POLICY BRIEF

Dataphyte Foundation



Recycled Trauma

Why Borno's IDP camp closures put returnees in Harm's Way

May, 2026



Aerial view of Dikwa, and Muna Garage Informal camp, Maiduguri, Borno State
Photo credit(s): WFP/Nommiyid Chantu, Associated Press/Andrew Esiebo

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Disclaimer

This brief draws on publicly available secondary sources, including media and think tank reports as well as residual knowledge from years of journalistic and research work in Borno State and direct conversations with local humanitarian actors from Borno State. While we strive to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information presented, Dataphyte Foundation does not accept liability for actions taken based on the information contained in this brief.

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Executive Summary

Borno State remains the epicentre of Nigeria's Boko Haram Terrorism and displacement crisis. The 2025 humanitarian planning baseline places the caseload of the Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States at about 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 1.4 million returnees, with Borno hosting the majority and their needs remaining the most severe.[1] In this context, the Borno State Government's policy of closing more than 60 formal IDP camps and accelerating returns since 2021 has become one of the most consequential drivers of movement in the state. The policy is implemented under the state's Reconstruct, Rehabilitate and Resettle (RRR) pillar of its broader stabilisation and development strategy launched by Governor Babagana Zulum. While officials frame camp closures as a pathway to dignity and durable solutions, independent assessments and reporting show that many returns are happening ahead of minimum safety, service, and livelihood conditions, creating a predictable cycle of secondary displacement and renewed harm.[2]

This brief focuses on the reality that Borno State is returning civilians to so-called liberated areas without credible security guarantees. In Borno, many return areas function as heavily militarised garrison towns where movement is restricted, farmland is inaccessible, markets are risky, and protection threats (GBV, abduction, IEDs, child recruitment, and explosive ordinance) remain acute. The outcome is a pattern of repeated attacks on (a) resettled communities, (b) people going to farms or bushes for wood collection, and (c) roads that connect return sites to service hubs. International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch have warned that pressure to close camps and 'prove normalcy' need not outpace the slow work of stabilisation, providing services, and civilian protection.[3]

The security picture has deteriorated further. 2025 saw sustained terrorist pressure on both civilians and military positions across central and southern Borno, with attacks specifically documented in or near resettled villages such as Kawuri (Konduga LGA), Yamtake and Pulka axis (Gwoza LGA), and along key roads including the Rann–

1 OCHA Nigeria Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) 2025 notes 1.8 million IDPs and 1.4 million returnees across BAY states; Borno hosts the majority of IDPs and returnees. HNRP_2025_Nigeria final 23, January 2025.pdf

2 Human Rights Watch (2022), "Those Who Returned Are Suffering": Impact of Camp Shutdowns on People Displaced by the Boko Haram Conflict in Nigeria https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/11/02/those-who-returned-are-suffering/impact-camp-shutdowns-people-displaced-boko ; Humangle (2 December 2025) Constant attacks continue to cast doubt on Borno's resettlement scheme. https://humanglemedia.com/constant-attacks-continue-to-cast-doubt-on-bornos-resettlement-scheme/

3 Ibid, International Crisis Group (2023), "Rethinking Resettlement and Return in Nigeria's North East" (Africa Briefing No. 184). https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/africa/west-africa/nigeria/b184-rethinking-resettlement-and-return-nigerias-north-east#:~:text=Briefing,Authorities%20are%20keen%20to%20return

Gamboru Ngala corridor[4]. In September 2025, Boko Haram attacked Darul Jamal in Bama LGA, home to residents recently resettled from an IDP camp, killing at least 60 and burning homes, which highlights the concern that return does not equal safety.[5]

What this Brief Argues

The brief argues that Borno's current return-and-resettlement drive, which has been described as aggressive in media and think tank reports, is structurally misaligned with the core legal and policy standards that should govern durable solutions to internal displacement. These standards include voluntariness, safety, dignity, and informed choice. The return policy endangers the lives of the returnees, who are now pushed closer to locations of combatant activity and farther from support. Apart from direct danger to their lives, the hardship and vulnerability of the returnees create intelligence and recruitment for Boko Haram factions.

Key Findings

- Camp closures and relocations are occurring in a context of persistent conflict and protection threats.
- Security in many return sites is based on garrison logic (static military presence, curfews, movement restrictions), limiting freedom to pursue livelihood opportunities and creating exposure when terrorists target military camps.
- Assistance at the point of return is often front-loaded (cash, food, some inputs, shelter) but weakly sustained, increasing negative coping mechanisms, secondary displacement, and renewed vulnerability.
- Women, adolescent girls, children, persons with disabilities, and female-headed households face compounded risks, including GBV and limited access to justice and psychosocial support.
- The governance of return is fragmented with state-driven relocation plans, military restrictions, and shrinking humanitarian access and financing, producing gaps in monitoring and accountability.

4 The New Humanitarian (5 Nov 2025), "Boko Haram is back, and Nigeria's IDP return policy is in trouble" (includes a dated incident timeline of attacks affecting return and resettlement areas). https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/11/05/boko-haram-back-nigeria-idp-return-policy-trouble

5 AP News (6 Sep 2025), report on Boko Haram attack on Darul Jamal (Bama LGA) killing at least 60; victims were recently resettled residents. https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-boko-haram-borno-darul-jamal-bama-203d09d3b3516d7f414a4668848f640f

Core recommendations

- Adopt a 'no-return-without-minimum-conditions' protocol in Borno, with measurable thresholds on security, access, services, and land and water access, aligned to the Kampala Convention, UN Guiding Principles, and Nigeria's National IDP Policy.
- Shift from garrison-town containment to civilian protection planning, including safe mobility corridors, predictable patrol patterns, community-based early warning, and dedicated protection, GBV and child-protection services in return areas.
- Publish LGA-level return plans and security arrangements (who provides what, where, and when) and create an independent incident-tracking mechanism for attacks affecting returnees to inform policy and operational adjustments.
- Guarantee participation: women-led and youth-led organisations, persons with disabilities, and camp or community committees must co-design return decisions, shelter allocation, and recovery priorities.
- Expand access to social assistance programmes and invest in livelihoods and infrastructure that reduce exposure.
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- Expand access to social assistance programmes and invest in livelihoods and infrastructure that reduce exposure.

1. **Context:** Displacement, camp closures, and return as policy

Three intersecting dynamics shape Borno State's displacement landscape. The first dynamic is the primary driver, the Boko Haram Terrorism, that has fragmented into factions, continues to intensify the victimisation of civilians, and contests territorial control with the Armed Forces. Second is a politics of normalisation that rewards visible return statistics. The last is a humanitarian environment with shrinking resources due to recent (notably USAID) aid cuts and constrained access caused by persistent attacks. Humanitarian planning baselines continue to show a vast caseload in the Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe (BAY) states, with Borno bearing the heaviest burden.[6]

The policy of the Borno State Government, beginning in 2021, which focuses on the closure of over 60 formal camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), is having a significant impact on the dynamics of displacement across the state. The Government set a 2026 deadline to close all formal camps. Humanitarian and development actors have observed that though these closures are intended to encourage returns, they are occurring in a precarious context where security conditions, basic services, and livelihoods in return areas remain notably insufficient or lacking[7]. The Borno State Government has, in practice, turned displacement management into a movement management problem. It relocates people out of camps (often in urban Maiduguri/Jere and other hubs) and disperses them to newly built estates, peri-urban 'host communities', or partially recovered towns and villages. Authorities often justify closures on grounds of dignity and the risk of camps becoming permanent slums. That concern is valid. However, the remedy is not simply to shut camps without safe, durable, rights-respecting solutions.

Human Rights Watch documented that camp shutdowns in Borno pushed many displaced families into deeper insecurity and deprivation when relocations occurred without adequate consultation, information, and sustainable alternatives.[8] International Crisis Group likewise argued that return/resettlement efforts were being

6 See 1.

7 For example, concerns about the return policy were raised by participants during the validation workshop for the updated Lake Chad Basin Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience in Abuja in February 2026. It is also an issue raised in the regional strategy document (in draft as of February 2026).

8 See 2.

pursued aggressively and risked outpacing the stabilisation needed for safe and durable outcomes.[9] This context runs against the standards of the Kampala Convention[10], Nigeria's National IDP Policy, and the updated Lake Chad Basin Regional Stabilisation Strategy (undergoing validation process), which require voluntariness, safety, transparency, and sustainable livelihoods.

This brief primarily depends on secondary sources, including media and think tank reports as well as residual knowledge from years of journalistic and research work on the ground in Borno State. However, during the month of February 2026, the brief benefited from direct conversations with local humanitarian actors from Borno State during a workshop in Abuja.

2. Why return policy without security guarantees produce repeated attacks

'Security guarantees' in displacement policy are often treated as a binary. An area is either safe or unsafe. However, in Borno, safety appears to be viewed as a spectrum. Armed groups do not need to hold territory openly to make return untenable; they can use improvised explosive devices (IEDs), raids on farms, targeted killings of perceived collaborators, abductions for ransom, and attacks on road corridors. These tactics exploit exactly the vulnerabilities created when populations are moved back before civilian protection, services, and livelihoods are sufficiently rebuilt.

A second structural driver is the garrison-town model. Many 'liberated' towns operate under heavy military control, with curfews and movement restrictions meant to reduce insurgent infiltration. But if people cannot farm, trade, or move safely to markets and water points, they remain dependent and exposed. The protection dilemma then becomes circular, with movement restricted for security, yet livelihoods require mobility. And when the returnees exceed military-imposed restriction lines in response to livelihood pressure, they become targets.

9 See 3.

10 African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention), adopted 23 Oct 2009 (obligations on protection, assistance, and conditions for voluntary return in safety and dignity).

3. A Geography of return in Borno: LGA-level patterns

Borno's return and relocation efforts have concentrated in a belt of LGAs that form the central corridor from Maiduguri/Jere outward to Konduga, Bama, Mafa, Dikwa, Ngala, Damboa, Gwoza, and in selected northern and southern nodes (Monguno/Marte axis; Biu/Hawul/Chibok axis). These are also the LGAs where insurgent activity, military deployments, and civilian movement converge most intensely.

3.1 Illustrative return/resettlement sites referenced in recent reporting and operational notes

The table below is not exhaustive. It captures sites that appear in media reporting, protection-sector advocacy notes, and conflict monitoring data, and illustrates why LGA-level planning is essential: the risks, access constraints, and recovery opportunities differ sharply from one LGA to the next.

LGA	Examples of return/resettlement sites (illustrative)	Observed/Reported threat pattern	Implication for return policy	Evidence source(s)
Bama	Darul Jamal; Kumshe axis; other resettled villages around Bama garrison	Night raids, killings, arson; targeting resettled civilians; exposure on roads and farms	Return requires layered protection beyond static garrison; secure mobility and early warning	AP; TNH
Konduga	Kawuri and surrounding communities; Maiduguri-Damboa road corridor	Attacks on resettled villages; IED risk on roads; kidnappings around farms/firewood routes	Any return must be paired with corridor security and safe access to livelihoods	TNH; HRW

LGA	Examples of return/resettlement sites (illustrative)	Observed/Reported threat pattern	Implication for return policy	Evidence source(s)
Gwoza	Pulka and Yamtake axis; other 'liberated' settlements near the Cameroon border	Attacks/assaults on towns; killings of returnees; cross-border militant movement	Return plans must integrate border dynamics and protection services, not only military posts	TNH
Ngala	ISS Camp relocation to Logumane (near Dikwa border); Rann–Gamboru Ngala road	Protection concerns around relocation process; road-based IED/attack risk	Relocation must be voluntary, informed, and monitored; corridor security critical	PSNE; TNH
Damboa	Wajiroko/Wajirko and Sabon Gari area; Damboa-Maidugur i road	Attacks on the recently resettled village; base attacks; road insecurity	Avoid 'return to exposure'; embed patrols, escorts, and market/farm access	TNH

Sources for the table include the AP, HRW, Protection Sector advocacy note on the Ngala–Logumane relocation and The New Humanitarian's 2025 incident timeline and analysis; Darul Jamal attack reporting provides a concrete example of resettled civilians being targeted.[11]

4. Security analysis: Attack patterns affecting returnees and resettled communities

Security risk to returnees in Borno is not something abstract. It is visible in incident patterns. Three patterns matter most for return policy: (1) direct assaults on resettled communities; (2) livelihood violence targeting farmers, fishermen, firewood collectors, and traders; and (3) corridor violence, including IEDs and ambushes on roads linking return sites to garrison towns and service hubs.

11 Protection Sector North-East Nigeria (PSNE) Advocacy Note (29 Jan 2024) on relocation of IDPs from ISS Camp (Ngala LGA) to Logumane, including assistance package and protection concerns. https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/psne_advoacy_note_on_the_relocation_and_return_of_idps_to_logumane_january_2024.pdf

4.1 Selected incident timeline (2025) highlighting attacks in or near return/resettlement areas

The timeline below draws from publicly documented incidents. It is illustrative, not exhaustive. It shows why security guarantees must be operationalised as predictable protection outcomes, including safe mobility, protected livelihoods, and reduced civilian harm, not simply the presence of a military base.

Date (2025)	Location (LGA)	Incident (summary)	Relevance to return/resettlement
30 Janruary	Wajiroko (Damboa)	ISWAP attacks the recently resettled village of Wajiroko.	Direct targeting of a 'recently resettled' community.
4 April	Izge (Gwoza)	ISWAP attacks the military post in Izge; former IDPs have been resettled there.	Shows risk where returns are anchored to a military post.
17 April	Yamtake (Gwoza)	ISWAP attacks Yamtake, killing former IDPs and two soldiers.	Civilian harm in a returnee context.
29 April	Kawuri (Konduga)	ISWAP attacks Kawuri village where former IDPs have been resettled.	Attack directly undermines sustainability of resettlement.
26 April	Rann–Gamboru Ngala road (Ngala)	IED attack kills 26 people on key corridor.	Attack directly undermines sustainability of resettlement.

The incidents above are drawn from a dated timeline compiled in The New Humanitarian's November 2025 analysis of Nigeria's return policy and the resurgence of attacks.[12]

12 More can be found here: The New Humanitarian (5 November 2025). Boko Haram is back and Nigeria's IDP return policy is in trouble. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/11/05/boko-haram-back-nigeria-idp-return-policy-trouble

4.2 A Resettled Community attacked: Darul Jamal (Bama LGA), September 2025

Darul Jamal in Bama LGA illustrates the starkest risks of 'return without guarantees. In early September 2025, Boko Haram militants attacked the village at night, killing at least 60 people, burning homes, and forcing additional displacement.5 According to media reports, residents were recently resettled from an IDP camp, meaning the policy objective (return) was achieved on paper, while the security objective (protection) failed in practice.

The residents were reportedly accused by the Boko Haram JAS faction of having spied on its fighters and their movements for the Nigerian Army. That massacre highlights the dilemma civilians face. Both insurgents and the Nigerian Army demand intelligence about the other, but providing it, or even being suspected of doing so, invites punishment from both sides.

4.3 Attacks linked to rebuilding and resettlement projects

A growing feature of the threat environment is violence targeting the very processes meant to enable return: reconstruction and site preparation. In November 2025, Boko Haram attacked Mayanti, killing people and damaging property in an incident linked in local reporting to fears around resettlement and rebuilding efforts.[13] Related reporting also describes a surge of attacks affecting construction workers and security personnel in locations tied to the resettlement agenda.

5. What does the security package for returnees actually look like?

In many Borno return areas, the practical 'security package' is a mix of (i) static military deployment in a garrison town or forward operating base; (ii) curfews and movement restrictions; (iii) ad hoc patrols or escorts on selected roads; and (iv) community-level watch structures including the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and hunters. This package can reduce certain risks (e.g., overt terrorist occupation of the town centre) while leaving the most common civilian exposure points, such as farms, bush paths, markets, and secondary roads, dangerously under-protected.

13 Humangle (13 February 2026). Renewed terror attacks target those rebuilding Borno's terrorised villages. https://humanglemedia.com/renewed-terror-attacks-target-those-rebuilding-bornos-terrorised-villages/

A critical problem is that return policy often treats security as a 'precondition' that can be declared once a town is recaptured, rather than a continuous service that must be financed, monitored, and adapted. When the military posture is primarily defensive and static, armed groups can shift to soft targets, such as returnees or any other civilian population categories. This is why attacks on firewood collectors, farmers, and commuters are so persistent. They are predictable, dispersed, and hard to protect without a deliberate civilian-protection design.

5.1 Movement restrictions and livelihood exposure

Movement restrictions in garrison towns are frequently justified as necessary to prevent insurgent infiltration and protect civilians from ambush. But restrictions are also costly. For example, when people can farm only within a narrow perimeter, that becomes insufficient; and when they go farther in desperate search for livelihood, women and girls, particularly, face heightened GBV and armed attack risks. The result is negative coping patterns, including dangerous journeys for firewood, informal taxation by armed actors, early marriage, child labour, and risky labour migration.

6. Livelihoods and basic services: front-loaded assistance, weak continuity

Where the state has invested in return packages, assistance is often most visible at the point of movement. In addition to transportation, returnees receive some food items, cash, and, in selected projects, housing and limited infrastructure. The Ngala-to-Logumane relocation documented by the Protection Sector provides a detailed snapshot whereby authorities provided transport, allocated newly built houses, and distributed cash and in-kind support, including cash transfers, food items, and agricultural and livestock inputs.[14]

However, the same protection sector note raised concerns about consultation, clarity of criteria, advance notice, and risks to vulnerable groups. illustrating that material support does not substitute for rights-compliant process and ongoing services.

14 Protection Sector North-East Nigeria (PSNE) Advocacy Note (29 Jan 2024) on relocation of IDPs from ISS Camp (Ngala LGA) to Logumane, including assistance package and protection concerns. https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/psne_advoacy_note_on_the_relocation_and_return_of_idps_to_logumane_january_2024.pdf

Human Rights Watch documented similar patterns, namely, cash support prior to some camp shutdowns (e.g., 50,000–100,000 naira in one closure context) was often too small and too short-term to rebuild livelihoods; and in some cases, access to certain aid streams was restricted after relocation.

6.1 Infrastructure gaps that turn returns into protracted vulnerability

Durable solutions require more than shelters. In many return areas, primary healthcare, education, WASH, and markets remain impaired or absent. Where schools are damaged or targeted, children's education becomes an additional driver of onward movement. Where health services are weak, women's maternal health needs and survivors' psychosocial support needs go unmet or require movement to service hubs in garrison towns such as Dikwa. Insecurity also reduces the willingness of service providers to deploy, creating a self-reinforcing gap.

7. Protection Risks: who bears the cost of premature return?

Protection risks for returnees in Borno are multi-layered. The risks include explosive ordnance and IEDs; abduction and forced recruitment; GBV and exploitation; family separation; and the erosion of coping mechanisms after years of displacement. Premature return magnifies these threats because monitoring capacity is weaker outside camp settings and because people must travel further to meet basic needs.

7.1 Women, girls, and persons with disabilities

Women and adolescent girls face heightened exposure to GBV and exploitation during movements to farms, water sources and bush for wood collection, exactly the daily movements that return is meant to restore. Women returnees, especially widows and those who experienced abduction or captivity, often face stigma, discrimination, and barriers to land and property.[15] And where shelter allocation is not

15 Interviews with Borno local humanitarian actors during the Lake Chad Basin workshop for the validation of updated regional stabilisation strategy in Abuja, February 2026.

sensitive to household composition, female-headed households can be pressured into unsafe shared arrangements, increasing protection risk.

Additionally, persons with disabilities are at risk of access barriers to services, mobility constraints and systemic exclusion from livelihood and human capital enhancement opportunities due to the absence of inclusive design in shelters. That means a risk multiplier.

7.2 Children and youth

Children face acute risks, such as separation, child labour, exposure to mines, and forced recruitment. Also, education disruption remains a common harm, with schools in return areas vacant, unsafe, or intermittently functioning. Families with a high value for education will have to move elsewhere to access learning opportunities, or children will remain out of school, amplifying long-term fragility.

8. Law and Policy: What standards are being tested in Borno?

Nigeria is bound by a mix of domestic, regional, and international standards that set clear expectations for return, resettlement, and relocation. The Kampala Convention requires states to promote and create satisfactory conditions for voluntary return, local integration, or relocation on a sustainable basis and in circumstances of safety and dignity, and to enable IDPs to make a free and informed choice through consultation and participation. The UN Guiding Principles likewise place the primary duty on competent authorities to establish conditions and provide means for IDPs to return voluntarily in safety and dignity (Principle 28)[16]. Nigeria's National Policy on IDPs reinforces these commitments domestically, including protections against forcible return to places where life, safety, liberty, or health would be at risk.[17]

Taken together, these instruments do not prohibit return; they demand that return be safe, voluntary, dignified, and informed. The policy challenge in Borno is not whether

16 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998).

17 Federal Republic of Nigeria, National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons (adopted 2021).

camp closures are desirable in principle, but whether the conditions being created are sufficient to meet these standards in practice, and whether IDPs are genuinely able to choose among options (return, local integration, or relocation) without coercive pressure.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations: from movement targets to durable solutions

Borno's IDP camp closures and return agenda sits at the intersection of security and humanitarian need. It is possible to reduce encampment and support dignified and durable solutions, but only if return is treated as a protection project, not a relocation exercise for visible statistics. Current evidence shows that when return happens without credible security guarantees and without sustained recovery support, civilians face repeated attacks, renewed displacement, and deeper vulnerability, thereby preventing durable solutions. This brief makes the following recommendations to enhance the durability and safety of the return policy.

9.1 Government of Borno State (and the Federal Government of Nigeria)

- Publish LGA-level return and relocation plans that specify target communities, verified security conditions, service readiness, land/property arrangements, and grievance mechanisms.
- Adopt minimum-condition benchmarks for any camp closure or relocation: (a) demonstrable reduction in civilian harm indicators; (b) access to basic services within reachable distance; (c) safe livelihood access (farmland/markets) or credible alternatives; and (d) functional protection referral pathways.
- Create a joint incident-tracking and transparency mechanism that reports attacks affecting returnees (location, type, civilian harm, displacement outcomes) and the response actions taken to generate data informing policy reviews and adjustments.
- Strengthen documentation and civil status services for returnees (birth registration, IDs) to reduce administrative exclusion and enable access to social assistance and justice.

- Expand the National Social Register in Borno State to ensure that returnees (and other displaced populations as well as vulnerable households) are captured and eligible for federal social safety programmes.

9.2 Security Actors

- Move beyond static garrison logic to more frequent, predictable patrols, protected mobility corridors, and safe-market days coordinated with community leaders and local defence volunteers.
- Expand community-based early warning and civilian protection coordination, including women's participation, and ensure accountability to prevent abuses by security personnel or volunteers.
- Integrate IED risk mitigation, including route clearance, risk education, and rapid response for incidents on key corridors (e.g., Rann–Gamboru Ngala; Maiduguri–Damboa).

9.3 Humanitarian and development partners

- Support independent monitoring of voluntariness and protection outcomes, including post-return follow-ups and feedback mechanisms accessible to women, youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Invest in women and girls' safe spaces, GBV response, and community psychosocial support, especially in newly resettled or hard-to-reach areas.

9.4 Community leaders and civil society

- Strengthen inclusive community committees that represent women, youth, persons with disabilities, and minority groups to engage with the government on return decisions.
- Document and report protection incidents affecting returnees, including livelihood violence and coercive taxation, to feed into accountability processes.



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