



Human Rights Challenges of the Nigerian Military during Operation Lafiya Dole in Borno State, 2015–2023

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Submission Date: 30 April 2026 **Published Date:** 24 June 2026

Citation: Zakari, Z. M., & Adejoh, S. (2026). Human Rights Challenges of the Nigerian Military during Operation Lafiya Dole in Borno State, 2015–2023. In INSR Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies (Vol. 2, Number 6, pp. 26–34). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20824054>

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Abstract

Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram in the North-East, particularly through Operation Lafiya Dole, has been accompanied by persistent allegations of human rights violations involving civilian harm, arbitrary detention, and excessive use of force. The central problem this study addresses is the difficulty faced by the Nigerian military in maintaining internationally recognised human rights standards while conducting complex counterterrorism operations in Borno State between 2015 and 2023. The objective of the study is to critically examine the nature, causes, and implications of these human rights challenges within the operational context of Lafiya Dole. The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary sources including academic literature, reports by human rights organisations, government and military documents, and credible media accounts. Data are analysed using content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and institutional constraints affecting human rights compliance. The findings reveal that challenges to human rights observance were largely shaped by asymmetric warfare, weak civil–military relations, intelligence deficits, prolonged deployment, inadequate training on international humanitarian law, and pressure to deliver rapid security outcomes. Structural factors such as poor accountability mechanisms and the humanitarian complexity of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps further compounded these challenges. The study concludes that human rights violations during Lafiya Dole were less a product of deliberate policy and more a reflection of systemic and operational constraints in counterinsurgency warfare. It recommends enhanced human rights training, stronger oversight and accountability frameworks, improved intelligence coordination, and deeper collaboration with humanitarian actors. The study contributes to knowledge by providing a contextualised understanding of military human rights dilemmas in counterinsurgency operations in Nigeria.

Keywords: Human Rights, Nigerian Military, Counterinsurgency, Operation Lafiya Dole, Borno State, Boko Haram, Civil–Military Relations.

Introduction

Nigeria's contemporary security crisis in the North-East is inseparable from the Boko Haram insurgency, which escalated into a full-scale armed conflict from 2009 onwards. What began as a localised extremist movement rapidly evolved into one of Africa's deadliest surgenies, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and the displacement of over two million people, particularly in Borno State (UNDP, 2021; Amnesty International, 2020). In response to the deteriorating security situation, the Nigerian government launched several military campaigns, culminating in Operation *Lafiya Dole* in 2015. The operation was designed to dismantle Boko Haram's territorial control, restore state authority, and protect civilian populations. While *Lafiya Dole* recorded notable military gains, including the recovery of key towns and the degradation of insurgent capabilities, it also unfolded within an exceptionally complex operational environment marked by asymmetric warfare, porous borders, humanitarian emergencies, and fragile civil-military relations.

Counterinsurgency operations of this nature have historically generated serious human rights concerns, both globally and within Nigeria. International experience from conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel demonstrates that the blurred lines between combatants and civilians often expose non-combatants to arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention, extrajudicial killings, and restrictions on movement (Kaldor, 2013; UNHRC, 2019). In Nigeria, reports by human rights organisations have documented allegations against security forces, including mass detention of suspected insurgents, civilian casualties during military raids, and abuses within Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps (Amnesty International, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2018). These allegations have attracted international scrutiny and raised critical questions about the Nigerian military's capacity to balance security imperatives with compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law.

The core problem addressed by this study is the persistent tension between effective counterinsurgency and the protection of human rights during Operation *Lafiya Dole*. Despite official commitments to civilian protection and adherence to the rules of engagement, evidence suggests recurring institutional and operational challenges that undermined consistent human rights compliance. These challenges include intelligence deficits, prolonged deployments, inadequate training in international humanitarian law, weak accountability mechanisms, and the immense pressure on troops operating in hostile and resource-constrained settings. The problem is not merely one of misconduct but of systemic constraints embedded within Nigeria's counterterrorism architecture. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the human rights challenges faced by the Nigerian military during Operation *Lafiya Dole* in Borno State between 2015 and 2023. The study seeks to answer key questions: What forms of human rights challenges emerged during the operation? What structural and operational factors contributed to these challenges? How did these challenges affect civil-military relations and counterinsurgency outcomes? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a balanced and evidence-based assessment that moves beyond simplistic narratives of blame.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both policy and scholarship. At a policy level, understanding the roots of human rights challenges in counterinsurgency operations is essential for reforming military training, accountability frameworks, and civilian protection strategies. Academically, the study enriches the growing literature on security governance in fragile states by situating Nigeria's experience within broader debates on human rights, military professionalism, and human security in asymmetric warfare contexts.

The scope of the study is limited to Borno State, the epicentre of Boko Haram activities, and covers the period from 2015 to 2023, corresponding with the lifespan and aftermath of Operation *Lafiya Dole*. The study relies on secondary sources, which, while rich in detail and breadth, may be constrained by reporting biases and limited access to classified military information. Nonetheless, triangulating multiple credible sources helps to mitigate these limitations and strengthens the validity of the analysis.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptual clarity is crucial in scholarly work, particularly in studies of security and human rights, to ensure precision in analysis and avoid terminological ambiguities. This study engages key concepts, human rights, counterinsurgency, Operation *Lafiya Dole*, Nigerian military, and Borno State conflict context, drawing on a range of scholarly perspectives to provide operational definitions and critical insights.

Human Rights

Human rights are universally recognised entitlements inherent to all individuals, encompassing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. According to Donnelly (2013), human rights are "moral entitlements codified in international instruments to protect individual dignity and ensure freedom from oppression." Similarly, Ni Aolain, Haynes, and Cahn (2011) emphasise that human rights encompass both protections from abuse and positive guarantees of welfare. Evans and Murray (2012) highlight the legal codification of human rights in treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), while Ratner, Abrams, and Bischoff (2009) distinguish between human rights law and international humanitarian law, which governs conduct in armed conflict. Bell (2006) further underscores the ethical and political dimensions, arguing that human rights create accountability standards for states and non-state actors. Critically, while scholars converge on the universality of human

rights, operationalisation in conflict zones is challenged by resource constraints, weak enforcement, and competing security imperatives. In this study, human rights are understood as legally and morally binding standards that the Nigerian military is expected to uphold, even amidst counterinsurgency operations. The deduced view is that protecting human rights is both a legal obligation and an operational necessity to legitimise counterinsurgency actions.

Counterinsurgency

Counterinsurgency refers to military, political, and socio-economic measures employed to suppress insurgent movements while seeking to win popular support. Galula (1964) defines it as “an effort to simultaneously contain armed opposition and address underlying grievances.” Kilcullen (2010) elaborates that modern counterinsurgency involves population-centric strategies in asymmetric warfare, where the distinction between combatants and civilians is often blurred. Metz (1993) emphasises that counterinsurgency requires integration of military, intelligence, and civil policies. According to McCormick (2010), insurgencies thrive on legitimacy deficits; therefore, counterinsurgency success depends on operational discipline and adherence to law. Petraeus (2006) further stresses that intelligence-led operations and minimal civilian harm are essential to winning “hearts and minds.” Critically, the challenge in Nigeria has been the operationalisation of these principles in a context of limited resources, porous borders, and complex socio-cultural dynamics. The deduced view is that effective counterinsurgency must balance kinetic military operations with protection of civilians and adherence to legal norms, highlighting the centrality of human rights in operational planning.

Operation Lafiya Dole

Operation *Lafiya Dole*, launched in 2015, represents the Nigerian military’s primary counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram in the North-East. Agbibo (2013) situates it as a continuation of previous military initiatives that sought to reclaim territories lost to insurgents. Johnson (2016) emphasises that the operation aimed to restore state authority, degrade Boko Haram capabilities, and provide humanitarian relief. Falola and Heaton (2018) note that the operational environment was characterised by difficult terrain, asymmetric attacks, and complex population dynamics. Adegbulu (2019) highlights that the operation involved both conventional military action and civil–military coordination, including engagement with local vigilante groups. Onuoha (2020) observes that despite territorial gains, *Lafiya Dole* faced criticism for civilian casualties, arbitrary detentions, and limited accountability mechanisms. Critically, while the operation achieved strategic objectives, it revealed systemic constraints in training, intelligence, and adherence to humanitarian norms. The deduced view is that *Lafiya Dole* provides a case study where operational success and human rights compliance are interdependent but often in tension, requiring integrated military and governance approaches.

Nigerian Military

The Nigerian military comprises the Army, Navy, and Air Force, with responsibilities for defending territorial integrity and maintaining internal security. According to Ebo (2005), the military operates under civilian control and is bound by rules of engagement and international law. Adebajo and Landsberg (2010) argue that civil–military relations in Nigeria have historically been complex, shaped by military coups, political transitions, and regional security challenges. Olayiwola (2017) notes that professionalism and adherence to international humanitarian law are essential to legitimacy in domestic and international eyes. Omotola (2018) highlights the dual pressures of operational effectiveness and human rights compliance, particularly in counterinsurgency contexts. Furthermore, Akinola (2020) stresses that accountability mechanisms, including judicial oversight and internal military regulation, are often weak, affecting discipline and conduct. The deduced view is that the Nigerian military’s capacity to protect human rights is influenced not only by operational challenges but also by institutional culture, governance, and oversight structures, making civil–military collaboration critical in conflict zones.

Borno State Conflict Context

Borno State, the epicentre of Boko Haram insurgency, has experienced widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and humanitarian crises. Agbibo (2013) identifies socio-economic marginalisation and governance deficits as key drivers of insurgency. According to the International Crisis Group (2020), over two million people remain internally displaced, living in camps with limited access to basic services. Onuoha (2014) emphasises the complexity of insurgent tactics, including suicide bombings and attacks on civilians, which complicate military and humanitarian responses. Falola and Heaton (2018) further note that the convergence of insurgency, displacement, and limited state capacity produces a highly volatile operational environment. Critically, understanding the local context, including religious, ethnic, and socio-economic dimensions, is essential for effective military and humanitarian interventions. The deduced view is that any analysis of human rights compliance or military strategy must be grounded in the complex realities of Borno State, recognising both structural vulnerabilities and the agency of local populations.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework to comprehensively analyse the human rights challenges faced by the Nigerian military during Operation *Lafiya Dole*. Counterinsurgency in Nigeria operates at the intersection of military, political, and humanitarian imperatives. No single theoretical lens fully captures the complexities of human rights

compliance within such operations; hence, the study integrates Just War Theory, Human Needs Theory, Principal–Agent Theory, and Organisational Theory, offering both normative and structural insights into military conduct, institutional behaviour, and civilian protection.

Just War Theory (JWT), with intellectual roots in Augustine and Aquinas, provides a normative framework for assessing the morality and legality of warfare. Its core principles, necessity, proportionality, and discrimination, guide military conduct to ensure that force is used only when essential, is proportionate to the threat, and differentiates between combatants and non-combatants (Walzer, 2006; Orend, 2013). In the Nigerian context, these principles are crucial for evaluating operations such as *Lafiya Dole*, where civilian populations were often interwoven with insurgent elements. Proponents of JWT argue that adherence legitimises military operations and enhances domestic and international credibility. Critics, however, contend that JWT is idealistic, often difficult to operationalise in asymmetric warfare, and may not account for complex insurgent tactics that deliberately exploit civilian areas (Coady, 2014). Nevertheless, historical evidence, from the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) to contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan—demonstrates that incorporating JWT principles can reduce civilian casualties and foster local support. The deduced view is that JWT provides an essential normative yardstick for assessing the ethical conduct of the Nigerian military and balancing operational necessity with human rights obligations.

Human Needs Theory (HNT) shifts focus from state-centric to people-centred security, emphasising that sustainable peace requires addressing fundamental human needs, including safety, subsistence, identity, and participation (Galtung, 1969; Burton, 1990). Within conflict zones like Borno State, civilian protection is not merely a legal imperative but a strategic necessity to prevent further recruitment by insurgents and to stabilise communities. Scholars argue that failure to meet basic human needs exacerbates conflict cycles (Paris, 2004; Duffield, 2001). In Nigeria, the neglect of IDPs' welfare and humanitarian provision in early counterinsurgency phases contributed to community mistrust and reduced cooperation with security forces. Critiques of HNT highlight that while addressing needs is morally sound, it is often challenging under conditions of ongoing combat, resource scarcity, and institutional incapacity. Nevertheless, HNT's strength lies in its ability to connect human rights protection with operational effectiveness, illustrating that military compliance with humanitarian norms can enhance legitimacy and support for counterinsurgency campaigns. The deduced view is that HNT underscores the strategic value of civilian protection as a central component of counterinsurgency planning.

Principal–Agent Theory (PAT) provides an analytical lens for understanding civilian control over the military and accountability gaps. The theory, rooted in economics and political science (Eisenhardt, 1989; Moe, 1984), posits that agents (military actors) may pursue interests divergent from those of principals (civilian authorities), creating challenges in oversight and enforcement. In Nigeria, historical patterns of military intervention in governance, coupled with operational autonomy in counterinsurgency zones, have occasionally led to human rights lapses (Adebajo & Landsberg, 2010). Critics argue that PAT may overemphasise hierarchical control and understate socio-cultural factors influencing military behaviour. Nonetheless, its strength lies in highlighting structural accountability mechanisms and the importance of aligning operational conduct with policy directives. Case studies from Sierra Leone and Liberia demonstrate that enhanced principal–agent alignment reduces human rights abuses in post-conflict military operations. The deduced view is that PAT helps explain why systemic violations occur despite formal rules of engagement, emphasising the need for robust oversight and clear accountability structures in Nigerian counterinsurgency operations.

Organisational Theory (OT) offers insights into institutional capacity, training, morale, and operational stress, highlighting how these factors influence compliance with rules and norms (Mintzberg, 1979; Scott & Davis, 2016). Prolonged deployments, inadequate resources, and high-intensity operational environments, such as those in Borno State, can erode discipline and decision-making, increasing the risk of human rights violations. Historical evidence from the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates that organisational structures, internal culture, and training are significant determinants of operational behaviour (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Biddle, 2004). Critics suggest that OT may underplay external political and social factors affecting military conduct. However, its applicability to the Nigerian context is strong: it explains how structural weaknesses and resource constraints within the Nigerian military influence operational choices and compliance with international norms. The deduced view is that enhancing organisational capacity, training, and morale is critical for bridging the gap between operational imperatives and human rights obligations.

Review of Related Literature

The intersection of human rights and counterterrorism has been a central focus of scholarly and policy debates globally, particularly in contexts characterised by asymmetric warfare. Scholars have consistently grappled with the tension between state security imperatives and the protection of individual liberties. Kaldor (2013) notes that contemporary conflicts often blur the boundaries between conventional and unconventional warfare, creating conditions in which civilian populations are inadvertently or deliberately affected. Similarly, Ratner, Abrams, and Bischoff (2009) emphasise that the imperative to combat terrorism does not absolve states of obligations under International Human Rights Law (IHRL) or International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Global case studies, including counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel, illustrate how security operations frequently result in civilian casualties, extrajudicial detentions, and violations of due

process, even when states attempt to comply with legal norms (Bellamy, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Scholars such as Orend (2013) and Walzer (2006) argue that moral and ethical frameworks, including Just War Theory, remain essential in evaluating military conduct, reinforcing the view that human rights observance is both a legal and operational necessity.

In the African context, empirical studies have highlighted the complex dynamics of counterterrorism and human rights in the Lake Chad Basin, particularly in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Agbiboa (2013) situates the Boko Haram insurgency within historical grievances, political exclusion, and socio-economic marginalisation, underscoring that security responses must account for both immediate threats and structural drivers of conflict. Onuoha (2014) and Onuoha (2020) provide detailed analyses of Nigerian military operations, noting that while *Operation Lafiya Dole* succeeded in reclaiming territories, it also generated allegations of civilian abuse, arbitrary arrests, and insufficient protection of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Falola and Heaton (2018) further emphasise that the operational environment in Borno State is characterised by extreme terrain, porous borders, and dense civilian populations, complicating adherence to human rights standards. Reports from Amnesty International (2015, 2020) and Human Rights Watch (2018) document persistent concerns over military conduct, particularly in urban areas and IDP camps, highlighting the need for robust oversight mechanisms and accountability structures.

Despite this growing body of literature, several gaps remain. First, much of the scholarship focuses on either military effectiveness or human rights compliance, but few studies integrate these dimensions to understand the trade-offs and interactions between operational imperatives and human rights obligations. Second, existing research often relies on secondary reports or limited case studies, resulting in fragmented insights into long-term patterns of compliance and violations over extended counterinsurgency operations (Adegbulu, 2019). Third, there is insufficient attention to the structural and organisational factors within the Nigerian military, such as training, morale, and principal-agent dynamics, which influence operational behaviour and adherence to legal norms. Finally, comparative perspectives between Nigeria and other Lake Chad Basin states are limited, restricting opportunities to draw lessons on best practices in civilian protection and counterinsurgency governance.

This study seeks to address these gaps by adopting an integrated approach that examines both human rights compliance and operational challenges during *Operation Lafiya Dole* from 2015 to 2023. By situating military conduct within its structural, organisational, and operational contexts, and by drawing on empirical and secondary data, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between security imperatives and civilian protection, offering insights relevant for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners engaged in counterinsurgency and human rights governance in fragile states.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited to exploring the complex and context-dependent nature of human rights challenges in counterinsurgency operations. Qualitative research allows for in-depth examination of narratives, policies, and operational practices, enabling the researcher to interpret meaning, identify patterns, and assess the interplay between institutional structures, military conduct, and civilian protection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative methods, which primarily focus on numerical measurement, qualitative inquiry facilitates a nuanced understanding of the social, political, and operational factors that shape human rights compliance in military campaigns such as *Operation Lafiya Dole*. This design is especially relevant given the difficulty of obtaining direct empirical data in conflict zones, where security, access, and confidentiality pose significant constraints.

The study relies on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy reports, official government and military documents, publications by international organisations such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, and credible media accounts. Secondary sources provide a rich and triangulated perspective on the Nigerian military's operations, enabling a historical and contemporary analysis of human rights practices. Reports from Amnesty International (2015, 2020) and Human Rights Watch (2018) offer detailed documentation of alleged violations, while scholarly works (Agbiboa, 2013; Onuoha, 2014, 2020) contextualise these within broader socio-political and security frameworks. By drawing on multiple sources, the study mitigates the potential biases inherent in any single dataset and allows for a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of the research questions.

Content analysis is employed as the primary method of data analysis. This method involves systematically examining textual materials to identify recurring themes, patterns, and narratives relevant to human rights compliance, operational challenges, and institutional behaviour. According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis enables researchers to transform qualitative data into meaningful insights, providing both descriptive and interpretive understanding of complex phenomena. In the context of this study, content analysis allows for critical comparison of official narratives, independent reports, and academic perspectives, highlighting convergences, contradictions, and gaps in human rights observance during counterinsurgency operations.

To ensure reliability and validity, the study adopts triangulation by cross-referencing multiple sources and perspectives, enhancing the robustness of the findings (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, the study critically evaluates the credibility of each

source, giving preference to peer-reviewed literature, official reports, and internationally recognised human rights organisations. Ethical considerations are also central to this research. Although the study utilises secondary data, care is taken to accurately represent the sources, respect confidentiality where relevant, and avoid sensationalising or politicising human rights violations. The study adheres to principles of academic integrity, transparency, and responsible reporting, ensuring that interpretations are evidence-based and contextualised within the operational realities of Borno State and Nigeria's broader counterinsurgency efforts.

Analysis and Discussion

The human rights challenges faced by the Nigerian military during Operation *Lafiya Dole* cannot be separated from the broader operational constraints inherent in counterinsurgency warfare. Borno State, as the epicentre of Boko Haram activity, presents a highly complex operational environment characterised by rugged terrain, dispersed insurgent cells, and porous borders facilitating cross-border attacks from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (International Crisis Group, 2020). These structural realities have constrained the ability of the Nigerian military to simultaneously achieve tactical objectives and ensure full compliance with human rights standards. Prolonged deployment, limited logistical support, and intelligence deficits have exacerbated operational stress, often compelling soldiers to prioritise immediate security outcomes over civilian protection (Onuoha, 2020). Historical evidence from other counterinsurgency campaigns, such as the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) and post-2001 Afghanistan, demonstrates that similar operational pressures frequently result in compromises in human rights observance (Kilcullen, 2010; Bellamy, 2010). In the Nigerian context, these operational constraints have created a persistent dilemma: how to neutralise insurgents effectively while avoiding harm to civilians who often inhabit the same localities as insurgent elements.

Detention practices, civilian protection, and the use of force have been particularly contentious areas. Amnesty International (2015) documented instances of arbitrary detention of suspected Boko Haram operatives, including minors, sometimes in overcrowded and poorly resourced facilities. Human Rights Watch (2018) also highlighted cases in which excessive force during raids led to civilian casualties, inadvertently undermining the legitimacy of the military's counterinsurgency campaign. While military authorities assert that some of these measures were operationally necessary to prevent insurgent attacks, the lack of robust oversight mechanisms and adherence to international humanitarian standards has exposed civilians to harm. The challenge is compounded by the fluidity of insurgent tactics, including the deliberate embedding of combatants within civilian populations, which blurs the distinction between lawful targets and protected persons (Ratner, Abrams, & Bischoff, 2009). Akinwotu (2020), indicates that between 2015 and 2020, over 2000 alleged insurgents were detained, yet only a fraction faced formal legal proceedings, reflecting gaps in procedural safeguards and judicial follow-up (Akinwotu, 2020).

Civil-military relations and community perceptions are another crucial dimension of the discussion. Studies indicate that civilian trust in the military is a determinant of counterinsurgency success (Metz, 1993; Onuoha, 2014). In Borno State, communities affected by both insurgent violence and collateral damage from military operations often hold ambivalent or negative perceptions of the Nigerian military. Agbiboa (2013) observes that repeated civilian harm, coupled with limited communication and engagement, fosters resentment and reduces the willingness of local populations to cooperate with security forces. Conversely, where the military has engaged in humanitarian outreach, protected IDPs, and coordinated with civil authorities, civilian compliance and intelligence sharing have improved, illustrating the importance of population-centric strategies in mitigating human rights risks and operational challenges. For instance, coordinated efforts in Maiduguri and Jere local government areas to provide food, medical aid, and security information have enhanced community trust and operational effectiveness (UNDP, 2021).

Finally, accountability and institutional response mechanisms play a pivotal role in shaping compliance with human rights obligations. Weak internal oversight, limited judicial scrutiny, and political pressures have historically constrained the Nigerian military's ability to enforce standards uniformly (Akinola, 2020; Omotola, 2018). While initiatives such as military courts and human rights training programmes exist, implementation gaps often persist due to resource limitations, operational tempo, and structural hierarchies. Comparative perspectives reveal that similar accountability challenges have been observed in other post-colonial militaries engaged in counterinsurgency, such as in Sierra Leone and Liberia, where institutional reforms and civilian oversight significantly improved human rights compliance over time (Cilliers, 2011). In Nigeria, enhancing these mechanisms could involve independent monitoring, integration of human rights officers in operational planning, and systematic post-operation reviews to assess civilian impact and operational adherence to international norms. The deduced view is that without effective accountability, even well-intentioned operations risk perpetuating civilian harm and undermining both legitimacy and long-term security objectives.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates that human rights challenges in Operation *Lafiya Dole* are deeply intertwined with operational, structural, and relational factors. Operational constraints, combined with insurgent tactics, limited oversight, and community mistrust, have produced a complex landscape where civilian protection is constantly negotiated against security imperatives. Addressing these challenges requires integrated strategies that balance tactical objectives with ethical and legal obligations, thereby reinforcing both the legitimacy and effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations.

Findings

The analysis of Operation *Lafiya Dole* from 2015 to 2023 reveals a series of empirical and thematic patterns regarding the Nigerian military's human rights practices, operational challenges, and civil–military dynamics. One of the most significant findings is the persistence of operational constraints that complicate human rights compliance. Akinwotu (2020) indicate that extended deployments, difficult terrain, and asymmetric insurgent tactics often forced soldiers to make split-second decisions in high-risk environments. These constraints were compounded by limited intelligence, inadequate logistical support, and insufficient specialised training in international humanitarian law, which together contributed to both inadvertent civilian harm and procedural lapses in detention and interrogation practices (Onuoha, 2020; Amnesty International, 2015).

A second major finding concerns detention practices and the use of force, particularly in urban and semi-urban conflict zones. Reports from Human Rights Watch (2018) and Amnesty International (2020) document the detention of thousands of suspected Boko Haram operatives, including minors, many of whom experienced prolonged confinement without formal trial. Military operations, especially during raids and recapture of towns such as Bama, Gwoza, and Dikwa, frequently involved heavy use of force that led to civilian casualties. While military authorities justified these actions as operationally necessary to neutralise insurgent threats, the findings suggest a recurring tension between tactical imperatives and human rights obligations, highlighting systemic gaps in accountability and procedural safeguards.

A third thematic finding relates to civil–military relations and community perceptions. Field evidence and secondary reports indicate that civilian trust in the military is mixed. In areas where the military coordinated humanitarian assistance and engaged with local leadership, such as Maiduguri and Jere, civilian cooperation and intelligence sharing improved, enhancing operational effectiveness (UNDP, 2021). Conversely, in communities affected by collateral damage, arbitrary detentions, or inadequate protection of IDPs, mistrust and resentment undermined military legitimacy and reduced the flow of critical intelligence, revealing the crucial role of community engagement in both operational success and human rights compliance (Agbibo, 2013).

Finally, the study identifies persistent challenges in accountability and institutional response mechanisms. While the Nigerian military has established human rights training programmes and internal disciplinary structures, these mechanisms are inconsistently applied, often hindered by hierarchical rigidity, operational tempo, and limited oversight (Akinola, 2020; Omotola, 2018). Comparative experiences from other post-conflict African militaries suggest that effective accountability and civilian oversight are essential to reducing violations and sustaining long-term security gains.

In summary, the findings indicate that human rights challenges in Operation *Lafiya Dole* are multifaceted, arising from operational constraints, structural and organisational weaknesses, and variable civil–military engagement. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach that balances military effectiveness with ethical and legal obligations, strengthens accountability mechanisms, and prioritises civilian protection as a central component of counterinsurgency strategy.

Conclusion

This study has examined the human rights challenges of the Nigerian military during Operation *Lafiya Dole* in Borno State (2015–2023), highlighting the complex interplay between operational imperatives, institutional capacity, and civilian protection. The analysis demonstrates that while the military achieved significant tactical successes, including the recovery of insurgent-held territories and the disruption of Boko Haram's operational capabilities, these achievements were accompanied by recurring human rights dilemmas. Operational constraints, such as difficult terrain, intelligence deficits, and prolonged deployments, often forced field commanders to make decisions that unintentionally compromised civilian safety. Detention practices, the use of force, and variable civil–military engagement further complicated the military's efforts to uphold human rights standards. Moreover, institutional accountability mechanisms were inconsistently applied, highlighting systemic weaknesses that undermined both civilian trust and operational legitimacy. The study underscores that human rights compliance is not peripheral to counterinsurgency but central to its long-term effectiveness, legitimacy, and ethical conduct, reflecting lessons from both historical and contemporary conflicts globally.

Recommendations

The findings of this study point to several actionable steps for policy, operational practice, and institutional reform.

First, policy and training reforms should prioritise comprehensive human rights and international humanitarian law modules, embedded within routine military training, field exercises, and leadership development. This would equip personnel to make ethically informed decisions under operational stress.

Second, oversight and accountability mechanisms should be strengthened. Independent monitoring bodies, transparent reporting procedures, and systematic post-operation reviews are essential to detect, investigate, and sanction violations, thereby enhancing military credibility and public trust.

Third, civilian protection mechanisms must be reinforced through coordinated humanitarian assistance, population-centric

engagement strategies, and integrated civil–military planning. Partnerships with local communities, NGOs, and international agencies can mitigate risks to civilians while improving intelligence and operational effectiveness.

Collectively, these measures would bridge the gap between operational necessity and legal and ethical obligations, ensuring that counterinsurgency campaigns are both effective and rights-compliant.

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