

MAGAZINE

Inside the Vigilante Fight Against Boko Haram

By ALEXIS OKEOWO NOV. 5, 2014

Long before the Islamist militant group Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 schoolgirls from Chibok in April, Abba Aji Kalli watched his country descend into madness. Kalli lives in Maiduguri, a city of more than one million and the capital of Borno State, just 80 miles from Chibok, in Nigeria's impoverished northeast. For months before the girls were taken, refugees flooded into Maiduguri, fleeing almost-daily Boko Haram raids on nearby villages. The militants arrived on motorcycles and Toyota Hilux trucks, sometimes in the middle of the night, sometimes in broad daylight, destroying homes and businesses and killing villagers. By May, a month after the kidnappings, the rebels were coming closer, striking surrounding villages and towns. Maiduguri could only be next.

Kalli was trying to stay calm, but he couldn't keep the anxiety and paranoia at bay. Recently, the stress had become so intense that he was hospitalized for eight days. Why was the military not protecting his people? He had grown tired of asking the question. Kalli, a wiry, energetic man of 50 with an affable manner, worked as a government auditor. He was also a unit commander in the Civilian Joint Task Force, a thousands-strong vigilante battalion that was formed in June 2013 to combat Boko Haram. The Civilian J.T.F., as it is known, is made up of volunteers — professionals, civil servants, students and traders — and arms itself with machetes, locally sourced guns and homemade weapons. Kalli led a unit of 8,000.

Just after the girls were kidnapped, Kalli and his volunteers, whom he affectionately calls his "boys" — they call him "Elder" — arranged to meet local soldiers in Alagarno, a village near the expansive Sambisa Forest, where Boko Haram had set up camps and the girls were thought to be held. But the military's promised aircraft never arrived, he said. Kalli was angry but not altogether surprised. It wasn't unusual for the military to fail to keep its promises. The

government's ineffectiveness in fighting Boko Haram was why he joined the Civilian J.T.F. in the first place.

Since the insurgency began in 2009, the military's response has been both slow and inadequate. Residents report seeing soldiers running away during confrontations with Boko Haram. Soldiers say they do not have enough equipment — they often appear to lack protective gear — and do not get paid on time, if at all. Recently, a military tribunal sentenced 12 soldiers to death for attempted murder and mutiny; they had shot at their commanding officer after a convoy of their fellow soldiers was ambushed by Boko Haram. The governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, angered federal government officials this year when he remarked that Boko Haram outmatched troops in the northeast in both weaponry and motivation. John Campbell, a senior fellow for Africa policy studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former United States ambassador to Nigeria, makes a similar point: “We are talking about a body that is relatively weak,” he says, one that “has been starved of training and resources for a very long time.”

In the absence of an effective military response, the job of combating Boko Haram has fallen to the Civilian J.T.F. “We are responsible for fighting them,” Kalli said. Widely credited with pushing Boko Haram out of Maiduguri a year ago, the Civilian J.T.F. dispenses a summary justice. Much of Kalli's time was devoted to tracking down and turning over to government authorities the men and boys suspected of having joined Boko Haram.

One Sunday in May, hours before I met up with him at a hotel in Maiduguri that is popular with the military and considered secure, his contact in Yola — the capital of neighboring Adamawa State, where Boko Haram has also waged attacks — called to say someone suspected of being a Boko Haram member was returning to his home in Maiduguri. Kalli guessed that the young man was coming to pick up supplies, perhaps weapons he had stashed somewhere. He gathered his boys and dispatched them to the suspect's house in one of the unit's blue pickup trucks.

A few hours later, while Kalli and I sat talking in the hotel, his phone rang. As he listened, he became agitated, twitching with excitement. “We got one,” he said, hanging up. His boys had captured the suspect. Kalli told me he had to go and rushed out of the hotel.

Two days later, I visited Kalli at one of his two homes, a modest bungalow. The power was out, and his third and youngest wife lay on the floor with their three

children, fanning them as they napped. I joined Kalli on the couch as he pulled up the cellphone video he shot of the Yola suspect. It showed a young man in black athletic shorts and a red T-shirt, surrounded by men shouting questions at him. The suspect, Mohammed Umar, who could not have been much older than 20, looked dazed. “He confessed that he was a member of Boko Haram and that they have been hiding AK-47s in one house,” Kalli said gleefully. “We asked him to take us to the house. At the first house, we went in and dug but didn’t find anything. He took us to three houses. At the third house, we found two AK-47 magazines.”

When it was over, Kalli and his men, who’d been joined by another Civilian J.T.F. commander, handed Umar over to the authorities. “He ran away from Maiduguri when we started chasing Boko Haram last year,” Kalli explained. “Most of them fled. Even now, many of them are living in Lagos, many of them are living in Abuja, many of them are living in Kano.” During his first operation in June 2013, Kalli and his boys captured 10 suspects with AK-47s. All were turned over to the military and detained. More recently, in April, he and his boys apprehended nearly 40 people suspected of being Boko Haram members in Abuja, Nigeria’s capital, 500 miles away. With each mission, Kalli and his unit have become more efficient at rooting out sympathizers. This time, he boasted, the entire operation — from finding Umar to searching the houses to handing him over to Nigerian security forces — took less than 35 minutes.

Kalli grew up in Maiduguri, among 18 brothers and sisters. His father was a cow trader and farmer, and his mother, the last of his father’s four wives, was a housewife. Kalli’s grandfather helped raise him and pushed him to excel at school. As a teenager, Kalli decided he wanted to be a military officer and joined his secondary school’s cadet program, a feeder for the best military academy. But his mother worried that he was choosing a risky career, and he ended up studying accounting at a technical college in Maiduguri. He became an auditor, rising through the ranks of the Borno State government, married and soon was prosperous enough to take two more wives and have 20 children.

Then Boko Haram began its onslaught against his hometown. Once an ancient center of Islamic teaching and trade, Maiduguri is now a city of sandbagged bunkers and security checkpoints. The attacks were sporadic but chilling. In June 2011, Boko Haram bombed a beer garden; last December, it orchestrated bombings near the airport and on a military air base. Boko Haram attacked civilians seemingly at

random. Kalli's brother was assassinated in his own home in 2011. "It really hurt me," he recalled. "But we were handicapped, we couldn't do anything. We were even afraid to report it to the military or authorities, because if you report it, a few days later Boko Haram will just come and kill you." This was not the Nigeria he knew.

Men of Kalli's generation were among the last to benefit from the country's post-independence, oil-driven economic expansion. In the 1960s and '70s, a high-school graduate could easily find a good job. The Nigerian naira was on par with the British pound. Nigeria was so wealthy, in fact, that it almost didn't matter that billions of dollars were lost to graft. But deep social and economic rifts existed just below the surface. Pieced together in 1914 and controlled by the British until its independence in 1960, Nigeria was loosely divided along religious lines, with a mostly Muslim, ethnically diverse north and an equally diverse, predominantly Christian south. Under British rule, the north was governed via local emirs, which did not interfere with the region's Muslim identity, while the south was more directly controlled by the British. The south eventually developed an economy centered on oil; the north remained largely agrarian. Because Christian missionaries were concentrated in the south, southerners also had access to Western education. Today, these regional differences persist: Literacy rates are significantly higher in the south than in the north, while poverty is more entrenched in the north than in the south.

After independence, a succession of military governments held the two regions together, suppressing ethnic and religious differences and quelling dissent. Civilian rule returned in 1999, renewing hopes of a more equitable society. Instead, says Max Siollun, a Nigerian writer and historian, "1999 came and went, soldiers left and were replaced by civilians, but nothing changed. The government was still corrupt, poverty was still rife and economic opportunities and jobs were still scarce." Radical Islamic groups, Siollun says, filled this moral vacuum, as they often had in Nigeria.

Boko Haram got its start in Maiduguri. In 2001, a young Muslim cleric named Mohammed Yusuf began preaching about the government's failures, blaming Western education for corrupting Nigerian leaders and advocating an Islamic society based on Shariah law. Yusuf's message resonated with many in the north, especially its disaffected young men. Over the next two years, the group, then known as the Yusufiyya movement, tried to create independent settlements in Borno and in neighboring Yobe State. Most of the efforts began peacefully, though some cells were accused of killing clerics and police officers. Local news media began to use a term

for the group, Boko Haram, which translates to “Western education is forbidden” in the regional language, Hausa. The insurgents’ official Arabic name, however, is *jama’atu ahlis sunna lidda’awati wal-jihad*, which means People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad.

In 2009, after the police opened fire on several Boko Haram members at a funeral procession in Maiduguri, shooting 17, the group bombed and set fire to government buildings. The police and the military battled the insurgents for days; more than 800 people were killed, most in extrajudicial killings by the military, and thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes. Yusuf was arrested and died in police custody. In response, Boko Haram staged an uprising. Under a newly appointed leader, Abubakar Shekau, the group burned down schools and police stations; blew up cellphone towers, markets, churches and mosques; and killed scores of students and teachers throughout central and northern Nigeria. Boko Haram has since massacred thousands of Nigerians and abducted hundreds more. In February, the group savagely murdered almost 60 schoolboys; some were burned alive. This year, Boko Haram set off three explosions in the country’s capital, underscoring that not even the federal government was safe from attack. In April, the group took the schoolgirls from Chibok. It still holds at least 200 of them captive.

The Nigerian government’s response to Boko Haram has been fraught from the beginning. President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, has behaved as if the insurgency is a creation of northern Muslim leaders and thus their problem to solve. It took him more than three weeks to speak publicly about the abduction of the schoolgirls. His wife, Patience, provoked public outrage when she questioned whether the kidnapping had occurred, claiming it was all a ploy by her husband’s opponents to embarrass him. (She later expressed concern over the missing schoolgirls.) Government critics charge that the military has been slow to respond to the threat posed by Boko Haram because officials are benefiting from the war in the north, siphoning money from the country’s \$6 billion security budget.

Residents in the northeast have complained frequently of the army’s indifference. But their grievances coalesced around the response to the kidnapping of the girls. Local officials in Chibok say the army was alerted to the possibility of an attack up to four hours before the girls were abducted, but military reinforcements never arrived. Since then, the military has been criticized for not doing enough to look for the girls. It claimed that it had broken up a Boko Haram cell that

participated in the kidnapping and that it was on the verge of rescuing the girls, but they never materialized. The United States and other foreign powers have offered assistance, but finding the girls remains a formidable task. “It’s a big, big challenge,” says Stephen Schwartz, the director of Nigeria policy and operations at the State Department. “If it were up to the United States, we would have difficulty trying to rescue that number of girls over that big an area. It’s a really high-stakes kind of effort. I give the Nigerians a lot of credit for having the forbearance to not try anything premature or reckless.” (The military declined repeated requests for comment.)

Meanwhile, Boko Haram continues to fund and arm itself through bank robberies, extortion, ransom demands, sieges on Nigerian armed forces and, some analysts say, help from affiliates of Al Qaeda. In part, Boko Haram can operate with impunity because much of the northeast remains inaccessible, with bad roads and poor phone reception. Large areas along Nigeria’s borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger are vulnerable to Boko Haram. “The northern land mass is just huge, and some parts of it are not very hospitable, so the government hasn’t always penetrated into every nook and cranny,” Siollun says. “Those border areas have always been bandit country; it facilitated the emergence of groups like Boko Haram.”

Despite Boko Haram’s increasing strength, the Nigerian government, says Campbell, the former ambassador, has not pursued a comprehensive anti-insurgency strategy. “The government has done very little to address the pervasive sense of alienation among people in the north,” Campbell says. “If you’re going to address the drivers of the insurgency, that takes time. My sense is implementation is very, very slow.” Fatima Akilu, a director in Nigeria’s Office of the National Security Adviser, told me that a deradicalization program is being created to promote sports, literature and the arts to secular and Islamic schools, and that the government is working on an economic-development plan for the northeast. Akilu says officials also hope to devise “safe passage” for militants who wish to leave the group. She assured me that the Civilian J.T.F. was not a reaction to the military’s failures but rather a natural response on the part of northerners to a common threat — a kind of citizens’ brigade. “It was a spontaneous movement that began without any involvement from the state at all,” she says. “These were youths who said, ‘We no longer want you in our communities,’ and they pushed them out. It is an initiative we support.”

From the time Kalli wakes up, around 4:30 in the morning, until he goes to bed, sometimes as late as 2:30 a.m., he receives calls alerting him to Boko Haram sightings, impending or developing attacks and recent abductions and killings. When he hears of a village under siege, he rounds up as many of his boys as he can and heads out to the fight — without protective gear and at times without proper weapons. “Sometimes your gun won’t even work,” he lamented. It was a miracle that only 15 of his men had been killed so far. “God is with us,” he said. When he began this work, his children, whom he calls “my soldiers,” and his wives urged him to reconsider. “I don’t have enough time to get rest or sleep,” he said. “I am always engaged.” Kalli, a Muslim, says he is ready to die for his religion and his country. “These insurgents came to destroy the image of Islam,” he told me. “They are cult members. Islam doesn’t allow anybody to kill anybody, either Muslim or Christian. I want to protect the integrity of this country.” He is still employed by the auditors’ office, but was given an extended leave for this new public service.

When I first met Kalli at the hotel in Maiduguri, he was with three men who had been seized by Boko Haram. The group has turned to forcible recruitment as its violent tactics erode support among northerners. “They began to recruit by force, because they have moved so far from their core ideology,” Akilu says. “When Shekau descended into this indiscriminate slaughter, murdering people for no reason, a lot of people didn’t understand what was going on and did not subscribe to the philosophy of the current leadership.” Sometimes Boko Haram compels the boys and young men it captures to spy or fight for the group; sometimes it kills those it captures, a warning to anyone who would collaborate with government forces. The men with Kalli managed to escape. (This is not unheard of; Boko Haram does not always guard its captives carefully. Right after their abduction, some 50 of the Chibok schoolgirls also managed to get away. One of them, a 14-year-old named Rejoice Yaga, told me that the militants seemed confused and kept asking one another if they should take the girls or leave them.)

Kalli had already debriefed the men, but he wanted me to hear their stories firsthand. The first man I spoke to, Ali Bukar, a tall 40-year-old whose face bears the distinctive scars of his Kanuri ethnic group, was abducted in May while farming outside his home in Konduga, a village in Borno State about 20 miles from Maiduguri. “I had heard people talk about Boko Haram, but I had never seen them until the day they came and captured me,” he said. His wife and children were inside

the house, unaware that just a few yards away two gunmen were tying him up with rope. The militants placed Bukar between them on their motorcycle and drove off. He thought he was doomed. “I asked them what kind of offense I committed, but they refused to talk to me.”

It took less than an hour to reach the site where Boko Haram had set up camp. Several men, some in T-shirts, others in traditional dress, milled about. They threw him, still tied up, to one side. Over the next three days, the men debated whether to kill him, occasionally feeding him beans and discussing plans to attack Maiduguri. But his rope was loose, and one day after nightfall with his hands still tied behind his back, he escaped. He ran for nearly 12 hours through the bush to reach his village. When we met, his arms were still severely bruised, marked by puffy, raw lesions; he could barely raise them. “I will never go back to that village,” he said of his hometown, shaking his head slowly. He has since moved some relatives with him to Maiduguri.

The second man Kalli introduced me to, Hamza Alhaji, was more fortunate. A prematurely graying 30-year-old who made his living collecting firewood in the forest outside Maiduguri, he was ambushed by Boko Haram militants while driving back to the city last spring and then unexpectedly abandoned when they retreated into the bush.

As I spoke with Bukar and Alhaji, Kalli kept interrupting, eager to answer the questions himself; he knew their stories so well. For Kalli, the men were proof that Boko Haram must be stopped at all costs. How could anyone be safe when grown men were seized in the middle of the afternoon?

Unlike Alhaji and Bukar, the third man with Kalli that day — Modu Jalomi, a 35-year-old who lives in Yajiwa, a town 45 miles outside Maiduguri — was used to seeing Boko Haram members near his home. “I have seen them before,” he said. “I know some of their members.” The militants occasionally passed through Yajiwa to buy food. At first, residents welcomed Boko Haram; as recently as last year, young men were voluntarily joining the militants. “It was their own wish, because of religion,” Jalomi said. He could count 20 young men, most of them teenagers, who left. He pitied them now, he said, because the situation had changed. “When people saw that what Boko Haram is doing is not the right thing, they started to run away,” Jalomi said.

As Jalomi lay in bed next to his wife one night, four men came into the house

with AK-47s. One was his neighbor. “They didn’t even hide their faces,” Jalomi recalled. They took him on a motorcycle to the same area near Alagarno where they had taken Bukar and accused him of feeding information about them to the Civilian J.T.F. and the military. Jalomi was tied to a mango tree for 11 hours before he managed to break free. The militants shot at him as he fled. He now lives in Maiduguri and hasn’t returned to his village since. “They have no support now,” he said of Boko Haram.

In a residential area of Maiduguri, Kalli rented a small office from which he directed his unit. When I visited, bags and boxes of donated items for victims of Boko Haram took up half the room. “When we started this, everybody was chasing the insurgents,” Kalli said, recalling the chaos of the early days of fighting Boko Haram. “Later on, we decided to organize and divide into 10 sectors.” Splitting up the city this way allowed him and his fellow commanders to more effectively monitor different neighborhoods. The Civilian J.T.F. has always relied on residents for tips about insurgents who may be hiding among them. Most readily complied, but as the Civilian J.T.F. gains strength, residents are beginning to fear that the vigilantes are using their power not to fight Boko Haram but to intimidate personal enemies. Men and boys have reported being forced to join the group under threat of being beaten. The Civilian J.T.F., some say, could one day prove to be as dangerous as the insurgents.

The Civilian J.T.F. works closely with Nigeria’s Joint Task Force — the military, the police and other security forces — which has been accused of indiscriminate killings in the counterinsurgency. After a March attack by Boko Haram on Giwa Barracks, a military garrison, troops killed hundreds of people, most of whom were unarmed suspects held there. In Maiduguri, thousands of boys and men have been detained on little to no evidence. Some are taken to Giwa Barracks, from which reports of torture and extrajudicial killings regularly emerge. Others simply disappear; sometimes their bodies turn up at the city’s morgues. In response, residents barricade streets with logs and tires to keep outsiders away. There are entire sections of the city that government officials are afraid to enter for fear of reprisal.

In August, Amnesty International released footage showing what appear to be Nigerian soldiers and Civilian J.T.F. members near Maiduguri, cutting the throats of suspected Boko Haram members and then pushing them into an open grave.

Amnesty International also says the vigilantes have made arbitrary arrests and engaged in torture and extrajudicial killings of suspects, both independently and with the military. “From witnesses and victims and families of victims that we have talked to, there is an undeniable degree of frustration and concern and fear against the vigilante groups,” Netsanet Belay, the Africa director of research and advocacy at Amnesty International, told me. “We are seeing the Civilian Joint Task Force increasingly engaged in serious, mass human-rights violations.” Schwartz, the State Department’s Nigeria director, says the United States has pressed and continues to press the Nigerian military on human rights — “Giwa Barracks was a big issue of contention.” The problem with vigilante groups like the Civilian J.T.F., he adds, is that they are essentially unaccountable. “They’re not trained as a law-enforcement group, they’re not underpinned by a law of the land,” he says. “We don’t sanction or condone lawless actions of vigilante groups. I’ve seen a number of these videos, and it’s disturbing.”

Government officials in Borno State express few misgivings about the Civilian J.T.F. One official in the governor’s office, who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation, told me that the Civilian J.T.F. was doing commendable work identifying and arresting Boko Haram members, and that any abuses committed were most likely the fault of the military on joint exercises. The state’s governor, Shettima, describes the emergence of the Civilian J.T.F. as “almost a divine intervention,” though he acknowledges that “one may not rule out some infractions from some overzealous members.” The government, in conjunction with the military, he says, is working to rein in excesses through a training program, the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme, which began in 2013 and provides a modest monthly stipend. The plan is to train at least 5,000 Civilian J.T.F. members by the end of this year; so far, 3,000 men have begun the program.

Jacob Zenn, an analyst of African affairs at the Jamestown Foundation in Washington, argues that to survive, the Civilian J.T.F. has had to evolve from stick-wielding vigilantes to a more sophisticated group. “It’s a catch-22, because if they remain lightly armed, they are at high risk of being massacred by heavily armed Boko Haram insurgents,” Zenn says. “But if they are armed, they essentially become like soldiers.” Once they assume their militarized roles, they may become what soldiers are in the region: both protection and threat.

In his office, Kalli insisted that anyone who fears the Civilian J.T.F. must have a

relationship with Boko Haram. “Any good Samaritans will have to support the Civilian J.T.F., because we have done a lot to bring peace to this city,” he said. If his neighbors refuse to understand that he is trying to help them, he will make them understand. Last year, he turned in his 18-year-old nephew, whom he believed to be a member of Boko Haram. He later watched the military execute him. Kalli expressed no remorse. “I saw him with AK-47s, so that proves he’s a Boko Haram member,” he said. When the insurgency began in 2009, his nephew attended Boko Haram’s sermons, and that year he ran away from Maiduguri. His family and neighbors suspected he had joined the group. “I was the first person to see him when he came back to town,” Kalli said. “He was part of my family, part of my blood. But I apprehended him and handed him over to security.” He told his brother and sister-in-law that their son confessed to killing more than 30 people and even threatened to kill him. “I asked him, ‘Is this the way we brought you up?’ ” Kalli recalled. “You know, the first thing before you start this job, you will take an oath. The oath is that you will not hide anybody, whether it’s your friend or relative.” Couldn’t his nephew have been brainwashed? I asked. He was, after all, little more than a child. Kalli’s face contorted into an expression somewhere between anger and disbelief, and his voice took on a hard edge. “Whether he understood or he didn’t understand, his mind was polluted,” he replied. “We have no regret for anybody if you are a Boko Haram member, because we have suffered a lot at the hands of Boko Haram. We have lost so many people.”

Several young men marched into Kalli’s office, greeting him with reverence before sitting down to wait for their training stipends. Among them was Mohammed Musa, an electrical-engineering student at the University of Maiduguri who signed up with the Civilian J.T.F. last year. For many young men, joining the Civilian J.T.F. is a way of retaking power after so much has been lost — relatives, friends, a viable future. His parents are happy that he volunteers, but he recognizes that much of Maiduguri is wary of the civilian police. “Many people fear us,” he said with frustration. “They say, ‘See this Civilian J.T.F., they’re doing bad things.’ They act as if we’re useless or up to no good. They should be praying for us every day.”

Kalli’s son Lawan, a small-boned and polite 17-year-old in his last year of high school, entered his father’s office and slid into a chair. He described how he inspects cars at checkpoints and carries a knife for protection. One charge leveled against the Civilian J.T.F. is that it recruits children. Human Rights Watch reports indicate that

some vigilantes manning checkpoints in Maiduguri appear to be younger than 18. The watchdog group says witnesses have seen children working at checkpoints in Borno and Yobe States. “If you are not 18, you are not part of us — that is the truth,” Kalli said. His son was different, he said; he wasn’t allowed to use a gun. “We are not using any children. If we see any under-age ones on the streets, we arrest them and call their parents.” I asked him about worries that the vigilantes could be committing abuses. He again became defensive. “We don’t kill anybody. We hand them to the authorities. We have to protect ourselves, but we normally catch them alive.”

One afternoon, Kalli picked me up in one of his trucks. A new crop of volunteers was jammed into the back. They wore T-shirts and sunglasses, with handkerchiefs and guns slung around their necks. They were talking and laughing loudly and watched with amusement as I climbed into the vehicle.

“I was sitting in my office preparing paperwork for my boys who went for training when I received a call from one of my chairmen,” Kalli said as he drove. “He told me that he’d been told that some members of Boko Haram we were looking for were in town and that he’d seen them at Ecobank. When we rushed there, they had already finished their transaction and left. I drove my boys to the car park and mounted a checkpoint. I left some of them there so that they can maybe trap them.”

He put on the truck’s siren and swerved through narrow spaces between lanes. As we sped through Civilian J.T.F. checkpoints, the young men at the barriers saluted him. “We are suspecting that they might enter the market to buy food items,” he said of the Boko Haram members he was tracking. “So we have already put our members on alert. They sleep in the bush, come in to get money and food items and then go back. But we have our people watching them. If we see them, we will grab them.”

I asked him about the guns his crew was carrying. They looked like relics from the 19th century, short-barreled rifle-muskets with wooden grips. “I personally told my boys to carry guns,” he said. Residents donated money to help buy the weapons, he said; at first they had only cutlasses and sticks to fight militants armed with anti-aircraft guns and rocket-propelled grenades. “I bought these local guns you have been seeing and distributed them, because my area is the worst area.” His zone, he pointed out, covers “up to Sambisa” and the outskirts of Maiduguri. “Anything can come through us,” he said. The siren blared louder.

As we drove, Kalli returned to talking about the military: “They are not

responding the way they should; that is the biggest problem we are facing. It is the fault of senior officers. If I were a soldier, I would not go in, because I wouldn't have enough equipment to fight the insurgents! I withdrew my men from Sambisa because I knew the authorities didn't want to finish this job."

We zigzagged through traffic to pick up medicine for Kalli's youngest daughter, who was gravely ill with the measles. His phone rang; the caller was reporting yet another attack on a village, demanding to know why Kalli and his men weren't there. When he hung up, he sighed, and his body slackened. "You know, I'm tired of this thing," he said. "We gave the security forces everything — information about the camps, where they are, and they're not doing anything." I asked him if he has given up on finding the girls. "We can't go up to Chibok again," he said.

The path that Kalli and his unit took out of Maiduguri to Chibok in May is now a lonely one. When I traveled along the same road on a market day, only a few cars, trucks and minivan taxis hurtled past torched vehicles and the burned-out shells of schools and homes. Boys rode bikes with bows and arrows tucked under their arms. Commuters between the two towns were stopped at a series of checkpoints, some manned by the military and others by the Civilian J.T.F. The vigilantes were more disorganized but savvier. They casually waved machetes at drivers and demanded that they turn on their windshield wipers. Militants had been hiding weapons under car hoods, which prevented the wipers from working.

I spoke with Kalli shortly after I left Maiduguri. He was in low spirits. His daughter with the measles had died, and he had taken a break from his Civilian J.T.F. duties. I asked him when he would rejoin his colleagues. "I don't know," he said. "I need rest."

In July, a bomb blast in a Maiduguri market killed at least 20 people. This fall, Boko Haram occupied numerous northeastern towns, including Bama, only 45 miles from Maiduguri, and declared a caliphate. The government recently claimed to have struck a cease-fire with Boko Haram that would lead to the release of the remaining Chibok schoolgirls. But in October, the militants abducted 60 women and girls from Adamawa State and later at least 30 boys and girls from Borno State, casting doubt on the existence of a truce.

Yet when I called Kalli recently, he spoke of the future as bright. He said the military was holding on to Maiduguri and had pushed Boko Haram out of other places. He was no longer doing much fieldwork. He was now an "executive at the

state level” for the Civilian J.T.F., coordinating the sectors and managing their finances. He was also running for Senate. Kalli remained relentlessly upbeat. “We are 100 percent sure we will kill these insurgents,” he told me. He seemed to believe it.

Alexis Okeowo is writing a book about people standing up to extremism in Africa. This is her first article for the magazine.

A version of this article appears in print on November 9, 2014, on page MM36 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: ‘God Is With Us’.

© 2014 The New York Times Company