu, the customs chief of the Far North Region.

The customs department is expected to contribute \$1.3 billion—about 24 percent—to the national budget in 2015, said Lissette Libom Li Likeng, the director-general of customs. But with shrinking customs revenue in the Far North Region, she doubts this will be achieved.

The decline in customs is also seen on the ground level. Low-quality fuel from Nigeria is in short supply. The regional economy depends greatly on this cheap fuel supply, called Zua-Zua.

“I used to feed my family of three wives and 10 children with proceeds from the sale of Zua-Zua,” said Ahmadou Salli. “Now, with incessant attacks and the borders closed, it’s no more possible.”

He was a resident of Fotokol in the Far North before fleeing the violence. Part of a steady exodus of refugees traveling to Yaoundé, he now begs in the streets of the capital to scrimp extra money.

Potential food crisis

The halt in trade between the two countries has also affected the food supply in the region.

“[Nigeria] has supplied 80 percent of foodstuffs and basic necessities to northern Cameroon since the two countries gained independence more than five decades

ago," said Sadi, the minister of territorial administration.

That shortage, coupled with the abandonment of farms by residents fleeing the area, has the potential to cause a food crisis in the north, the government has said.

Sustenance farming is the prime occupation for most residents in the region.

Abakachi, the regional agriculture delegate, who goes by one name, said that the deficit in cereal grains will lead to an annual shortfall of about \$52 million.

To counter the food shortage, the government has disbursed more than \$8.7 million.

"I am afraid we will face a blank agricultural year," Abakachi said.