



AFRICA/NIGERIA - Nigerian government ready to accept Boko Haram cease-fire

Abuja (Agenzia Fides)- The Nigerian government is ready to accept the offer of a cease fire put forward by Boko Haram and to grant amnesty to members of the sect if the leader Sheikh Abubakar Shekau publicly renounces violence.

This was stated by retired Major General Sarkin-Yaki Bello National Coordinator of the Counterterrorism. The high ranking officer also promised a rehabilitation programme for extremists who hand over weapons and said the government is prepared to meet demands made by Boko Haram, such as the release of its members in detention; the rebuilding of its mosque, which was destroyed by a military operation in Maiduguri in 2009 and allowing sect members to practice their religious beliefs freely.

The general added that the government intends to address the issue of the high unemployment rate in northern Nigeria (which favours recruitment of young boys by the sect) and to reform and regulate the school system in the area. The retired General remarked that Boko Haram is no longer just a Nigerian problem, since its members include citizens of various African countries, such as Chad and Cameroon, and its arsenal has been boosted with weapons coming from Libyan arms deposits. He also spoke of an "umbilical cord" between Boko Haram and other extremist Islamic groups in northern Mali.

In January, one of Boko Haram's commanders, Sheikh Muhammed Abdulazeez Ibn Idris, said that after conferring with the Sect's leadership, he was ready for a cease-fire (see Fides 29/1/2013). Since then, armed clashes have been reported in the north of Nigeria, but, unusually, there has been no claim for responsibility on the part of Boko Haram. (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 19/2/2013)