

Nigeria's Countless Casualties

The Politics of Counting Boko Haram's Victims

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*A sign marking an unidentified grave in Freetown, Sierra Leone, December 17, 2014.
(Baz Ratner / Courtesy Reuters)*

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On January 8, reports began filtering out of Borno state in northeastern Nigeria that the Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram had attacked the fishing village of Baga, torching buildings and massacring somewhere between 150 and around 2,000 people. Although the discrepancy between a couple hundred and a couple thousand dead in Baga is significant, it is anything but unusual. A lack of

agreement on measuring the human costs of conflict is an endemic feature of modern warfare. Conflicting incentives to either minimize or maximize the perception of a rising threat are particularly acute in the lead-up to the country's nationwide elections. The vote, which was originally scheduled for February 14, has now been postponed to March 28, by which time the Nigerian government ambitiously claims it will have crushed the insurgency and destroyed all of Boko Haram's training camps, an assertion that the opposition has dismissed as fanciful.

Counting the dead during ongoing violence is, as a rule, a difficult and often risky endeavor. Fatalities frequently occur in dangerous and inaccessible terrain, among hostile parties, and under chaotic conditions; Borno state is no exception. The attacks took place in an area of the country under the control of Boko Haram, which has prevented the media and other organizations from investigating the number of deaths. In many areas controlled by the insurgents, there is currently limited to no mobile phone and Internet connectivity, making satellite pictures the only source of visual information. Although such images are useful for confirming the scale and scope of destruction, they are much less effective with respect to verifying or repudiating claims about death tolls, since the absence of people in any given image can mean that they are either dead or have fled.

Institutional limitations also add to the difficulty in getting accurate data. For example, in many parts of the world, especially in weak and fragile states, death toll data gathering apparatuses, such as morgues, hospitals, and law-enforcement entities, may be internally inept, externally obstructed, structurally inadequate, or simply corrupt even before the outbreak of hostilities; the efficacy of such institutions can hardly be expected to improve in the midst of war. Such states may also lack the capacity or willingness to conduct censuses, which is another reason why pre- and post-violence comparisons are often ineffective or even misleading. In the case of Baga, for instance, some local officials have asserted that the village had a pre-attack population of 10,000, but it is unclear how they came up with this number and whether it should be treated as even remotely authoritative. Yet it matters materially when trying to suss out how many actually died during the attack in early January.

Counting gets all the more tricky when it comes to eyewitnesses. A wide array of psychological and anthropological studies have shown, for instance, that even eyewitnesses to tragic events may (whether consciously or unconsciously) provide false or biased accounts. Cultural considerations—differences in storytelling, for example—may be one likely factor. Another is the emotional aspect of providing testimony. Whether due to ego, embarrassment, or fear, witnesses may lie or fabricate answers to protect themselves from psychological and physical harm. They may also concoct or embellish answers if they believe they will be rewarded for doing so.

Involved parties may also have incentives to hide, undercount, or downplay their own military casualties, as well as the civilian casualties they have inflicted; or on the other hand, to inflate the damage they have inflicted, whether upon their adversary or the civilian population. This kind of manipulation can be strategic, as well as useful in the court of public opinion. In the same vein, both actors on the ground, and policymakers and activists farther afield, may find it perfectly legitimate to embellish the truth. This was the case in the so-called massacre of Jenin in the Palestinian refugee camp in April 2002, as well as during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, among others.

Just as there are nuances in acquiring accurate witness testimony, there are disparities and inconsistencies in how information is measured. Those responsible for the actual counting may either intentionally or inadvertently focus, for instance, on different periods of time. With respect to Baga, it has been suggested that the death toll differences may reflect two different estimates: one particularly

vicious attack on January 7 and all those killed by Boko Haram in the series of attacks in Baga between January 3 and 7.

There is even variation on how to define the “war dead.” One figure might include soldiers, and another might only contain non-combatants. For example, the Nigerian Defense Ministry has asserted that the 2,000 figure includes “many of the terrorists” who attacked Baga and were killed by Nigerian troops. Human rights organizations have claimed that the figure includes mostly civilians. In some modern asymmetric conflicts, it can be difficult to even figure out who is a soldier and who is a civilian. Some of those counting the dead might also consider indirect deaths—such as those who drowned crossing Lake Chad to flee Boko Haram—as “war dead,” while others may count only violent, intentional deaths. The disparities are made even more acute by debates over what constitutes violent and non-violent causes of death.

Even if a definition of “war dead” is pinned down, the overarching methods used for counting the dead are critically different. One version, commonly known as passive surveillance, frequently entails cross-referencing fatalities reported in the media with figures from hospitals, morgues, and NGOs. Such techniques tend to generate lower aggregate death toll numbers than active surveillance, which requires soliciting casualty data from a statistically representative selection of individuals and households within, or displaced from, conflict-affected communities. If passive surveillance tends to undercount, active surveillance can conversely over count.

In Nigeria, however, the gap between the low- and high-end estimates appears to have less to do with counting techniques than conflicting political incentives. Local Nigerian officials who want the government to respond to the devastating advances made by Boko Haram have promulgated the “at least 2,000 killed” figure. Boko Haram itself has not disputed the figure, which is unsurprising, since the group sees higher numbers of casualties as a demonstration of its growing strength.

In stark contrast, however, the Nigerian government has dismissed the 2,000 figure as “exaggerated” and merely “speculation and conjecture.” It claims that the real number is closer to the lower estimate of 150. This too is anything but surprising. President Goodluck Jonathan’s government has long been accused of underestimating casualty and death figures associated with Boko Haram to downplay the insurgency’s threat and the government’s lack of control over the militant group. The government’s decision late last week to postpone upcoming national elections—ostensibly because it could not guarantee safety at polling centers while fighting Boko Haram—does not help its case in this regard. As Nigerian opposition candidate and retired general Muhammadu Buhari reportedly put it, “If the military cannot secure 14 local governorates in six years, how can they be sure they can secure those 14 in six weeks?”

The numerous factors that impede consensus on calculating the human costs of war are regrettably unlikely to disappear anytime soon, especially since we live in a world where the importance of an issue, and how much attention it merits, is often dependent on scale: Bigger numbers mean bigger problems that require bigger interventions and responses, and vice versa. The danger is that once numbers are produced and publicized, they take on a life of their own. A shockingly large number, regardless of its origins or validity, can generate prominent press coverage, which in turn can further legitimize and perpetuate the use of the number. Skeptical treatments of statistics, on the other hand, tend to receive significantly less coverage.

Still, there are steps one can take to combat both the fetishization and politicization of numbers. Many of the most effective methods require vigilance from the users of conflict statistics—be they

policymakers, journalists, academics, or engaged members of the public. It entails asking hard and probing questions regarding the numbers on offer, such as: Where do the numbers come from and how reliable are their sources? What methodology was used to collect them? What are the interests, potential biases, or stakes involved for those providing the numbers?

Answering these questions will certainly not fix all the problems in determining accurate death tolls. However, knowing who provided a number, how that person derived it, and why he or she might be promoting it can help in better judging the accuracy of conflict statistics. Supply also comes from demand: If users of this information insist on answers to these questions, the producers of these statistics may feel pressured to be more scrupulous and judicious when calculating them, as well as exhibit greater candor in admitting when they are simply guesstimating.

Asking these questions also enables both producers and users of statistics to make a decision on when not to rely on them; for example, when they know accurate data may be impossible to find or that there are political incentives to play games with the numbers. Under such circumstances, we should consider divorcing the significance of an issue from its reported or purported size. Instead, we could use alternative criteria to judge the merits of how to deal with conflict, such as applying collective values and societal norms. A focus on deterring mass atrocities, for instance, might be a better use of limited resources than either waiting for a death toll to escalate in order to justify intervention, or artificially inflating numbers to justify taking actions actually driven by other, more strategically-oriented rationales. This mode of thinking may be naive, perhaps. But to paraphrase Albert Einstein, an extraordinarily numerate consumer and producer of numbers himself: “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”

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