Nigeria’s security sector needs a radical overhaul, with an emphasis on improving professionalism and accountability.

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by Hilary Matfess (/profiles/m/hilary-matfess.html) - @HilaryMatfess (http://www.twitter.com)

On June 3 the London-based Amnesty International released a scathing report accusing the Nigerian military of war crimes, based on hundreds of interviews, satellite images and leaked military documents. The revelations came only days after Nigeria’s new President Muhammadu Buhari (http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2015/06/01/nigeria-president-muhammadu-buharis-inauguration-address/) was sworn in, after his election in March.
The report recounts the military’s abuses in Nigeria’s conflict-affected northeast. It documents the arbitrary arrests of 20,000 Nigerians, the extrajudicial killings of an estimated 1,200 civilians and the deaths of at least 7,000 Nigerians held in military detention centers.

The Nigerian military’s abuse of power and lack of accountability is not new. Over the years, it has shown a stunning lack of professionalism, has engaged in gross human rights violations and suffers from high rates of soldiers being absent without leave on the front lines of the fight against the Boko Haram insurgency. In fact, its grave improprieties have fueled the conflict, which has claimed nearly 19,000 lives and displaced an estimated 3 million to 4 million people since 2002.

Buhari has proposed to relocate the military headquarters to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state and the center of the Boko Haram crisis. Reining in corruption and the military’s abuse of power is key to effectively countering the insurgency. Amnesty’s report offers Buhari a unique opportunity to do just that. He can send a clear message to the military brass by removing the officers implicated in the report from their positions and launching an investigation into the alleged abuses.

Throwing more money and soldiers at the insecurity in the northeast has proved ineffective. The security sector needs a radical overhaul, with an emphasis on improving the professionalism of its forces and accountability for human rights violations. Buhari’s reputation as a former military leader who took on corruption and indiscipline suggests that he could radically reform the military to prevent more abuses. But he can’t do it alone. The precarious state of the Nigerian economy makes international support critical to facilitating that effort. While Nigeria’s allies may now recoil from military partnership, the latest revelations underline the importance of international cooperation to promote professionalism and restore trust to Nigeria’s security sector. Rescinding military assistance to Nigeria would only increase the likelihood of more human rights abuses, further galvanizing Boko Haram and destabilizing the country.
Ending the alleged embezzling of funds intended to finance the campaign against Boko Haram should also be part of Buhari’s anti-corruption campaign. Prosecuting those who diverted funds from the military to their own pockets would demonstrate that no institution is above the rule of law. A 2012 survey by Afrobarometer, an African independent research group, found that 53 percent of Nigerians don’t trust the police. The lack of public trust in the security sector represents a significant threat to Africa’s most populous nation.

Boko Haram has capitalized on this mistrust and the erosion of legitimacy in the security sector. During the Giwa prison break in March 2014, the insurgents reportedly gave detainees the option of returning home or joining Boko Haram’s ranks once they were freed. The incident was featured in a propaganda video from the group that portrayed the rebels as the defenders of innocents persecuted by the state. Amnesty found that more than 600 of the detainees released during that raid were recaptured and extrajudicially killed by the military.

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The killings of suspected Boko Haram members and civilians serves as another useful recruiting tool for the group. “In a village in Kaduna state, Muslims were pushed into a dug-out hole and gasoline was poured on them before they were set ablaze,” Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, said in a 2011 statement directed at Nigerian Muslims. “What did your government do about this? We are aware of how they are persecuting the ordinary people in the city.”
In light of Amnesty’s report, Nigeria’s allies, including the United States, must take critical stock of the security assistance they provide to the country. U.S.-Nigeria relations are strained, but Nigeria is one of the top recipients of U.S. military aid in sub-Saharan Africa, receiving an estimated $1 million (http://www.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14560.htm) in 2014, in addition to the funding it receives through the multimillion-dollar regional security partnerships such as the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership and the Global Security Contingency Fund to counter Boko Haram.

The Leahy amendment (http://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/issues/leahy-vetting.html), which prevents Washington from selling weapons, sending aid or providing training to foreign security forces that commit human rights violations, may complicate Washington’s ability to support the Buhari administration’s fight against Boko Haram. The U.S. must rethink its military partnership with Nigeria with an eye to the military’s lack of professionalism and credibility to ensure that its support improves the military’s conduct.

Any international support that focuses on providing weapons or financial assistance to Nigeria’s military will do little to restore stability to the country’s troubled northeast. Nigeria intensified its campaign against Boko Haram in May 2013 when President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency (http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/14/world/africa/nigeria-violence/) in three states and escalated it again in February after the presidential elections were postponed over insecurity in the region. The offensive against Boko Haram has since gained support from neighboring Chad, Cameroon and Niger (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31695508) as part of an African Union–backed force. As Amnesty’s report illustrates, though the government has drastically increased the military’s budget, corruption in the military has prevented this assistance from making it to the front lines.

International cooperation remains critical to defeating Boko Haram. But the Buhari administration must prioritize security sector reform by implementing accountability in the chain of command, undertaking measures to professionalize soldiers and police officers and reducing the military’s reliance on vigilante groups.

Hilary Matfess is a master’s candidate at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies, where she focuses on issues of governance, security and development in sub-Saharan Africa. She is also a researcher at the Nigerian Social Violence Project (http://www.connectsaisafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/).

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