

Although crushed by the military, remnants of last December's Taliban insurgents in Yobe State have reportedly fanned out into some states, fuelling fears of possible terrorist attack on Nigeria

# The Big Hunt

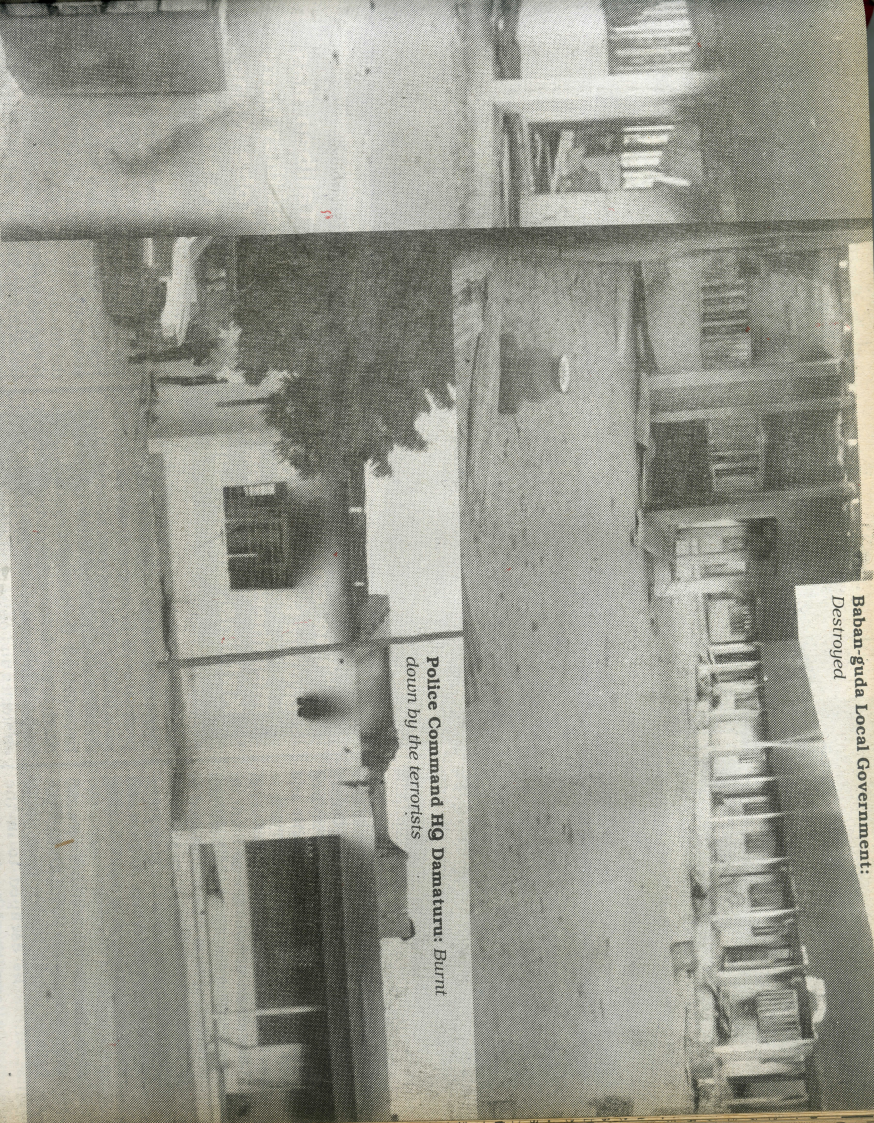
Nigeria Army and the Police on full alert against terrorist attack: Fatalities were recorded



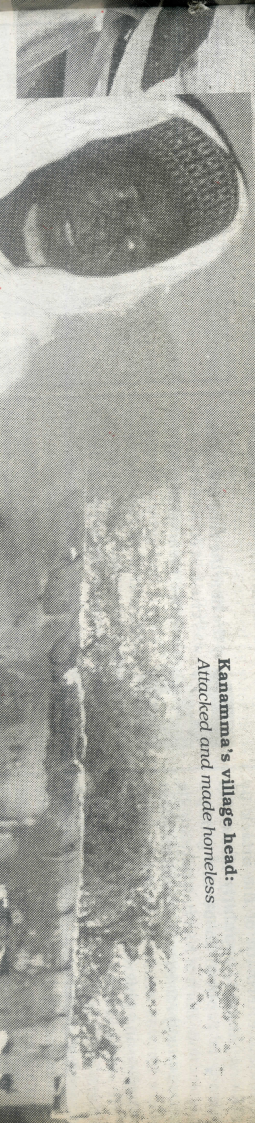
COVER STORY



*Yunusari Local Government Secretariat: Offices and vehicle set ablaze*



**Babar-guda Local Government:**  
*Destroyed*



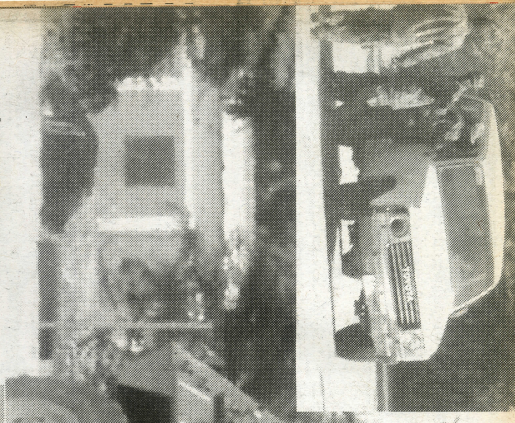
**Kanamma's village head:**  
*Attacked and made homeless*

**By SHOLA OSHUNKEYE**

**U**ntil Sunday, December 21, 2003, the federal government had persistently denied the existence of an Al-Qaeda cell or terrorist groups in the country. The denials have, however, ebbed since that day an Islamic fundamentalist group, *Ahl Ul Sunnah Wal Ja ma'ah* (Yobe Taliban for short) woke up and almost seized the nation by the jugular.

For about 12 days, the self-styled Talibans unleashed terror on parts of Yobe State, totally overwhelming the police. By the time troops from the 241 RECCE Battalion of the Nigerian Army, stationed at Nguru, came in to crush the insurgents January 1, 17 persons, including two policemen, had been killed. The fatalities were recorded in two local government areas — Kanamma and Geldam.

On the Talibans' side, 25 of its members, including two of its leaders — Mohammed Ali and



**Soldiers of 241  
Reece Battalion,  
Nguru patrolling  
major streets of  
Nguru in wake of  
terrorist violence**



## “The core membership of the Taliban has grown to about 100, and it is believed they have members in states such as Borno, Yobe, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Lagos, Ogun and Oyo states”

Islamic preacher reportedly recruited undergraduates, graduates, and professionals in diverse fields as well as ex-military personnel from some southern states to constitute his think-tank. While he exploited the *alshiriki* system in the North to get his foot-soldiers, the educated corps was responsible for formulating strategies and organising campaigns.

At press time last week, efforts were still in top gear to repairatrie Yusuf Ahmed, the Yobe Taliban overall leader, from Saudi Arabia, where he escaped to in the immediate aftermath of the attack by soldiers. Ahmed, popularly known as Djana, is reputed to be the group's mastermind. Born of Nigerian parents, he was reportedly raised in the Saudi kingdom where he was schooled in the Taliban principles and philosophy.

He returned to Nigeria in 2002, settled Kano and engaged in Quranic teachings and azebic anti-establishment preaching. To put his words into action, his network began an intensive recruitment campaign and indoctrination of men in the deep Algham Taliban philosophy. In a nutshell, the kernel of that philosophy includes the radical theology of self-purification, migration (*Hijrah*) and *Jihad* (holy war) to establish a purely Islamic government in Nigeria and the world at large.

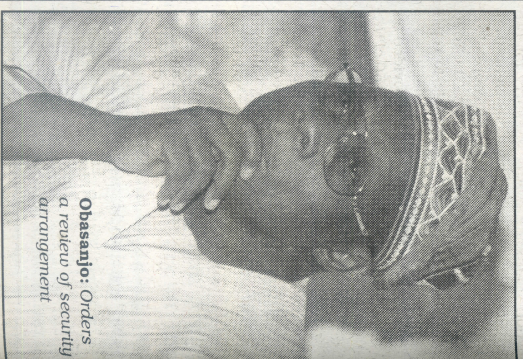
Ahmed's gospel spread like wild fire, hurting harmattan. The prevailing anti-west sentiments at the time, fuelled by the allied forces bombardment of Alghamistan a reprisal for the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States aided his cause. A meticulous organiser, the fugitive

There are fears that the few members of the Yobe/Taliban who managed to regroup, and possibly attack where it would hurt the nation most. They almost did this during the Queen of England's visit to Nigeria for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting but the vigilance of the security services prevented the

**B**y the time the Yobe insurgency was crushed on New Year day, the core membership of the Taliban had grown to about 100, and it is believed they

have members in states such as Borno, Yobe, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Lagos, Ogun and Oyo states. Among items recovered from the group's camp in Yobe are some computers loaded with intensive literature in Arabic, documents containing some sensitive information and sundry indoctrination materials in the Algham Taliban principles and philosophy.

After a thorough analysis of the recovered items and the group's operational strategies, the nation's security community is now convinced beyond reasonable doubt that Nigeria, indeed, has a terrorist cell. The magazine learnt, last week, that the presidency was, in fact, studying a report on the Yobe/Taliban insurgency, which confirmed matter-of-factly, that "a terrorist cell, though at its formative stage" exists in the country.



**Ohasanjo: Orders  
a review of security  
arrangement**



actualisation of their nefarious plan.

The latest fear, the magazine learnt, was particularly reinforced by the attitude of the captured Talibans while undergoing interrogation. Their utterances were reportedly scary like virulent ashes from an active volcano. "They were unrepentant," a source said. "They believe that their mission to transform Nigeria into an Islamic state is divinely directed. And no human being, no military action, can change that. When they were asked if they would turn a new leaf if released, they told their interrogators to forget it. They said they would rather die."

Such defiance is very consistent with the Afghan Talibans. Indeed, the way the group reportedly responded to the military action remains a source of worry for the authorities. When it became clear that government was going to draft troops after they had overwhelmed the police, the Yobe Talibans made good their pledge to repel the soldiers.

Relying on the information provided by their own intelligence unit, about 50 of the Talibans invaded the Gaidam police station one night, broke into the armoury and carried away arms and ammunition, especially AK-47 rifles. A police Toyota Hilux jeep was also commandeered. When the soldiers came charging, the Talibans not only returned fire, they reportedly hauled hand grenades at the troops from their well-camouflaged trenches.

By the reckoning of the Yobe Talibans, Kano was to provide a canvas of disaster for Nigeria, the Commonwealth and, indeed, the world at large during last December's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, CHOGM, in Abuja. TELL learnt that the Talibans reportedly planned to strike at the heart of the nation during the Queen's scheduled visit to the

commercial city. Although the source was

not sure if the group intended to inflict bodily harm on the visiting monarch, he said an intelligence report was positive that something that would have seriously embarrassed the country was planned. And it would have come amid a protest rally scheduled for one of the Queen's routes or at the Durbar to be organised for her in the city, where she would have been pelted with either a rotten tomatoes or even stones.

**B**ut the country's security agencies read the situation correctly and acted with dispatch. They outlawed all rallies within the period, including a forum organised by some non-governmental organisations slated for Monday December 1, 2003, and got the Commonwealth secretariat to accede to an alternative venue.

The lot fell on Karu, a sprawling rustic settlement in Nasarawa State located within a driving distance of Abuja. Several days before the Queen's scheduled visit, security agents swooped, not only on Karu but also on the two adjoining satellite towns — Nyanyan and Mararaba. People were screened almost to their underpants and everywhere became like a glass house. Soldiers were withdrawn from army units in and around the Federal Capital Territory and stationed in bushes around the place. They were changed every three days. The security web was so thick visitors flying to Abuja confirmed seeing scores of battle-ready soldiers around the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja. The airforce too was on high alert. So were the counter-terrorism units of the Nigeria Police Force.

All the venues, hotels and routes of the

## Cover Story

Commonwealth Heads of Government were tightly covered by both plain-clothed and uniformed security agents, who were very firm but polite in discharging their duties. Tara Balogun, the inspector-general of police, never left anything to chance. As early as November, he had deployed about 290,000 policemen and over 10,000 vehicles for motorised patrol nationwide. Security was beefed up at the Sembe-Badagry border with Benin Republic as well as Ota-Itdi Iroko highways in the Lagos area.

Finally, CHOGM came and ended. And not a single unoward incident was recorded. Don Mckinnon, Commonwealth secretary-general and a host of the Heads of Government, praised the Nigerian security arrangement to high heavens. "The security arrangement was excellent," Mckinnon told TELL in an interview on the last day of CHOGM. "Bringing a conciliation of 52 Heads of Government, including Her Majesty, the Queen of England, could be a security nightmare for any country."

Nigerians who should know, credited President Olusegun Obasanjo's foresight for ordering a unified command structure for CHOGM security arrangement. Under the arrangement, a sub-committee on Security, Accreditation and Advisory Groups, SAAG, was created with Colonel Kayode Aye, the State Security Service, SSS, director general, as chairman. His counterparts from the National Intelligence Agency, NIA, the Directorate of Military Intelligence, DMI, among others, assisted him.

He, in turn, created the Threat Analysis and Liaison Committee, TALC, among others, which produced a monthly brief on security occurrences worldwide, terrorist organisations, their capabilities, frequency of strikes and *modus operandi*. In addition, TALC provided briefs on militants and closely monitored potential threats and possible targets like oil installations, NEPA installations and national monuments.

"The Colonel Aye committee deserves all the accolades it can get for the excellent security arrangement not only during CHOGM but also during the 8th All Africa Games," a military chief quipped. The SSS had been on the trail of the Yobe/Taliban since 2002 when Ahmed, its leader, returned to Nigeria and setled in Kano where he delivered his regular caustic anti-establishment sermons. When Kano became too hot, he relocated to Maiduguri the Borno State capital, with his proselytes. As his disciples grew in number, he surreptitiously established a camp in a village near Nigeria's border with the Republic of Chad. Last August, the group surfaced in

**“The Taliban raided their police station, carting away A-K 47 rifles and ammunition, as well as a Toyota Hillux jeep. Flying Afghanistan flags on the police jeeps they stole, they reportedly went on rampage, killing and maiming people, sacking a primary school”**

Zajir-Biriri, a desert settlement in Tarmuwa Local Government area of Yobe State, 70 kilometres north of Damaturu, the state capital. The Taliban, according to a report, quoting villagers, conducted themselves in a very peaceful manner on arrival. “They would buy foodstuff and pay the correct price,” a villager was quoted as saying.

But trouble started when they reportedly beat up a middle-aged woman who reportedly challenged them for trespassing on her family’s fishing area. The Taliban were forced to relocate to Kanamma in Yunusari Local Government area, situated on the bank of one of River Yobe’s estuaries after the villagers had reported their excesses to the police.

They unleashed terror almost as soon as they arrived there. On the second day, December 22, 2003, the Taliban reportedly stormed the police station and carted away arms and ammunition. Timothy James, the divisional police officer, DPO, in charge of the station promptly reported the incident to the headquarters in Damaturu, requesting orders to deal with the insurgents.

**B**efore the DPO got his orders, the Taliban had returned. They burnt the station, the local government secretariat and lodge, as well as the houses of the council boss and the DPO. The community members did not just fold their arms. Its leaders, backed by the police, ordered the Taliban to vacate their territory within three days. No dice. The group responded by abducting the youths of the village and forced them to dig trenches that were perfectly camouflaged and well fortified. Simultaneously, the group intensified combat training.

The cops, who were roundly beaten by the group, had made a retreat to Geidam, a town 13 kilometres south of Kanamma. But they returned a few days later in a surprise raid. Again, the cops were effectively repelled. The same night, the Taliban raided their station, carting away A-K 47 rifles and ammunition, as well as a Toyota Hillux jeep. From then onward, there was no stopping the Taliban. Flying Afghanistan flags on the police jeeps they

stole, they reportedly went on rampage, killing and maiming people, sacking a primary school.

The ‘victory run’ was, however, cut short on New Year eve when soldiers from the 241 RECCE Battalion, Nguru, bombarded them with grenades and heavy artillery fire. The Taliban were routed almost effortlessly.

Fatai Fagbemi, the assistant inspector-general of police, AIG, in charge of Zone 12, comprising Bauchi, Borno and Yobe, confirmed to reporters that 1,525 rounds of ammunition, 16 rifles including four A-K 47, three revolvers, a Beretta pistol,



**Ibrahim:** Treats the presence of the Taliban with levity?

among others, were recovered from the Taliban. Forty-seven arrests were also made.

Aged between 13 and 30 years, and including females, the suspects included a son of the secretary to Borno State government, Alhaji Abba Gana Terab as well as five sons of a Maiduguri-based contractor, Kamar Adam.

The police and the SSS were reported not only to have drawn the attention of Bukar Abba-Ibrahim, Yobe state governor, to the menace of the Taliban, they also advised him to flush them out. Rather than heed the advice, however, the governor chose to persuade them, believing they were true Islamic preachers. The governor

has since denied the charge, saying he only got to know about the Taliban “after December 31.”

After screening the suspects, *prima facie* cases were established against nine of them and recommended their prosecution. They include Ismaila Abdulfatahi, Abdulshakur Hussein, Mohammed Bunu Kafinta, Abdulkareem Akande, Idris Mohammed, Rasheed Suleiman, Ali Hussein, Audu Hassan and Mohammed Mustapha Ismail.

Although Ahmed, the Yobe Taliban mastermind, has strong links with Saudi Arabia, the group’s source of funding is hazy. The only visible sources of funding, for now, seem to be proceeds from some commercial buses owned and operated by one of the group’s leaders, Mohammed Ali; funds brought by both Ali and Ahmed from sources known only to the duo; and proceeds from the menial jobs done by members. Investigations are said to be going on as to what relationship exists between Ahmed’s group and the Afghanistan Taliban. Some sources say

Ahmed’s possible link with the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda must have been forged while he was growing up in Saudi Arabia. The attention of security agencies, has shifted to irredentist groups, which are believed to be “eroding the foundation of Nigeria” through their separatist inclinations, fundamentalists who have infiltrated the nation’s tertiary institutions as well as people who have turned the *Almajiri* system in the North to fertile breeding grounds for potential Taliban.

Besides these, government is reported to have encouraged the nation’s security and intelligence agencies to intensify both intra and inter-agency cooperation and maintain liaison with foreign counterparts. Again, money launderers, oil bunkerers and other Nigerians with inexplicable stupendous wealth, are under security spotlight. “This is being done to prevent them from using their ill-gotten wealth to foment trouble,” a source told the magazine.

No doubt, the war against terrorism is on in Nigeria. But success or failure would depend largely on the amount of concrete support government is ready to give the country’s security agencies.