

bicc policy brief

Curbing the Expansion of Lakurawa and Mamudawa Insurgent Groups

Oyewole Oginni, Mustapha Alhassan,
Claudia Breitung, Abubakar Abdullahi

Project ●●●
Breaking Patterns of
Armed Violence (PAVE)

Deepening ties between two insurgent groups—Lakurawa and Mamudawa—are fuelling a new surge of civilian harm. This necessitates a change from intermittent, incident-driven military operations to steady, continuous protection of civilians in at-risk areas.

Recommendations

1 Ensure steady protection in at-risk areas

Communities in the tri-border area of Nigeria, Niger and Benin resist the jihadist movements of Lakurawa and Mamudawa when state protection is steady. But episodic, incident-driven military deployments leave them exposed to reprisals and push them towards tolerance or (reluctant) cooperation with the jihadist groups. Federal and state governments must ensure a sustained security presence. Scaling up the training and deployment of auxiliary security forces such as Forest Guards and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps strengthens protection where military and police presence is lacking.

2 Strengthen risk-free local reporting to disrupt insurgent alliance-building

Emerging alliances between Lakurawa and Mamudawa are increasing civilian harm in this tri-border region. Real time local community reporting is central to disrupting this alliance-building, but fear of reprisals, mistrust of state security institutions in sensitive information handling and slow security responses limit the transfer of knowledge. Strengthening local reporting networks requires secure communication tools, targeted information management training, rapid feedback on reported incidents and coordinated cross-border intelligence-sharing to rebuild trust and erode the social base of jihadist recruitment.

3 Ensure viable in-country relocation options for families leaving high risk areas

In the Nigeria part of the tri-border area, remaining in insurgent-controlled areas is driven less by ideology than by the absence of viable alternatives. Families who attempt to leave often face deeper hardship. Nigerian federal, state and local governments should establish structured and holistic in-country relocation programmes with secure housing, farmland access, transitional cash support and compensation for seized livestock. Preparing receiving communities and coordinating support would encourage voluntary departure from high-risk areas.

Background

The jihadist insurgent group Lakurawa¹ is a major threat to regional stability in West Africa despite the Nigerian government's efforts, including military operations against its forest camps and its designation as a terrorist organisation. Active in the Northwest region since 2018, Lakurawa continues to control remote border communities in Nigeria and is now extending its reach into Northcentral Nigeria. In the enclaves it governs across the Gudu–Tangaza forest belt, Illela–Gwadabawa bush paths and Sabon Birni–Isa axis (see Map 2), Lakurawa imposes authority rooted in its interpretation of Sharia law, collecting *zakat*, supervising social gatherings, dictating dress codes and modes of worship, as well as punishing anyone who associates with the Nigerian government or its security personnel. The group's access to heavy weapons, ability to recruit rapidly across borders and its growing alliances with other Al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent groups such as Mamudawa are fuelling a new surge of civilian harm across Nigeria's tri-borders with Niger and Benin (see Map 1).

International attention to the insurgent group increased after US President Donald Trump ordered a strike on Lakurawa camps on 25 December 2025. Although the strike forced the group to retreat from the Bauni camp in Tangaza, Sokoto State, it did not halt its violence against civilians, its attacks on military targets and its southward expansion. Over the past two years, Lakurawa has been led by a number of commanders, among them Abu Anas, Manu and Malam Dango, who receive directives and emissaries from Katiba Macina, the local branch of Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)² in Mali. Manu commands the Tangaza camp covering Tangaza and Gudu in Sokoto, while Abu Anas oversees camps in Kebbi.³ Malam Dango plays a senior coordinating role across multiple camps and supports Abu Baki⁴, who facilitates movements of fighters from Mali (especially from Macina, some parts of Gao and Nampalari near the Wagadou Forest in the Ségou Region), Niger and Burkina Faso into border communities in Sokoto and Kebbi states, and onward to the Chikanda, Dekara and Babana forests as well as along the Karunji–Bete axis, where the Mamudawa insurgent group is active.⁵

Lakurawa's expansion into Northcentral Nigeria has been driven in part by its ideological and operational ties to JNIM, a violent extremist organisation aligned with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁶ These links have enabled Lakurawa's coordinated operations with Mamudawa, another AQIM-affiliated insurgent group that has sharply escalated violence in Northcentral

MAP 1: MOVEMENT OF JIHADIST INSURGENTS INTO NIGERIA'S NORTHCENTRAL AND NORTHWEST



MAP 2: LAKURAWA EXPANSION FROM NORTHWEST NIGERIA



Nigeria in recent years. A notable example is the February 2026 attack in Woro and Nuku, Kaiama LGA, Kwara State, which resulted in significant civilian harm and the abduction of more than 150 women and children.⁷ That same week, Lakurawa commander Malam Dango visited Mamudawa camps in Kwara State, signalling a deepening of cooperation between the two groups.⁸

Mamudawa currently operates across Nigeria's tri-borders with Niger and Benin and claims established links to fighters in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.⁹ The insurgent group moved into the Chikanda forest belt in northern Kwara, as well as the Dekara and Babana forest belts in Niger State in 2019 where it first established *madrasas* (i.e. Islamic schools) to gain community trust (see Map 3). Some Nigeriens who later became Mamudawa fighters were transported from Arlit, an industrial mining town located in northern-central Niger within the Agadez Region. They were recruited with the promise of working in a gold-mining company with a starting allowance of one million CFA-Franc, only to be handed weapons upon arrival. Woro, one of the affected border communities, is strategically important for illicit revenue generation because it hosts an active illegal mining site with an estimated 1,000 miners present across the Woro, Bani and Daba communities, making it economically valuable and heavily contested by insurgents and other criminal groups.

Mamudawa's former leader, Mallam Mahmuda, served as AQIM's operational commander in Nigeria before his arrest in June 2025.¹⁰ Despite his arrest, the recent *da'wah* (i.e. sermon/preaching in Tsamiya areas in late January 2026) shows that Mamudawa's followers, now led by Abu Salman and other commanders, have maintained their allegiance to Al-Qaeda and continue to expand command centres across Nigeria's forested tri-border areas. The group's continued presence shows that leadership removal alone has not curbed its cross-border support networks. Its expanding ties with the Lakurawa group are driving a new wave of violence in the tri-border area, including the 20 April 2026 attack on a military post in Kemanji, northern Kwara.

As a result, fear is now a daily reality in the border communities. Residents report that even being seen speaking to a government official or security personnel can invite reprisals. This threat pushes families in high-risk areas into an impossible choice: reluctantly cooperate with these groups to survive or abandon their homes and livelihoods altogether. If the Lakurawa-Mamudawa alliance is allowed to deepen, it will entrench both groups' territorial foothold, expand their recruitment pipelines and further erode Nigerian state authority across the tri-border region. The consequences are clear: more forced displacement, weakened local social cohesion and a stronger operational base for AQIM-aligned networks across West Africa. The window to prevent this trajectory is narrowing, and the stakes for at-risk communities could not be higher. Against this backdrop, this *policy brief* outlines urgent steps that Nigerian governments at all levels must take to protect at-risk communities, disrupt the insurgent groups' alliance-building and limit insurgent expansion.

1 At-risk communities need steady state protection

Community members often push back against the jihadist groups Lakurawa and Mamudawa once they understand what these groups stand for. They reject insurgent messaging, form vigilante groups and share information with state authorities. Yet these efforts are difficult to sustain. Limited and inconsistent state protection -exacerbated by the repeated withdrawal of security personnel from remote border areas, partly because of personnel capacity shortages -leaves resisting families and entire communities exposed to reprisals. Faced with heavy losses, many families feel they have little choice but to tolerate or reluctantly cooperate with the insurgents.

LIMITED AND INCONSISTENT STATE PROTECTION LEAVES RESISTING FAMILIES AND ENTIRE COMMUNITIES EXPOSED TO REPRISALS.

Many communities have thus shifted from open resistance to accommodation: paying levies, complying with insurgent rules or avoiding confrontation altogether. This does not reflect support for the groups; rather, it is a survival strategy to reduce

harm and preserve livelihoods in areas where the state cannot guarantee safety. However, prolonged insurgent presence in remote areas deepens their economic and social integration into local life over time. What begins as coerced accommodation gradually evolves into patterns of mutual exchange or reciprocity, particularly where insurgents control access to farmland, markets or mobility. In such contexts, communities withhold critical information about insurgent locations and activities from state security agencies, not out of ideological alignment but to avoid retaliation and preserve fragile stability.

WHAT BEGINS AS COERCED ACCOMMODATION GRADUALLY EVOLVES INTO PATTERNS OF MUTUAL EXCHANGE OR RECIPROCITY, PARTICULARLY WHERE INSURGENTS CONTROL ACCESS TO FARMLAND, MARKETS OR MOBILITY.

The decision to tolerate—or at times reluctantly cooperate with—Lakurawa and Mamudawa is therefore rarely driven by shared beliefs. It is instead a stabilising strategy driven by weak state presence and the high risks associated with resistance, though the situation in the end benefits the insurgent groups. For example, Mamudawa initially avoided kidnapping for

ransom but punished residents in Kemanji, Chikanda, Nuku and Woro for logging in the forest and instructed them to stop entering the forest. Rather than kidnapping people, the group initially collected Nigerian naira (NGN) 200,000 from loggers, before progressively increasing the levy to NGN one million per week. Through these interactions, Mamudawa gradually built relationships with loggers and fishermen, some of whom later became informants for the group.

To reverse this trend and further curb Lakurawa and Mamudawa expansion, Nigeria's federal, state and local governments should maintain steady, long-term protection for high risk communities. Such protection must be sustained rather than episodic. Consistent state presence helps communities regain confidence and trust, reduces fear of reprisals and enables a shift from tolerance or (reluctant) cooperation with insurgent groups back to active resistance. Temporary military operations alone will not achieve this.

Joint task force operations under Operation Savannah Shield, Operation Forest Flush and Operation Fansan Yamma have delivered gains in parts of the tri-border region. Yet withdrawals and delayed reinforcements, including in places such as Woro, Nuku, Kemanji and Duruma, continue to create security vacuums that insurgents exploit, often with retaliatory violence against civilians. The recent training and deployment of 7,000 Forest Guards is a positive step. Federal and state governments should build on this progress by scaling up the training, equipping and deployment of Forest Guards and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, especially in areas where military and police units cannot maintain a long-term presence.

Auxiliary forces such as Forest Guards are largely drawn from local catchment areas and possess deep local knowledge and embeddedness that enable them to maintain state presence effectively when properly trained. However, this expansion must also prioritise force protection to avoid exposing personnel to greater risk.

MAP 3: MAMUDAWA SPREAD ACROSS NORTHCENTRAL NIGERIA



2 Secure reporting and rapid state responses disrupt insurgent expansion

Lakurawa and Mamudawa exploit communication gaps, fear of retaliation and weak state responsiveness to deepen their presence and build alliances across Nigeria's tri point border with Niger and Benin. Their expansion strategy relies on steady threat messaging and discreet infiltration through the establishment of sociocultural ties, using associates, local worship centres and, at times, direct engagement with traditional leaders. In areas where the state response to security incidences is slow or episodic, the insurgent groups require only three to six months to shift from a limited presence to a strong foothold, especially along transit corridors and communities targeted with repeated messaging.

Local reporting mechanisms, through vigilante groups, community guards and community based intelligence networks, hold credible, real time information on insurgent movements and alliance building efforts. Yet these networks remain under-utilised. Fear of reprisals, mistrust of state institutions and slow or unpredictable responses from security agencies discourage communities from sharing timely information. In many high risk areas, reporting insurgent activity is dangerous when there is no guarantee of immediate or sustained state protection.

Recent incidents show how communication gaps expose communities. Before the coordinated attack in Wowo and Nuku, for instance, Mamudawa issued threat messages to the traditional leader, but information leakages and long delays between local reporting and the state security response left the community vulnerable. Similar delays and breaches in Tangaza and Gudu have resulted in reprisals against residents after attempts to relay information to security agencies. To disrupt alliance formation and limit insurgent expansion, Nigerian federal, state and local governments should strengthen local reporting through four interlinked actions.

IN AREAS WHERE THE STATE RESPONSE TO SECURITY INCIDENTS IS SLOW OR EPISODIC, THE INSURGENT GROUPS REQUIRE ONLY THREE TO SIX MONTHS TO SHIFT FROM A LIMITED PRESENCE TO A STRONG FOOTHOLD

First, deploy secure communication technologies such as non traceable coded SMS, toll free lines and encrypted radios to protect informants and ensure safe intelligence flows to Divisional Police, outposts and the Department of State Security. Second, provide training on information management to equip local sources with the skills to handle, verify and transmit intelligence confidentially. Third, rebuild public trust through rapid, visible state responses, including structured feedback on reported information within reasonable time. Finally, establish coordinated tri border information sharing systems and a dedicated coordination unit to standardise reporting, eliminate duplication and enable joint analysis among security agencies in Nigeria, Niger and Benin. These measures must be matched by sustained state presence in at-risk communities: evidence from Kemanji, Duruma and Chikanda confirms that military withdrawal invites reprisal and reverses any security gains.

3 Viable relocation options reduce exposure to insurgent groups

Many community members tolerate the presence of Lakurawa and Mamudawa not out of support, but out of fear, limited state protection and the absence of viable alternatives for survival if they choose to leave. With no tangible internal relocation options, local residents often shift from reluctant tolerance

to eventual cooperation with the insurgent groups. In several communities, earlier waves of banditry had already eroded livelihoods, leaving families with little income, no relocation support, weak social networks outside their villages and uncertainty about where they could safely move. Exit is therefore technically possible but not practically viable.

FAMILIES WHO ATTEMPT TO LEAVE OFTEN RETURN, NOT BECAUSE CONDITIONS IMPROVED, BUT BECAUSE INTERNAL RELOCATION OFFERED NOTHING.

In remote areas of Tangaza, Sabon Birni, Kwallajiya and Kemanji, remaining in insurgent-controlled areas is rarely driven by ideological alignment. Families who attempt to leave frequently return, not because conditions improved, but because internal relocation offered nothing. In Tangaza, displaced households reported returning only to surrender half their harvest to the insurgent groups after finding no farmland, shelter or income at their settlement destination. In Sabon Birni, residents described a five-year pattern of leaving at night and returning at dawn because they had nowhere else to safely settle permanently.

Lakurawa and Mamudawa understand and exploit this calculus. By confiscating livestock, imposing harvest levies and extracting protection payments, they systematically strip households of the assets that would make departure viable, ensuring communities remain economically captive even when physically free to leave. Thus, the absence of a credible departure option does more than trap individuals; it gives insurgents a structural advantage. Where households cannot leave and the state cannot maintain presence, accommodation with armed groups becomes the only rational survival strategy, enabling insurgents to consolidate governance over what remains.

NIGERIAN FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS MUST ESTABLISH STRUCTURED INTERNAL RELOCATION PROGRAMMES THAT MAKE DEPARTURE GENUINELY VIABLE.

To break this cycle, Nigerian federal, state and local governments must establish structured internal relocation programmes that make departure genuinely viable. This can include secure housing with legal tenure in receiving communities, guaranteed farmland access, transitional cash support and livelihood programming for displaced households. Governments should also compensate households for livestock seized by the insurgent groups, as cattle rustling in the tri-border region is central to insurgent strategy and removes the economic foundation required for voluntary departure. Relocation areas must be prepared to receive internally displaced persons from at-risk communities and prevent re-recruitment by the same insurgent networks from which families fled. However, such programmes do not absolve the state of its duty to protect those who choose to stay behind.

When these alternatives are clear, concrete and backed by strong political will, communities become less vulnerable to insurgent influence and less likely to remain in areas where insurgents consolidate control.

Endnotes

- ¹ For details about what Lakurawa stands for, see Alhassan, M., Oginni, O. S., & Breitung, C. (2025). *Countering Lakurawa Recruitment in North-west Nigeria* (bicc policy brief). bicc. <https://doi.org/10.60638/YFXF-SP73>
- ² JNIM, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group, operates across the Sahel, including Central Mali (Mopti and Ségou) and northern Mali (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal).
- ³ Manu, the younger brother of Malam Dango, was assigned a role within Lakurawa by his brother. Manu was shot twice during Nigerian military operations and appears to have sustained serious injuries to both legs. Abu Anas, a Tuareg, controls the Augi, Mera, Arewa and Kebbi border areas with Niger State. Lakurawa fighters associate themselves with Macina and Nampalari—a commune close to Wagadou Forest—as well as parts of the Gao Region in Mali. Lakurawa's fighters are described as predominantly Tuareg from Mali and Niger. Some reports indicated that Malam Dango was killed in late April 2026 but as at the time of our field visits (February 2026), he was still alive.
- ⁴ Abu Baki was previously a bandit leader before being captured by Lakurawa and later joining the group. There have also been attempts by Lakurawa leaders to form an alliance with a renowned bandit leader (Turji Bello) in the past, but they failed.
- ⁵ Mamudawa fighters operating in the tri-border areas prefer to be called "Yaran Mallam". Mamudawa fighters tell communities that they are settling in the forest because it "belongs to nobody but God" and that their presence is justified by Islam and Sharia.
- ⁶ Dahiru, A. (2 December 2024). Is Lakurawa adopting Al Qaeda's strategy in conflict areas? *HumAngle Media*. <https://humanglemedia.com/is-lakurawa-adopting-al-qaedas-strategy-in-conflict-areas/>
- ⁷ Interviews with Kaima LGA Secretariats 11/02/2026. Local community members report that Mamudawa generally claims not to harm women, but during the Woro attack, the group departed from this pattern, assaulting some women and abducting others. Residents also noted that large-scale massacres did not occur previously in Mamudawa-controlled forest areas, partly because the group prioritises protecting the forested zones where it operates.
- ⁸ Interviews with local intelligence and residents in Sokoto, Kebbi and along the corridors leading from Bagudu LGA to Kaima LGA consistently described the movement of the Lakurawa leader through these routes. In addition, Mamudawa commanders associate their group with Al-Qaeda and maintain that its members cut across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In the preaching released two weeks before our field visits, Abu Salman referenced Al-Qaeda and mentioned Ansarul Islam Wal Muslimeen, Fi Biladu Sudan as Mamudawa's umbrella organisation under the leadership of Usama Bin Laden and with the mentorship of Malam Mamuda.
- ⁹ Interviewees shared that some Mamudawa fighters operating in the Karunji axis in Nigeria's tri-border communities are transported from Arlit, an industrial mining town located in northern-central Niger within Agadez Region and from Mali, Niger and Benin.
- ¹⁰ Between 2013 and 2015, Mallam Mamuda underwent training in Libya under foreign jihadist instructors from Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, focusing on weapons handling and IED related skills. The group he led was known as Mamudawa or Mallam Group.

PUBLISHER

BICC – Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies gGmbH
Pfarrer-Byns-Straße 1, 53121 Bonn, Germany

CONTACT

Elvan Isikozlu
Head of Advice & Scientific Transfer
elvan.isikozlu@bicc.de
+49 (0)228 911 96-54

EDITOR: Elvan Isikozlu

COPYEDITOR: Heike Webb

LAYOUT: Heike Webb

EDITORIAL DESIGN: Verena Krautter

PHOTO CREDIT: Nigeria–Niger–Benin tripoint waterways in Lolo, Kebbi State, used for trade and exploited by both insurgent groups. 2026, © Oyewole Oginni/bicc.

MAPS: Julian Schindler/bicc

PRINT: Köllen Druck + Verlag GmbH, Bonn

DATED: June 2026

<https://doi.org/10.60638/14ec-h704>

This *bicc policy brief* is an outcome of the joint project "Breaking Patterns of Armed Violence (PAVE)" of bicc, the African Union and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, generously funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.



Federal Republic of Germany
Foreign Office



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>

The JRF institutes are institutionally supported by the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia



