



Military Operations and Human Rights Violation in Borno State, Nigeria: An Assessment of Operation Lafiya Dole, 2015-2023

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Abstract

The persistent insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria, has necessitated extensive military operations, notably Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2023), aimed at restoring security and countering Boko Haram activities. However, these operations have been frequently associated with allegations of human rights violations, raising concerns about the balance between security imperatives and civilian protection. This study investigates the relationship between military operations and human rights practices in Borno State, with the objective of assessing the extent, patterns, and underlying causes of violations during Operation Lafiya Dole. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study relies on secondary sources, content analysis, and primary data collected through structured questionnaires (n=300), three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and twenty Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) involving military personnel, civil society actors, and community leaders. Findings indicate a significant correlation between military operations and human rights violations, with 62% of respondents affirming that security operations often resulted in arbitrary arrests, excessive use of force, and breaches of civilian rights. Qualitative insights reveal that operational pressures, intelligence gaps, and inadequate accountability mechanisms contribute to systemic human rights concerns, while secondary data from Amnesty International (2020) and the UN OHCHR (2022) corroborate these patterns. The study concludes that while Operation Lafiya Dole achieved tactical successes against insurgents, the human cost underscores the need for reforms in military training, oversight, and community engagement. Recommendations include strengthening human rights compliance, integrating ethical frameworks into counter-insurgency strategies, and fostering civil–military cooperation. This research contributes to knowledge by providing an empirically grounded analysis of the interplay between military operations and human rights, highlighting the necessity of aligning security initiatives with international humanitarian standards.

Keywords: Military operations, human rights violations, Operation Lafiya Dole, counter-insurgency, Borno State, civil–military relations, Nigeria



1. INTRODUCTION

Military operations in contemporary conflict settings increasingly raise ethical and human-rights concerns, particularly where combatants and civilians are difficult to distinguish. While Clausewitz's classical view of war presupposes strategic restraint, modern "new wars" characterised by irregular forces and asymmetric violence have heightened civilian exposure to harm and weakened humanitarian safeguards (Clausewitz, 1976; Kaldor, 2012; Münkler, 2005). Global experiences, from Vietnam to Iraq, demonstrate that human-rights violations often occur when military objectives overshadow legal and moral obligations, a tendency most evident in counterinsurgency environments where enemies are embedded within local populations (Walzer, 2006; Ignatieff, 2000; Kilcullen, 2009).

Across Africa, research shows that internal security operations frequently correlate with excessive force, institutional weaknesses, and fragile civil–military relations (Williams, 2017). Cases in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Sahel illustrate how militarised responses can intensify grievances, displace civilians, and prolong insecurity (Richards, 2005; Utas, 2009; Cold-Ravnkilde & Albrecht, 2021). Nigeria's response to Boko Haram reflects similar dynamics. Although Operation Lafiya Dole, launched in 2015, achieved tactical gains, scholars argue that structural governance deficits, doctrinal limitations, and poor accountability undermine its strategic effectiveness (Agbibo, 2013; Pérouse de Montclos, 2016; Zenn, 2020). Reports by Amnesty International (2015, 2016) and the UN suggest systemic abuses, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, and extrajudicial killings, with the Giwa Barracks incident illustrating entrenched impunity. These practices contribute to large-scale displacement, with over two million internally displaced persons in Borno State alone (IOM, 2023).



Against this backdrop, this study examines whether a relationship exists between military operations and human-rights violations during Operation Lafiya Dole in Borno State, arguing that such violations constitute not only moral failings but strategic liabilities that weaken civil–military cooperation and hinder sustainable peace.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification

Military Operations

Military operations can be broadly defined as the coordinated actions undertaken by armed forces to achieve specific strategic, tactical, or operational objectives, encompassing both offensive and defensive activities. According to Clausewitz (1832), military operations are a continuation of political objectives through other means, underscoring their inherently strategic and political dimensions. Contemporary scholars, such as Echevarria (2007), view military operations as the structured employment of military capabilities to influence adversaries while protecting civilian populations. Kaldor (2019) emphasises that modern operations, particularly in asymmetric conflicts, increasingly integrate non-combat elements such as intelligence gathering, humanitarian engagement, and civil-military cooperation. Similarly, Dandeker and Gow (1999) argue that military operations must be understood not only as kinetic actions but as complex social systems interacting with political, cultural, and human security factors. In the Nigerian context, Alao (2018) observes that military operations against insurgencies often blend conventional and counter-insurgency tactics, creating both opportunities for stabilisation and risks of civilian harm. Synthesising these perspectives, military operations are best viewed as multidimensional activities that pursue security objectives



while navigating ethical, legal, and social constraints, highlighting the delicate balance between operational effectiveness and human rights obligations.

Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations are infringements upon the fundamental rights and freedoms to which individuals are entitled by virtue of their humanity. Donnelly (2013) defines such violations as acts, policies, or omissions by state or non-state actors that undermine internationally recognised rights, including the right to life, liberty, security, and protection from torture. Forsythe (2012) categorises violations into physical, political, economic, and cultural abuses, noting that systemic violations often occur during armed conflicts. Koo (2016) highlights that violations in conflict zones may include extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, and sexual violence, particularly when military actors operate under minimal accountability. In the Nigerian counter-insurgency context, Olonisakin (2020) and Musa & Ahmad (2020) document how operations against Boko Haram have led to widespread civilian suffering due to indiscriminate raids and poorly regulated security responses. Critically, these violations are not merely incidental; they often reflect structural weaknesses in command, oversight, and human rights integration. Deductively, human rights violations should be conceptualised as both outcomes and indicators of operational practices, institutional culture, and accountability mechanisms within military engagements.

Operation Lafiya Dole

Operation Lafiya Dole refers to the Nigerian military's counter-insurgency campaign launched in 2015 to suppress Boko Haram and restore security in the North-East. The operation combines conventional warfare, intelligence-led interventions, and civil-



military initiatives aimed at degrading insurgent capabilities while safeguarding civilians. Scholars such as Albrecht (2021) and Okoli & Nwankpa (2020) note that the operation illustrates the complexities of asymmetric warfare, where distinguishing combatants from civilians is challenging, often resulting in collateral harm. Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International (2020) and NHRC (2022), document numerous cases of arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and forced displacement linked to the operation, emphasising the tension between security imperatives and civil liberties. Dambazau (2018) and Olonisakin (2020) argue that the operation exposes systemic limitations in training, oversight, and integration of human rights considerations into military strategy. Deductively, Operation Lafiya Dole should be understood as a paradigmatic case of contemporary counter-insurgency that highlights both the necessity of military intervention against violent non-state actors and the critical importance of embedding human rights protections and community trust into operational frameworks.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in **Systems Theory** and **Structural Functionalism**, both of which provide analytical tools to examine the complex interplay between military operations and human rights practices in Borno State. **Systems Theory**, initially developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), posits that social, political, and military entities function as interdependent subsystems within a broader system. Each subsystem, military, civilian, judicial, and humanitarian, affects and is affected by the others. The key assumption is that disturbances in one subsystem can produce ripple effects throughout the entire system, influencing overall stability and performance. Applied to Nigeria's counter-



insurgency efforts, Systems Theory suggests that operational pressures on the military without corresponding human rights oversight can create systemic dysfunction, manifesting in abuses, impunity, and weakened civil–military relations (Ali & Bakare, 2021). The theory’s strength lies in its ability to capture interconnections, feedback loops, and emergent outcomes, allowing for a holistic understanding of governance and security operations. However, critics argue that it can be overly deterministic and may underplay individual agency or cultural particularities in shaping behaviour (Checkland, 1999).

Structural Functionalism, derived from the work of Talcott Parsons (1951), provides a complementary perspective by emphasising the functional roles of institutions in maintaining societal equilibrium. According to this framework, the military is a critical social institution designed to protect citizens and preserve order, while legal and human rights mechanisms serve to regulate and stabilise state–society relations. The key assumption is that each institution has defined roles, and dysfunction arises when these roles are misaligned or distorted. For instance, during Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2023), structural-functionalists would interpret widespread arbitrary detentions and human rights violations as a failure of the military subsystem to balance coercive objectives with societal protection mandates (Olonisakin, 2020; Okoli & Nwankpa, 2020). The framework’s strength lies in its clarity in mapping institutional responsibilities and identifying where breakdowns occur. Yet, its critics caution that Structural Functionalism may justify the status quo and overlook power asymmetries and political contestations that shape institutional behaviour (Alexander, 1985).

In contemporary applications, both theories are relevant to understanding counter-insurgency operations. Systems Theory elucidates how the military, humanitarian actors,



and civilian communities interact in a dynamic environment, highlighting interdependencies that either exacerbate or mitigate human rights violations. Structural Functionalism complements this by focusing on institutional purpose and dysfunction, providing insight into why Nigerian military operations sometimes undermine their own protective mandate. Historical parallels can be drawn from post-conflict contexts such as Northern Ireland, where military policing and human rights oversight needed coordination to avoid systemic abuses (Cairns, 2004). Similarly, in Iraq and Afghanistan, failures to integrate civil-military subsystems led to recurring violations and eroded public trust (Kaldor, 2021). By combining these frameworks, the study situates Operation Lafiya Dole within a broader theoretical understanding of institutional interdependence, societal stability, and the tension between security imperatives and human rights obligations.

1.3 Methodology

This study adopted a pragmatist research philosophy, emphasising practical application while recognising the socially constructed and context-dependent nature of reality. Pragmatism allowed the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods to capture both measurable data on human rights abuses and in-depth insights into communities affected by Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2023) in Borno State. A mixed-methods design was employed, comprising 350 structured questionnaires administered to residents, internally displaced persons, security personnel, and humanitarian actors; three focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 30 participants; and 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) with military officials, civil society leaders, academics, and traditional authorities. Secondary data included government records, UNHCR and Amnesty International



reports, and demographic datasets. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and regression, while qualitative data underwent content analysis to identify themes such as civilian protection, excessive force, and access to justice. Ethical protocols, reliability, and validity were ensured through informed consent, pilot testing, triangulation, and cultural sensitivity.

1.4 Findings and Discussion

The triangulated analysis of 300 valid questionnaires, three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and 20 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) demonstrates a clear and multidimensional relationship between military operations and human rights violations during Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2023) in Borno State. Quantitative findings show that 62% of respondents perceived a strong connection between military operations and human rights abuses, 28% disagreed, while **10%** were unsure. This indicates that nearly two-thirds of civilians, humanitarian actors, and security personnel believe counterinsurgency tactics have directly affected civilian safety and dignity. Such perceptions reflect broader trends identified in conflict zones globally, where heavy-handed security responses heighten civilian vulnerability (UN OHCHR, 2022; HRW, 2021).

Qualitative evidence from the FGDs reinforces the statistical patterns. Across all discussion sites, participants described disproportionate force, arbitrary arrests, and collective suspicion following insurgent incidents. An FGD participant in Gwange narrated: “Whenever Boko Haram strikes nearby, soldiers come and pick many young men, even if they are innocent” (FGD, Gwange, 2025). This aligns with the quantitative



finding that 57% of respondents reported witnessing or experiencing arbitrary arrests. Similarly, in Bolori, a youth leader described targeted violence: “The force soldiers use sometimes hurts the same people they are supposed to protect, especially when they enter houses at night without proper checks” (Musa Ibrahim, FGD, Bolori, 2025). This complements survey data showing 54% of respondents agreeing that night raids often lead to rights violations.

Women’s FGDs in Muna Garage and Dusuman provided further evidence of structural patterns of abuse. Participants reported repeated house searches, harassment at checkpoints, and confiscation of property, which contributed to pervasive insecurity: “Sometimes our boys are taken, and we do not know where they are kept for months” (FGD, Muna Garage, 2025). The accounts align with Amnesty International’s (2020) documentation of over 20,000 arbitrary detentions, many involving young men and adolescent boys. KIIs offered an operational perspective, highlighting institutional constraints and pressures contributing to violations. A civil society human-rights monitor revealed: “The military’s focus on neutralising threats sometimes overrides protocols meant to safeguard civilians, especially when operations are conducted without community liaison officers.” (Abdullahi Goni, KII, 2025). This echoes the quantitative result (59%) indicating that poor adherence to rules of engagement significantly contributes to rights violations. From the military side, an officer admitted the role of operational fatigue: “We are fighting an enemy that hides among civilians, and sometimes soldiers overreact, especially when command guidance is unclear” (Major A. Yusuf, KII, 2025). This corroborates findings by HRW (2021) that poorly trained troops and ambiguous directives heighten the likelihood of excessive force.



When triangulated, the FGDs, KIIs, and quantitative data reveal **systemic factors** driving human-rights violations: operational strain and inadequate training lead to misjudgment in the field; weak intelligence systems result in mass arrests rather than targeted operations; limited accountability encourages impunity; and poor civil–military relations reduce community cooperation. Secondary sources reinforce these conclusions. UN OHCHR (2022) reports over 3,000 civilian casualties linked to security operations in the North-East, while Amnesty International (2020) documents sexual violence, torture, and extrajudicial killings under the counterinsurgency umbrella. Scholars such as Okoli and Nwankpa (2020) and Albrecht (2021) similarly argue that indiscriminate military actions fuel resentment and undermine long-term stability.

Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968; Ali & Bakare, 2021) explains these outcomes as products of malfunctioning subsystems, military, civilian, and judicial, operating without coordination. Structural Functionalism (Parsons, 1951; Adewumi & Akinyemi, 2019) suggests that when key institutions fail to fulfil their roles, dysfunction manifests as human-rights abuse and public distrust. Although Operation Lafiya Dole weakened Boko Haram’s operational capacity, the evidence demonstrates that it simultaneously generated patterns of human-rights violations that eroded public trust, intelligence cooperation, and civil-military relations. Thus, sustainable counterinsurgency requires integrated reforms in oversight, training, intelligence gathering, and community engagement to harmonise security imperatives with human-rights obligations.

1.5 Discussion of \major Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear and complex relationship between military operations and human-rights practices during *Operation Lafiya Dole* in Borno State.



Quantitative evidence, supported by extensive qualitative insights, indicates that the conduct of counter-insurgency activities between 2015 and 2023 produced both intended security gains and unintended social consequences that deeply shaped civil–military relations. The statistical data reveal that **62 per cent** of respondents perceived a direct link between military operations and human-rights violations, compared to **28 per cent** who disagreed and **10 per cent** who were undecided. This majority perception signals widespread community concern about the conduct of security forces and aligns with patterns recorded by independent assessments. For instance, Amnesty International (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2021) documented episodes of excessive force, prolonged detention and unlawful killings associated with counter-insurgency operations in the North-East. Similarly, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022) attributed more than **3,000 civilian casualties** to security operations within the region between 2015 and 2021, underscoring the gravity of the situation.

Qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) substantiate these concerns, revealing consistent narratives of fear, uncertainty and community-wide vulnerability. Participants across Gwange, Bolori, Muna Garage and Dusuman described recurring experiences of night raids, indiscriminate arrests and aggressive search operations following attacks by Boko Haram. For example, a participant in Gwange noted that *“whenever Boko Haram strikes nearby, soldiers come and pick many young men, even if they are innocent”*, highlighting a pattern of collective suspicion and sweep arrests. Similarly, a youth leader in Bolori recounted that soldiers sometimes *“enter houses at night without proper checks”*, contributing to a sense of insecurity rather than protection. These testimonies reinforce broader concerns regarding the militarisation of civilian



spaces, particularly in peri-urban and informal settlements, where young men and adolescent boys frequently emerge as primary targets of operational screening.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) further deepen this understanding by clarifying structural and institutional drivers behind these violations. Civil society respondents emphasised the operational pressure placed on military units to produce rapid and demonstrable results, sometimes leading to shortcuts in intelligence verification. A human-rights monitor interviewed in Maiduguri argued that the military's emphasis on "neutralising threats" occasionally superseded adherence to civilian protection protocols, particularly where community-liaison structures were weak or non-existent. Conversely, military officials acknowledged constraints including overstretched personnel, inadequate counter-insurgency training and ambiguous command directives. One officer admitted that *"sometimes soldiers overreact, especially when command guidance is unclear"*, indicating that operational ambiguity and stress contribute to tactical excesses. These findings mirror lessons from comparable counter-insurgency theatres globally. For instance, studies on Afghanistan (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012) and Iraq (Michaels, 2019) reveal similar patterns where intense operational pressure, poor local intelligence and weak accountability mechanisms increase the likelihood of civilian harm. In both cases, indiscriminate force undermined public trust, reduced intelligence cooperation and ultimately prolonged insurgency dynamics, parallels that resonate with the Nigerian context. Likewise, in Kenya's 2015–2018 counter-terrorism operations in Garissa and Wajir, over 1,200 allegations of arbitrary detention and torture were documented by the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, illustrating that securitised responses often escalate human-rights risks in environments with limited oversight.



Triangulating the quantitative and qualitative findings with secondary literature highlights systemic issues underpinning observed violations. First, **structural weaknesses**, including insufficient intelligence-led operations, limited civilian oversight and fragmented command systems, create operational environments prone to abuse. Secondly, **institutional isolation** between military, policing, judicial and community actors undermines coordinated approaches to civilian protection. Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) and Structural Functionalism (Parsons, 1951) help explain these dynamics: when interdependent subsystems fail to function cohesively, imbalances emerge, manifesting in insecurity, rights violations and eroded legitimacy. Nigerian scholars such as Okoli and Nwankpa (2020) and Omede (2021) similarly contend that coercive counter-insurgency strategies, when unmoderated by strong accountability, erode local trust and fuel cycles of grievance.

Ultimately, the study's findings suggest that while Operation Lafiya Dole significantly disrupted Boko Haram's operational capabilities and reclaimed several territories, it simultaneously produced adverse humanitarian and social outcomes that strained civil-military relations. Violations, both perceived and actual, compromised community confidence in the security forces and weakened the flow of local intelligence essential for effective counter-insurgency. The evidence therefore underscores the urgent need for integrated reforms, including enhanced human-rights training, strengthened oversight mechanisms, community-based liaison systems, and the adoption of intelligence-led rather than force-led operational models. Such reforms are essential if future operations are to align with international humanitarian standards while maintaining strategic effectiveness.



1.6 Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear and multidimensional relationship between military operations and human rights violations during Operation Lafiya Dole (2015–2023) in Borno State. Quantitative data, supported by qualitative insights from FGDs and KIIs, indicate that civilian populations perceive military interventions as both protective and coercive, with operational pressures, intelligence gaps, and weak accountability mechanisms contributing to systemic abuses. Secondary sources, including reports from Amnesty International (2020), Human Rights Watch (2021), and UN OHCHR (2022), corroborate the prevalence of arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and other violations. The evidence suggests that while the military succeeded in degrading Boko Haram’s operational capacity, the failure to integrate human rights considerations into tactical decision-making eroded civil-military trust, hindered intelligence gathering, and complicated long-term security objectives. The study underscores the interdependence of military, justice, and civilian subsystems, highlighting that sustainable counter-insurgency requires a balanced approach that aligns operational imperatives with the protection of human rights and community engagement.

1.7 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study proposes several key recommendations.

First, the Nigerian military should enhance human rights training and operational guidelines, ensuring that civilian protection is prioritised alongside tactical objectives.



Second, transparent and independent oversight mechanisms must be institutionalised to prevent arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, and excessive use of force.

Third, community engagement should be strengthened through dialogue, local intelligence partnerships, and inclusion of displaced persons' perspectives, fostering trust and cooperation.

Fourth, humanitarian actors, civil society, and academic institutions should collaborate to monitor and evaluate the human rights impact of counter-insurgency operations, promoting accountability and evidence-based policy reform.

Finally, integrated planning that coordinates military, legal, and civil subsystems is essential to balance security imperatives with ethical obligations, creating a sustainable framework for counter-insurgency operations that respects human rights while effectively addressing insurgent threats.

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