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8<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2021

## Preliminary Report

**NIGERIA: ISWAP CLAIMS ABUBAKAR SHEKAU WAS KILLED ON DIRECT ORDERS OF ISIS**

**6<sup>th</sup> JUNE, 2021**

### Incident:

Transcript of an audio tape obtained by Humangle, a local Nigerian news website with proven strong contacts among insurgents and counter-terrorist agencies and published on Sunday 6th June, 2021, appeared to confirm the killing of the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, which was first reported by media sources on 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2021.



Abubakar Shekau

In the audio tape, the leader of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Abu Musab al-Barnawi, was reportedly heard telling his followers that the killing of Abubakar Shekau was in response to an order by the new leader of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. Al-Barnawi in the tape, accused Shekau committing unimaginable terrorism, and asked his audience "how many has he wasted? How many has he killed? How many has he terrorised? But Allah left him alone and prolonged his life. When it was time, Allah set out brave soldiers after receiving orders from the leader of the believers."

As indicated above, the longtime leader of the ruthless terrorist organization reportedly killed himself in late May 2021, by detonating his suicide vest when fighters of ISWAP tried to capture him in his hideout in Sambisa forest in northeastern Nigeria.

Although the Nigeria military had said it was investigating the reports, it had not confirmed the death until the release of the audio tape from the ISWAP group.

### Analysis:

The report of the confirmation of killing of Abubakar Shekau by a rival and splinter group ISWAP will be a welcome news to the Nigerian Military and its Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) partners who spent a decade devoting huge resources on hunting him down without success.

Having announced the killing of the dreaded Boko Haram leader several times including in official statements only for him to resurface weeks later, the Nigerian Military is reticent about confirming his demise this time, even if it were at the hands of a rival group and not the Army.

The decision by the new leader of ISIS to give the instruction for al-Barnawi and his ISWAP faction to launch the operation against Shekau was said to be informed by Boko Haram's indiscriminate targeting of believers (moslems) which was the basis of the schism that led to the splinter in the first place.

It is recalled that in 2016 when ISIS under its slain leader Abubakar Al-Baghdadi ordered Shekau to cease attacking mosques, killing moslems and using girls and children as suicide bombers, the latter disobeyed the orders prompting the former to withdraw his support for Shekau and appointed Abu Musab al- Barnawi, considered as relatively moderate among extremist leaders in the region, as the leader of the Islamic State West Africa Province. An incident that didn't go down well with Shekau, who in return reverted with his supporters to the group's former name Boko Haram.

The directive to kill the merciless Boko Haram leader for the same reasons that led to the splinter of the once united organization, underlines the desire of ISIS to further consolidate its reach and authority in West Africa and to portray itself as fighting the military and security services and not ordinary civilians particularly those they consider as believers.

Ironically, while the strategy to portray itself as only targeting the military and military establishments in the Lake Chad Basin, the strategy of the ISIS affiliate in the Sahel, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) appears to be more expansive, by targeting both security services and civilians alike.

In the attack that led to the death of Shekau, 30 other Boko Haram commanders were said to have surrendered to ISWAP while 10 others who refused to surrender were killed. ISWAP also reportedly intensified attacks against other Boko Haram factions and appointed its own representative in Boko Haram's domain.

The success of ISWAP in dislodging and absorbing some of the fighters of Boko Haram poses a new threat to Nigeria's army as they face a more unified jihadist force. However, ISWAP may still struggle to control or persuade other Boko Haram factions loyal to Shekau outside Sambisa forest.

Be that as it may, the demise of Abubakar Shekau and the emerging dominance of ISWAP may lead a reduction in indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations and the use of women and girls as suicide bombers as the group and its parent organization, ISIS Central is opposed to such tactics.

### **Recommendations:**

The success of ISWAP in dislodging its main rival in Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin should by no means lead to complacency by the Nigerian military and its MNJTF counterparts. The consolidation of the fighters of the two groups could prove even more formidable for the security services especially so as ISWAP's main target remains the military and its bases.

Within the wider West Africa region, the success of al-Barnawi's group will boost the quest of ISIS to link its affiliates particularly ISWAP and the ISGS, a situation that will pose a nightmare to governments and security services in the region. All efforts should therefore be made by the Nigerian army and the MNJTF to ensure that ISWAP does not establish a foothold on the territories once held by Boko Haram.