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# Counterinsurgency airstrike mishap, intelligence failure and civilian harm in northern Nigeria – 2014 to 2024

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## ABSTRACT

Nigerian Air Force (NAF) airstrikes intended to target armed groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, Lakurawa, and bandits, have inadvertently caused harm to civilians and their properties, eroded public trust in the military, and exacerbated instability. The frequency and recurrence of these mishaps, along with the mounting civilian casualties, raise critical concerns about the factors driving the incidents and whether they are genuinely accidental or incidental. The Nigerian military's claims that the airstrikes on civilian populations were mere accidents or mistakes fail to address systemic issues within their intelligence and operations. While the role of the NAF in the Joint Task Force battle against insurgencies has been overshadowed by the ground operations in policy and academic discussions, this study is concerned with aerial operations within Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign. Focusing on the NAF's airstrike accidents in northern Nigeria from 2014 to 2024, the research examines intelligence lapses, civilian harms, and human rights concerns, thereby addressing a gap in counterinsurgency literature while emphasising humanitarian implications.

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## Introduction

For more than a decade, the Nigerian government, with support from international partners, has initiated military campaigns to combat threats posed by armed groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), Ansaru, Lakurawa, and various banditry factions. These military actions draw upon the lessons learned from the Joint Military Task Force (JMTF), established in 1994 and 1999 in response to militant activities in the Ogoni and Odi communities of the Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. Similarly, the Joint Task Force (JTF), comprising the Nigerian Army, Navy, Air Force, and civilian units, was created to augment the law enforcement efforts in the counterinsurgency campaign. Although, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) has the primary responsibility for internal security in the country, they were overwhelmed by the escalating insurgent activities in the northern region (Onyi-Ogelle & Izimah, 2022, p. 34). While these military operations have led to a decrease in insurgent activities, they have frequently been marred by

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unintended harm to civilians and property, undermining public trust in the JTF, and fueling further instability (Ogbozor, 2019, p. 1).

In May 2013, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) and the Army embarked on offensive airstrikes at insurgents' hideouts and provide support for ground troops to rid out criminals. Some airstrikes, however, killed and injured civilians in several communities, leading to forced displacements (ICIR, 2021). While targeting armed groups, the Nigerian security forces have repeatedly killed and wounded civilians and bombed settlements and camps (Jamiu, 2022). SB Morgen Intel further noted that since 2022, such 'mistakes' have soared, but with limited acknowledgment from the Nigeria Air Force (SBM Intel, 2023). While the Nigerian military has termed the recurring civilian deaths from military airstrikes as mere accidents (Isamotu, 2023) or 'innocent mistakes' (Mutch and Afzal, 2023), it has failed to carry out comprehensive investigations, hold anyone accountable, or compensate the victims' families (SBM Intel, 2023).

The impact of combat military airstrikes mishap on civilian populations was brought to the forefront in February 2014 when a Nigerian military plane mistakenly bombed the village of Daglun in Borno State, northeastern Nigeria, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. Following that incident, between February 2014 and December 2024 at least 18 erroneous military airstrikes on civilians have been documented, resulting in 450 civilians dead and many injured (see Table 1). Three recent cases of accidental aerial attacks on civilians which occurred in Sokoto and Kaduna State are typical of the mishaps under consideration in this paper. An airstrike targeted at Lakurawa terrorists on Christmas day, 25 December 2024, accidentally apparently killed 10 civilians in the Gidan Sama and Rumtuwa communities of Silame local government area in Sokoto state (Punch, 2024). On 27 September 2024, a NAF airstrike targeting armed bandits hit a mosque in Jika da Kolo, killing 24 people (Muhammad and Kingimi, 2024). On 3 December 2023, a military drone accident in Tudun Biri community killed 120 and injured 66 Muslim worshippers commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Amnesty International, 2023). The frequency of recurrence and the cumulative increase in civilian casualties from the military airstrike mishaps have generated concerns and frustrations among the affected population (Human Rights Watch, 2023b).

While the impact of the JTF's ground operations has been extensively analysed in the literature, Oyewole noted that the NAF's role and the importance of airpower in counter-insurgency operation has not been adequately given attention in policy and academic discussions (Oyewole, 2021). To Oyewole, NAF's pivotal role is often overshadowed by the land forces in discussions and analysis of counterinsurgency efforts. Nevertheless, the NAF's crucial support for ground forces in various campaigns against bandits, terrorists, and criminal syndicates across the country is evidence of the breadth of its operational engagements (Oyewole, 2021, p. 24). Oyewole maintained that totality of Nigeria's air campaigns is often described as indiscriminate bombing on civilians with little or no attention to basic operational details such as the date, location, target, and impact. Additionally, the deficiencies in NAF operations, such as instances where NAF airstrikes have affected civilians, its alleged failure to neutralise armed groups and prevent attacks, as well as perceived inadequate air cover for land forces have been acknowledged but received less scrutiny in the literature (Okoli, Olaniyan, & Ayegbusi, 2024; Oyewole, 2021).

**Table 1.** Military airstrike errors in northern Nigeria – 2014–2024.

Date	Location	Reasons by military	Number killed
Feb.28, 2014	Daglun, Mafa L.G.A. Borno State	Denied Knowledge	20 Civilians
Mar.16, 2014	Kayamla, Konduga L.G.A. Borno State	Denied Knowledge	10 Civilians
Jan.17, 2017	Rann, Kala/Balga. L.G.A. Borno State	Believe it was Boko Haram encampment	53 IDPs and Aid Workers
Apr 11, 2019	Ajia, Birnin Magaji L.G.A. Zamfara State	Unknown	11 Civilians
Jul. 02, 2019	Gajigana, Magumeri L.G.A. Borno State	Unknown	13 Civilians
Apr. 25, 2021	Mainok, Kaga L.G.A. Borno State	Unknown	30 Soldiers and ground troops
Sept.16, 2021	Buwari, Yinusari, LGA Yobe State	Unknown	9 Villagers
Sept.26, 2021	Kwatar Daban Masara, Borno State	Pre-emptive strike	20 Fishermen
Apr.20, 2022	Kuragba, Shiroro L.G.A. Niger State	Refused to comment on the matter	6 Children
Jul. 06, 2022	Kunkunni, Safana L.G.A. Katsina State	Unknown	2 Persons
Dec.17, 2022	Mutunji, Maru L.G.A. Zamfara State	Collateral damage	60 Persons
Jan. 24, 2023	Galkogo, Shiroro L.G.A. Niger State	Unknown	18 Civilians
Jan. 25, 2023	Rukubi, Doma L.G.A. Nasarawa State	Targeted terrorist offloading cattle	40 Pastoralist
Mar.05, 2023	Sabon Gida, Giwa L.G.A. Kaduna State	Unknown	3 Civilians
Aug.18, 2023	Kwaki, Shiroro L.G.A. Niger State	Unknown	1 Civilians
Dec.03, 2023	Tudun Biri, Igabi L.G.A. Kaduna State	Misjudgement	120 Muslims Worshippers
Sep. 27, 2024	Jika da Kolo, Giwa L.G.A. Kaduna State	Wrongly analysed and misinterpreted.	24 Muslim in a Mosque
Dec. 25, 2024	Gidan Sama and Rumtuwa, Silame LGA, Sokoto State	Authorities pledged to investigate claim of civilian casualties	10 civilians
Total			450

Sources: International Center for Investigative Reporting (2021), SBM Intel (2023), Jamiu (2022), Isamotu (2023); Punch (2024).

This points to a need for a critical re-examination of the JTF’s 13 years of counterinsurgency efforts to combat insurgent threats in northern Nigeria. According to Okoli et al. (2024), the nature of these highly kinetic military operations and the resulting civilian casualties from accidental airstrikes have made it even more difficult to combat insurgency due to the local communities’ frustrations with the negative impacts of the military campaign. These evolving situations present challenges for counter-terror operations, particularly aerial operations, as civilian casualties from erroneous airstrikes continue to occur (Okoli et al., 2024). Indeed, Okoli concludes that the military’s counter campaign has proven to be challenging to the local communities, just as the threat of terrorism itself.

Instances of airstrike errors within counterinsurgency operations are not peculiar to Nigeria, and evidence is prevalent in the literature regarding accidental aerial attacks on civilian population during armed conflicts. In their study of mis-targeted counterinsurgency airstrikes in Nigeria, Okoli et al. (2024) noted that these events have similarities with the March 2017, U.S’ accidental bombing of a mosque in Aleppo, Syria, which killed 38

civilians, and recent erroneous airstrikes by Israel in both Gaza and Lebanon that affected civilians. While the civilian casualties from the latter may be higher than Nigerian cases, Okoli underlines that Nigeria's situation still stands out due to its seemingly perpetual nature and the significant mounting number of civilian casualties. Although the study enhanced understanding about mis-targeted airstrikes on civilians, the fundamental causes – such as failures in intelligence, nature of civilian harm, and related concerns about human rights violations – have not been comprehensively examined. This article addresses this gap in literature.

This study examines the effects of erroneous counterinsurgency airstrikes on civilian populations in northern Nigeria from 2014 to 2024. The research highlights the significant yet often overlooked role of aerial operations within Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy. This is elucidated through a series of inquiries that address the broader implications of these actions. Why do military airstrikes on civilians happen so frequently in Nigeria? Are the recurring incidents of combat airstrikes on civilians truly accidental or do they reveal intelligence and operational failures? Who is accountable for the high number of civilian casualties? Why is there no compensation for the victims? The article argues that while the JTF's aerial operations have contributed to limiting insurgencies and provided cover for the ground troops, it has inadvertently harmed civilians, fuelling discontent on JTF activities and further instability. This article is organised into sections covering the background to Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations, airpower, intelligence and NAF airstrike accidents, civilian harm, and critical human rights issues. The article ends with recommendations for a critical review of the root causes of the airstrike mishaps and measures to address the human rights violation concerns.

## **Background to Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations**

Since 2011, Nigeria's security forces have engaged Boko Haram and other groups such as ISWAP, Ansaru, Lakurawa, and bandits by implementing counterinsurgency measures and military tactics, including the use of ground and aerial offensives. However, despite the declaration of a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States in mid-2013, Boko Haram attacks persisted, causing disruptions to economic and social activities (Council of Foreign Relations, 2013). As the insurgent attacks intensified, border crossings, schools, markets, and roads in the affected areas were shut down to minimise the impact on civilians. Although the closure of markets and the ban on fishing in Lake Chad disrupted Boko Haram's financial activities, it also restricted people's movement and access to essential livelihood resources (ICG, 2017, p. 4).

The activities of Boko Haram escalated in 2014, resulting in civilian fatalities, widespread destruction of properties and critical local infrastructure, disruption of formal education, mass displacement of individuals, and the collapse of livelihoods in northeastern Nigeria. This led to a massive movement of people, with a large number seeking refuge in neighbouring countries like Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The human cost of the conflict was significant, with an estimated 4.6 million people, primarily farmers, compelled to leave their homes, and the humanitarian impact of the crisis extending to other areas in northern Nigeria (World Bank and UNHCR, 2016). In response to the increasing violence, the Nigerian government collaborated with regional and international partners, including the African Union (AU), and neighbouring countries' military forces to launch a

comprehensive series of multinational counterinsurgency operations. These operations encompassed a wide range of military strategies, including precision airstrikes, ground-based military campaigns, and the strategic deployment of specialised forces with the aim of containing the insurgency.

Beginning in 2015, a coalition of AU forces, primarily comprising members from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and nearby countries, collaborated with Nigeria to initiate a concentrated effort to eradicate Boko Haram prior to Nigeria's 2015 election. This multinational coalition made impressive progress in the first half of 2015, reclaiming nearly all the territories previously held by Boko Haram within just one month (Ogbozor & Paden, 2015). The success was not only evident in terms of territorial gains but also in disrupting Boko Haram's operational capabilities and dismantling its infrastructure. This was a significant achievement, particularly given the military's previous struggles to accomplish such gains in the prior five years (Ogbozor & Paden, 2015). While the military campaign did lead to territorial recapture and a weakening of Boko Haram's operational capabilities, it also had unintended adverse effects on civilians. Amnesty International (2018) documented numerous instances of civilian casualties, arbitrary detentions, and forced displacement resulting from the military operations. Additionally, the increased militarisation of the region disrupted livelihoods, restricted access to essential services, and escalated tensions between security forces and local communities (Amnesty International, 2018).

After the election of President Muhammadu Buhari in May 2015, the forces of the neighbouring countries remained in Nigeria under the auspices of the AU. Buhari's election campaign had included a promise to end Boko Haram, and in mid-2015, the Nigerian government took several proactive steps to address the insurgency. These measures included relocating the military headquarters from Abuja to Borno State, the epicenter of Boko Haram's activities. As part of the re-organisation initiative, the army operation transitioned from 'Operation Zaman Lafiya' (peaceful) to 'Operation Lafiya Dole' (peace by force), indicating a more intense assertive approach to dealing with the insurgency in the northeast region (Ikeolu, 2018). Moving the military base closer to the insurgent stronghold was applauded by Nigerians. Nevertheless, it inadvertently resulted in adverse consequences for the civilian population, with civilians frequently finding themselves in the line of fire during confrontations between insurgents and the military. In this regard, OPLD was similar to previous joint military task forces created for internal security operations in 1994 in Ogoni and 1999 in the Odi areas of the Niger Delta region. These were punitive military operations resulting in extensive loss of lives, properties and livelihoods (Onyi-Ogelle & Izimah, 2022, p. 34).

The robust counter-campaign of Operation Lafiya Dole (OPLD), which involved ground operations and airstrikes, led to the successful recapture of the entire self-proclaimed 'Islamic Caliphate' of Boko Haram in the period after Nigeria's 2015 election (Ogbozor & Paden, 2015). This achievement can be partly attributed to the relocation of the military headquarters, and notably the transformation of the operational mandate of the JTF. This strategic shift from a relatively passive force to an offensive one played a crucial role in the success (Ikeolu, 2018). Boko Haram was on the defensive, suffering the loss of territory, resources and fighters, and the Nigerian administration has characterised subsequent attacks by the insurgents as the 'last kick of a dying horse' (Premium Times, 2017).

Yet, the military's triumph did not signify the end of the conflict. On the contrary, Boko Haram is still potent and targeting civilians, livelihoods, security forces, and humanitarian workers (Ogbozor, 2019, p. 210). Moreover, the forceful military actions and restrictions which characterised the period of OPLD lead to civilian casualties and widespread displacement (Ogbozor, 2019, p. 1). Some severe military counterinsurgency measures, such as the NAF's massive aerial onslaughts and military restrictions, including prolonged closing of roads, markets, and border points, have been associated with the period of OPLD. Oyewole (2021) argues that Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign has been overly kinetic and reactive and has not yielded the desired result of defeating the insurgents. Indeed, the strategy of enforcing peace through strength rather than through mediation or negotiation undermines the very principles it aims to promote, according to McDappa (2021). OPLD, seen as a peacebuilding framework in military circles, has had a negative rather than positive effect (McDappa, 2021).

### **Airpower, intelligence failure and NAF airstrike accidents**

Nigeria's airpower dates to the establishment of the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) in 1964, which has historically depended on foreign training and equipment (Ebiye, 1992). Although terrorism in Nigeria predates airpower development, aerial capabilities have been pivotal in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations in northern Nigeria, leveraging drones and aircraft for real-time data acquisition (Onuoha, 2014). Precision airstrikes have targeted insurgents' strongholds, though issues such as collateral damage and intelligence accuracy have long been problematic (Ewi & Salifu, 2017). The NAF has been integral to counterinsurgency efforts, employing airstrikes to neutralise insurgent strongholds, interrupt supply logistics, and target leadership figures. However, it is essential to note that the Army also employs airpower for purposes such as airstrikes, transportation, interception, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 5).

Despite the importance of airpower to Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign, the NAF faces substantial challenges, including an aging fleet and limited maintenance infrastructure, leaving many aircraft grounded and dependent on foreign spare parts (Aghedo & Osumah, 2015). Operational readiness is further undermined by procurement delays and geopolitical obstacles. While pilot training has improved, gaps in technical expertise and maintenance capabilities highlight the need for greater investment in capacity building (Egbewole, 2020). Nevertheless, according to John Campbell the acquisition of A-29 Super Tucano combat aircraft from the US in 2021 has enhanced Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations (Campbell, 2021). The integration of the newly acquired Tucanos significantly enhanced the aerial capabilities of the NAF. This strategic upgrade not only improved the operational readiness and effectiveness of their fleet but also expanded their ability to conduct a wider range of missions in support of national security objectives, such as aerial cover for ground forces and tactical intelligence. However, Freedom Onuoha maintains that despite the diversification in military partnerships, challenges related to interoperability with Western systems persist (Onuoha, 2014). There are still issues with communication and intelligence sharing with partners, especially the Western countries.

While airpower has bolstered Nigeria's deterrent capabilities against insurgents, the increasing civilian casualties from airstrike mishaps has raised concerns about the

effectiveness of aerial campaigns. The labelling of all NAF's airstrikes on civilian population as accidents, mistakes, or mishaps by the military obscures their deeper causes, and ignores the two distinct perspectives on how these incidents should be classified – typical mistakes or failures of human or technical functions (Okoli et al., 2024). While these occurrences can be either accidental or incidental, accidental mishaps typically involve carelessness, inattention, or negligence, whereas incidental mishaps could occur irrespective of the level of care or intention (Okoli et al., 2024). Okoli further noted that while airstrikes that harm civilians may be incidental, given the frequent recurrence of such events and the rising number of civilian casualties, this needs to be examined further.

In the literature, two main factors have been linked to airstrike accidents: intelligence deficiencies and military errors. Writing in 2014, Onuoha attributes mistakes to excessive reliance on inadequate reconnaissance and the poor fusion of human intelligence (HUMINT) with technical data. More recently, Campbell (2021) highlights contributory factors to the mishaps that include flawed intelligence, technical inaccuracies, and the challenge of differentiating between combatants and non-combatants in complex conflict environments.

An effective counterinsurgency operation requires tactical intelligence that offers actionable insights to improve decision-making and operational efficiency. Tactical intelligence is real-time, local information critical for planning and executing military and security activities, and its evolution in Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts dates to the Boko Haram insurgency, which began in late 2000s. According to Campbell (2021), the initial shortcomings in intelligence gathering facilitated Boko Haram's rise. While the initial rise of Boko Haram can be linked to poor military intelligence, reforms, including the establishment of specialised military intelligence units and participation in international intelligence-sharing initiatives, have gradually improved Nigeria's tactical intelligence capabilities (Campbell, 2021). The initial inability to collect and analyse timely intelligence that had limited military operations seem to have eased with the establishment of a specialised JTF intelligence unit and the collaborations with neighbouring countries.

To this end, Aghedo and Osumah (2015) maintained that accurate intelligence enabled Nigerian forces to reclaim territories such as those in the Sambisa Forest, utilising surveillance drones and HUMINT to locate insurgent hideouts and plan precise strikes. The Nigeria Ministry of Defense (2019) highlights successes where timely intelligence disrupted insurgent supply chains and facilitated the recovery of key territories during OPLD. Onuoha (2014) noted the importance of intelligence in force protection, citing its role in anticipating ambushes and mitigating IED threats, which has helped reduce casualties in conflict zones. Integrating local populations into intelligence efforts yields crucial HUMINT for civilians and the military despite challenges like mistrust and fear of insurgent reprisals (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2018). Collaborative efforts, such as those by the MNJTF, have significantly enhanced intelligence capabilities through shared resources and joint operations, with Walker (2020) emphasising the positive impact of regional cooperation.

Nonetheless, Nigeria faces significant barriers to practical and tactical intelligence. Ikelegbe and Umukoro (2016) point to technological deficiencies, such as limited access to satellite imagery and real-time communication systems, which impair intelligence accuracy and responsiveness. Ochonu (2020) documents difficulties in HUMINT

acquisition, including community distrust, insurgent intimidation, and the complexity of Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape. Inter-agency rivalry among the military, DSS, and police exacerbates inefficiencies in intelligence processing, according to Alli (2019), reducing its tactical utility. Meanwhile, insurgent groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP have adapted with counterintelligence tactics, such as misinformation and encrypted communication, often outpacing government responses (Ewi & Salifu, 2017).

More broadly, the Nigerian military faces technical challenges in logistics, intelligence, and command, which limit its capacity to maintain control over counterinsurgency operations (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 15). Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign has exhibited significant command and intelligence failures, attributed to technical and operational issues, including corruption within the military hierarchy (Okoli et al., 2024). Also, funds intended for counterinsurgency logistics are sometimes mismanaged, creating operational deficits due to a patronage system that exists within the military and the possibility of double agents and saboteurs compromising tactical intelligence (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 15). These factors, in addition to a lack of cooperation with local communities, limit the efficiency of counterinsurgency operations.

In addition to intelligence deficiencies, the Nigerian military has faced strong criticism for frequently employing indiscriminate bombing and shelling in densely populated areas, resulting in serious civilian harm (Amnesty International, 2018). Counterinsurgency operations have been marred by errors that have caused significant civilian casualties, stemming from indiscriminate use of force, inadequate training and discipline, and strained civil–military relations. The emergence of drones as an integral aspect of military airpower has transformed modern warfare. While drone-fired airstrikes are intended to hit targets with high precision, some have missed, causing civilian or other unintended damages, highlighting the human cost of modern warfare (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 6). The timeline of NAF airstrike errors, locations, reasons provided by the military, and the number of civilian casualties is detailed in [Table 1](#).

[Table 1](#) depicts the timeline, locations and number of civilians killed from military airstrike mishap in northern Nigeria from 2014. A total of 450 civilians have lost their lives, and the annual average of 1.5 erroneous airstrikes during this period shows the frequency of these events. Of particular concern is the deadliest single attack, which claimed 120 lives in Tudun Biri in Kaduna State. A total of eight states in the northern region of the country have been impacted: four in the northwest, two in the northeast, and two in the northcentral regions. The northeast region has borne the brunt, with nearly half of the total incidents. Borno State alone has witnessed six airstrike mishaps, while Yobe State has experienced one. In the northwest, six incidents have been reported – in Sokoto, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina States. In the northcentral region, there have been three mishaps, with two in Niger State and one in Nasarawa State.

The airstrike mishap in January 2023 on herders in the Rukubi community in Nasarawa State continued the troubling trend of disregard for civilian lives that has become associated with military operations in Nigeria (SBM Intel, 2023). Additionally, the 25 December 2024 airstrike accident in Sokoto State (Punch, 2024), the drone attack that occurred in December 2023 at the Tudun Biri community, and the airstrike on Sept 27, 2024, in Jika da Kolo community, are the latest incidents of the airstrike mishaps (Vanguard, 2023). When examining the miscalculated Tudun Biri drone attack in Kaduna that killed over hundred civilians observing religious festival, it is pertinent to question the tactical

intelligence and command conditions under which the operation was directed and executed (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 16). The Nigerian military claimed that the drone operation was based on credible intelligence, stating, 'We acted on intelligence, but we missed it' (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 15). The military implied that the Muslim worshippers were accidental victims of the drone attack instead of the actual target. While intelligence failures can occur in any military operation, however, the frequency and nature of the accidents suggests serious operational and technical challenges (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 15).

After the Rukubi strike which claimed 40 civilian lives, the NAF acknowledged that they had conducted the operation based on 'credible intelligence and in collaboration with other security forces and agencies in Nasarawa State' (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). The NAF asserted their surveillance footage depicted the movement of 'suspected terrorists' gathering around 'a truck suspected to be a logistics vehicle' delivering weapons to insurgents, deemed a target for the airstrike (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). However, the statement did not address other questions, such as how the information about the suspected threat was evaluated and confirmed, whether attempts were made to identify those targeted, or if any assessment was conducted prior to the airstrike to prevent civilian casualties (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 15). The lack of specific details raises concerns about whether the NAF carried out the airstrike solely based on suspicion.

The frequency of airstrike mishaps in Nigeria has raised serious concerns regarding the country's airpower capabilities and operational effectiveness. The successful execution of airstrikes in combat situations demands a high level of technical expertise and precision. While some unintended civilian casualties could be deemed understandable if the intended target is hit, it is a much graver operational failure when an airstrike completely misses its mark and causes indiscriminate harm elsewhere (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 5). The loss of civilian lives through failure to take adequate precautions in targeting, or through disproportionate military response is against international laws of armed combat.

Nigeria's recurring pattern of airstrike mishaps reflects operational deficiencies or ineptitude, particularly in its counterinsurgency efforts. These mishaps not only tarnish the reputation of the Nigerian military but also significantly impact its combat proficiency (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 6, 7). Consequently, they undermine the military's overall effectiveness and pose a major challenge to the country's counterinsurgency endeavours (Okoli et al., 2024, p. 2). There is a need to recognise that accurate intelligence is crucial for the success of airstrikes; it informs target selection, timing, and execution. When intelligence is flawed, airstrikes can miss their intended targets, hitting civilian areas or friendly forces instead. These failures can result from inadequate reconnaissance, faulty data analysis, or communication breakdowns within the military hierarchy. Mutch and Afzal (2023) describe these mishaps as a case of an 'innocent mistake.' However, this perspective overlooks the systemic issues within military intelligence operations. Intelligence failures often reflect deeper problems in the planning and execution stages of military operations. For instance, if intelligence reports are based on outdated or incomplete information, the likelihood of an airstrike hitting the wrong target increases. Similarly, if there is a failure in communication between intelligence analysts and military commanders, the airstrike may proceed based on incorrect or misunderstood data. These deficiencies in intelligence, in conjunction with military errors, are significant factors contributing to civilian harm resulting from airstrikes conducted for counterinsurgency operations.

## Civilian harm from NAF airstrike mishaps

A review of the literature and the analysis in [Table 1](#) indicate that NAF airstrike mishaps have impacted civilians in the three sub-regions of northern Nigeria. Human Rights Watch (2023a) reported that several civilians were killed by NAF airstrikes intended for bandits or members of the Islamist group Boko Haram but instead hit civilians. SB Morgen Intel (2023) added that since 2017, over 300 people have died in airstrikes by NAF targeting terrorists. [Table 1](#) shows that in the past decade, at least 450 civilians in 18 communities have been killed by accidental NAF airstrikes. However, casualty numbers vary across sources, suggesting that the actual toll might be higher due to unreported incidents in remote areas (Isamotu, 2023). Analysis of the regional distribution of harm to civilians provides additional insight into the incidents spanning from 2014 to 2024.

In the northeast region, six reported incidents affected civilians, along with one accidental strike on a military convoy. On February 28, 2014, a military plane mistakenly bombed the village of Daglun community during an offensive against Boko Haram, resulting in the death of 20 civilians, most of whom were elderly (BBC News, 2014). Despite an extensive military ground operations aimed at eradicating Boko Haram, the government aircraft dropped four bombs, killing Daglun civilians while they slept (Ali Ndume, cited in BBC News, 2014). According to Human Rights Watch (2023a), a similar military mishap occurred two weeks later in the village of Kayamla, resulting in the deaths of ten civilians. Following the Daglun and Kayamla airstrikes, Human Rights Watch stated that the NAF rarely acknowledges mistakes and does not provide justice or accountability to the families of the victims (Human Rights Watch, 2023a).

Three years after the Daglun and Kayamla incidents, a NAF airstrike struck an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Rann, resulting in the deaths of at least 53 displaced persons. The death toll may have been as high as 115, with over 100 people injured (Isamotu, 2023). Although there was no clearly designated displacement camp in Rann, numerous tents for displaced individuals were spread out among the residential structures at the two locations that were affected. These tents could be seen clearly from the air, leading to inquiries about how such an incident could have taken place (Isamotu, 2023). Other reported accidental NAF strikes in the region include those in Gajigana and Kwatar Daban Masara, which led to the deaths of 13 and 20 civilians, respectively. Additionally, 30 soldiers were killed in Mainok by a NAF fighter jet that hit the wrong coordinates while targeting Boko Haram insurgents (SBM Intel, 2023). In Buwari village, Yobe State, NAF airstrikes killed nine farmers (Isamotu, 2023). The NAF initially denied involvement in the incidents but later acknowledged the possibility of civilian casualties. This pattern of denial in the aftermath of airstrike mishaps is consistent with the NAF's response to previous incidents in the northeast region.

In the northwest region, the military campaign's focus shifted from combating insurgency to banditry. On 25 December 2024, 10 civilians were killed by NAF accidental airstrikes in Gidan Sama and Rumtuwa communities in the Silame local government area of Sokoto state (Punch, 2024). Eleven individuals were killed in the Ajia community, Birnin Magaji, due to NAF airstrike accidents (Isamotu, 2023). Two civilians were killed, and 13 others were wounded in Kunkunni Village, Safana, Katsina State, by a NAF fighter jet strike (SBM Intel, 2023). Also, the Mutunji attack was responsible for 60 deaths (Isamotu, 2023) and the Tudun Biri incident resulted in 120 civilian deaths, as

well as 66 injuries. Similarly, while Tudun Biri residents were gathered to celebrate Maulud, commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, a military drone misinterpreted their movements as suspicious during a routine counterterrorism operation, leading to an airstrike on the civilians. Survivors of these attacks, such as 37-year-old Idris Dahiru, describe the loss of as many as 30 family members, highlighting the human toll of these catastrophic incidents (Odeniyi, 2023).

The northcentral region has experienced mishaps from NAF airstrikes similar to other regions. In Genu town, Niger State, a bombing by the NAF Alpha jet resulted in the deaths of several wedding guests (SBM Intel, 2023). In the Kuregba community of Shiroro Local Government Area, at least six children were killed by a NAF airstrike (SBM Intel, 2023). Additionally, 18 individuals, including vigilantes and residents in the Galkogo community, lost their lives following an inadvertent action by a NAF aircraft; 8,000 people were displaced because of the incident. In Kwaki Village, Shiroro L.G.A., a woman was also killed in a NAF airstrike (Isamotu, 2023). The Rukubi airstrike incidents that killed 40 individuals, mainly Fulani pastoralists was another tragic incident (SBM Intel, 2023). The recurring incidents in Niger State were linked to miscommunication between the NAF and local security forces, highlighting the need for better coordination in such operations.

One case serves as an example of the economic hardships that compound the tragic deaths for victims of these mishaps. Okotta Samiala tragically lost 11 of his siblings in the NAF airstrike in Rukubi. He recounted that his siblings were bombed while unloading their cattle, which had been confiscated by the Benue State Livestock Guards (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). Samiala's family had taken a loan to reclaim their impounded cattle, leaving him responsible for providing for the remaining family members amidst the devastating losses. He expressed concerns about repaying the cattle loan, particularly given the challenging circumstances prevailing in the country. Samiala's story serves as a stark reminder of the far-reaching impact of NAF airstrike incidents on civilians in the northcentral region. Overall, this narrative underlines the urgent need for the NAF to implement effective measures to minimise civilian casualties during air operations and to address the fundamental human rights issues faced by the victims and their families.

## Human rights violations concerns

The NAF's counterinsurgency airstrikes have frequently killed civilians from alleged indiscriminate use of force, intelligence lapses, insufficient training, lack of discipline, and poor civil–military relations. NAF has consistently refuted involvement in the occurrence of civilian casualties or described culpability as accidents. The lack of transparency in the investigation process and the failure to make reports of investigation public hinder the pursuit of justice and accountability. Worse still, despite the mistakes' recurrence, victims have had little recourse to legal redress, even as NAF actions constitute grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) (Human Rights Watch, 2023b).

The Geneva Convention IV of 1949 protects civilians in armed conflict, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, article 3 guarantees the right to life, liberty, and the security of a person. Indiscriminate aerial bombing of the civilian population not only fails to achieve military strategic objectives but also results in severe humanitarian consequences, as in the case of NAF airstrike mishaps (Oyewole, 2021). The repeated occurrence of NAF airstrikes that harm protected civilians highlights a blatant disregard for IHL,

underscoring the crucial necessity for adherence to international humanitarian standards (Oyewole, 2021).

IHL places a great deal of emphasis on the principle of distinction to protect civilians and civilian property from harm during armed conflict. It requires the parties involved in conflict to consistently differentiate between enemy combatants and non-combatants, and direct attacks to only legitimate military targets (IHL Rule 1; cited in Human Rights Watch, 2023b). It also compels the parties involved to always make a clear distinction between combatants, military targets, civilians, and objects, ensuring that only the former are legitimate targets (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). Nigeria, as a signatory to the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, is obliged to adhere to these legal standards, but the recurring NAF airstrikes raises a lot of concerns.

Following the NAF airstrike at the Rann IDPs camp, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) played a crucial role in ensuring the protection of civilians and adherence to IHL. Seif Magango, spokesperson of the OHCHR stated, 'While we acknowledge that the authorities have characterised the civilian deaths as accidental, we implore them to undertake all necessary measures in the future to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure in consistence with Nigeria's international legal obligations' (Seif Magango, cited in Isamotu, 2023). The question of whether the NAF airstrike violated IHL arose following the evidence that the tents used by the displaced persons were easily visible from the air. It prompted inquiries into the circumstances leading to such an incident. It is reasonable to expect that the military would have been aware of the populated civilian area and implemented the necessary precautions to prevent harm to the Rann camp.

High-profile incidents, such as the Rann attack have prompted some operational changes. For example, pre-strike reconnaissance protocols and enhanced pilot training measures have been reported (Alli, 2019). Nevertheless, logistical and resource limitations frequently compromise the effectiveness of these adjustments. Moreover, in disregard of civilian losses from aerial operations, the NAF approved a deal for more Cobra attack helicopters after the Rann attack (Jamiu, 2022). This move has been condemned by civil rights organisations because of the increasing civil casualties from aerial operations (Jamiu, 2022).

The NAF has shown a pattern of denying responsibility and even involvement in mishaps. Similar to the military's response to the Rann attack, NAF initially denied the air raid in Buwari, Yobe State, stating that, 'no bomb or missile was even used' (Jamiu, 2022). However, the NAF later acknowledged the attack, admitting that civilian casualties may have occurred. The Rukubi attack is another instance in which NAF denied responsibility. Instead of acknowledging the operational error, the NAF designated the deceased as terrorists planning an attack on the community and required survivors to provide proof of civilian casualties. The NAF maintained that they had conducted surveillance and had verified the presence of terrorists before taking action (Ayodele Famuyiwa, cited in Isamotu, 2023). Samiala, the surviving victim of the attack described above, remains deeply troubled by the Air Force's refusal to admit to the mistake in the airstrike and upset by the portrayal of his innocent siblings as terrorists. Samiala's emotional distress is palpable as he refutes the NAF's account: 'I lost eleven of my siblings in that tragic event; my siblings were inaccurately labeled as terrorists and killed in the airstrike' (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). He maintained that they were peaceful herders and that

the deaths of his siblings had left an irreplaceable void in his life. Samiala further described the blatant NAF refusal to admit the mistake as the height of injustice.

Apart from the denial of NAF's accidental airstrikes, as in the case of Rukubi, the failure to make reports of internal investigation public is another critical concern. Despite initiating two probes into the Rann attack, the outcomes have not been made public (Human Rights Watch, 2023a). The NAF also initiated an investigation into the death of over 20 soldiers in an airstrike in Mainok, but it remains uncertain whether the military will reveal the report on this incident. Amnesty International (2023) reported that after every erroneous strike, the military established an inquiry board to investigate the incident, but no further details were disclosed, and no punishments were given. The rights group contends that the Nigerian military's failure to take responsibility for past actions has resulted in more mistaken attacks. Further, Human Rights Watch (2023b) notes that Nigerian government inability to hold the NAF accountable is fostering a culture of impunity and posing an increasing threat to the lives of the civilians whom the military should safeguard. As a result, the army has continued to conduct airstrikes that inadvertently result in civilian casualties (Amnesty International, 2024).

Isamotu (2023) claims that due to the Nigerian government's lack of cooperation, those seeking legal redress against the military have faced deterrence. For example, after the Tudun Biri incident, Dalhatu Salihu filed a lawsuit against the Federal Government, but he was discouraged by his community leaders (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). Similarly, despite persistent efforts by Samiala to seek justice following the Rukubi attack, he encountered frustration and disappointment. Samiala stated, 'We have exhausted every avenue in pursuit of justice ... ..' (Human Rights Watch, 2023b). The discouragement faced by victims in pursuing legal action is a sad reminder of the challenges that confront civilians in affected areas. Nevertheless, rights groups have consistently advocated the payment of compensation to victims. Abubakar Umar Garba, an intelligence and security expert, stated that timely compensation would ease the suffering and grief of the victims' relatives and further advised the military high command to act on the compensation issue to prevent problems (Abubakar Garba, cited in Isamotu, 2023). This lack of compensation underscores the government's failure and the suffering of the affected families. Nigerian security forces have also not adapted to the changing security landscape in the north-west, failing to apply the lessons learned from combating Boko Haram to bandits. Leena Hoffmann, a Fellow at the Chatham House African program, concludes that the Nigerian military is unable to engage in self-reflection, hold itself accountable, and transform into a force that protects civilians (Leena Hoffmann, cited in Isamotu, 2023). This underscores the need for robust oversight and transparent investigations to rebuild confidence in the military (Human Rights Watch, 2023b).

## Conclusion and recommendations

In this study, Nigeria's airpower, intelligence lapses, civilian harm, and human rights concerns were analysed in relation to NAF's combat airstrikes in northern Nigeria from 2014 to 2024.

The study acknowledges that the Nigeria Air Force (NAF) airstrikes targeting Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru, Lakurawa, and bandits have unintentionally harmed civilians and damaged their properties, leading to an erosion of public trust in the military and

increased instability. While the military claimed that civilian casualties from NAF airstrikes were accidental, the frequency and recurrence of these incidents raised critical concerns about potential intelligence and operational lapses, contrary to the military's stance. The military has faced criticism for its heavy-handed kinetic approaches, often involving seemingly indiscriminate bombing and shelling in populated civilian areas.

Although NAF's airstrikes have been a significant component of the Joint Task Force military strategy since the beginning of Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign in mid-2011, these air campaigns targeting insurgents have been plagued by errors that have frequently led to civilian casualties. The study shows that in the past 10 years, 450 civilians in 18 communities in northern Nigeria have been killed by accidental airstrikes. Even as IHL and human rights laws provide protection for civilians during armed conflicts, the Nigerian military frequently deny culpability and display a lack of transparency in investigating civilian harm. This lack of accountability is exacerbated by the lack of compensation for victims. These issues continue to undermine efforts to reduce airstrike mishaps and improve operational effectiveness. By focusing on the root causes, such as intelligence and operational lapses, instead of merely labelling incidents as accidents, the military can make significant strides in addressing the challenges.

To effectively reduce airstrike mishaps on civilians in northern Nigeria, it is imperative for the Nigerian military to implement the following recommendations: enhance intelligence capabilities, elevate military training standards, strengthen civil–military relations, and address human rights violation concerns. Given the rapidly evolving nature of threats, investing in cutting-edge technology and data analysis tools to modernise intelligence capabilities is necessary. Also, leveraging advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning will significantly enhance the ability to gather, analyse, and act on critical intelligence reporting. Additionally, fostering collaboration and information-sharing among intelligence agencies and communities is crucial for improving intelligence effectiveness. Enhancing military effectiveness hinges on prioritising comprehensive and realistic training programs focused on counterinsurgency tactics, asymmetric warfare, and rules of engagement.

Equally important is implementing robust accountability measures, including thorough after-action reviews and continuous professional development, to foster a culture of learning and improvement within the military. Addressing human rights issues, ensuring accountability for violations, and upholding international humanitarian law are crucial steps in building trust and respect between the military and civilian populations. A commitment to transparency and open communication channels will make the civilian population feel included and informed.

## Disclosure statement

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