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Environmental Degradation, Climate Change and Conflict: The Lake Chad Basin Area

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MAGNUM/Raymond Depardon

“Borno without Lake Chad is like Egypt without the Nile”



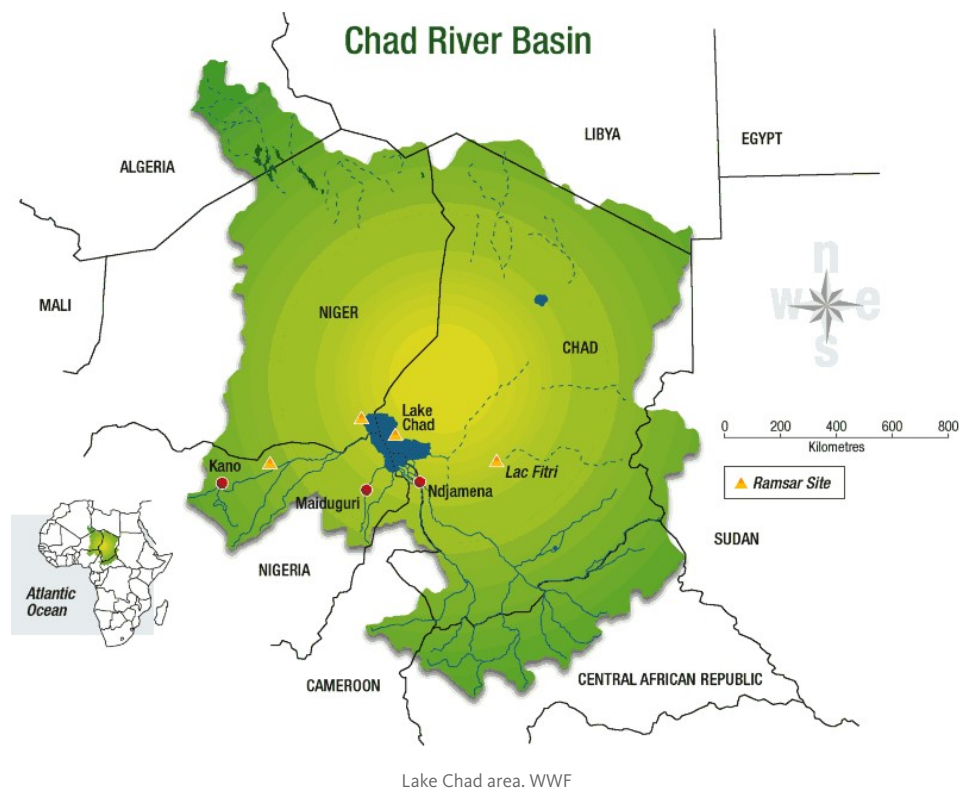
In 1974, Yisa (not his real name), a young engineer from Chibok town in north-eastern Nigeria's Borno state, was an enthusiastic participant in the country's response to the severe drought that had affected northern Nigeria and the wider Sahel region over the previous two years. The federal military government established several large-scale irrigation schemes designed to check the impact of future droughts, as well as allow the cultivation of rice, wheat, tomatoes and other foodstuffs. Engineer Yisa worked hard enough to merit a scholarship for further studies in Germany. But by the time he returned in 1979, hopes that the shrinkage of Lake Chad was due to temporary drought could no longer be sustained. And in 1984 he was one of several hundred who were sacked with little notice and no benefits when it became clear that Lake Chad could no longer sustain the development programs for which he had been employed.

What happened to Lake Chad? And how is this affecting the 30 million people who rely on its waters for survival?

A combination of climate change, demographic pressures, human activity, and mismanagement of the remaining water resources has created what the UN describes as an "ecological catastrophe".

From a surface area of 25,000km² in 1963, Lake Chad now covers a surface area of less than 2,500km². The region's recent history provides an illuminating snapshot, repeated across the globe, of how climate change is already driving social tensions, conflict and migration, and threatens to do so on a much larger scale over the next twenty years should the world fail to act.

The Lake Chad catastrophe had been long foreseen, and indeed, in 1964 the four countries that border Lake Chad—Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria—formed the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in order to manage its waters in a sustainable and cooperative manner. As it is, the permanent waters have receded so far that only Cameroon and Chad can now be said to have permanent lake shore within their borders. On the Nigerian side, children now play football where thirty years ago fishermen plied their boats. Yet despite studies, surveys, plans and programs, little has been done to reverse the shrinkage: according to the climate forecasts of the U.S.' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the lake may very well dry up within twenty years if nothing is done.



The impact on the lives of the millions who depend on Lake Chad for their livelihood has been severe, as has been the resultant deleterious effect on peace and security in the area.

In 2010 Nigeria's former chief of defence staff, Admiral Ola Sa'ad Ibrahim, warned that climate change and environmental degradation would be among the top five security threats that Nigeria would face in the coming

decade. At that time, Nigeria was focussing more on the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta where oil exploration had despoiled farmlands and polluted traditional fishing areas. Yet Ibrahim could equally have been warning about the Lake Chad basin area, where environmental disaster was also already a reality, and where the Boko Haram insurgency was already taking root.

As living conditions continue to worsen, security challenges, ranging from theft and robbery to abduction and terror have increased, both within the affected countries and across their borders.

Like populations around the globe whose lives are affected by climate change and environmental degradation, millions have seen their livelihoods destroyed by the shrinking of Lake Chad. Most lack the education or skills for anything other than farming, livestock rearing and fishing—occupations they can no longer engage in. For others who have a little more education or training, hopes that agro-allied industries would provide them with gainful employment have not been realised: there is no medium or large-scale industry in the area to employ the region's workers. The region now houses an explosive mix of those who have actively resisted any exposure to education in the belief their future lay in the traditional occupations that had supported generations before them, and those whose exposure to a formal education has created rising expectations they can no longer hope to realise. It is also supplying a wave of migrants who leave the region and head to neighbouring countries or further afield in search of the opportunities that their home areas no longer provide.

Falling water levels, deforestation and desertification have also affected the traditional pasturelands of nomadic herdsman, who have been forced to move into new areas, with significant ramifications for regional security.

With no nationwide plan to accommodate their needs, and lack of coordination among individual states that may wish to establish designated grazing areas, the herders often come into conflict with local landowners.

The shrinkage of Lake Chad has worsened an already perilous situation in an area that has consistently returned some of the lowest human development indices.

Despite Nigeria's decade of economic growth at rates in excess of 7 per cent per annum, Borno state continues to return disturbingly high numbers of people who have never had any formal modern education at all.

This was manageable when such people were still able to practise their traditional farming, fishing and animal husbandry, but as Lake Chad's waters dry up they have little or nothing to fall back on.

Living in poverty in Nigeria's deeply unequal society, this situation breeds the kind of resentments that make both the educated and uneducated easily attracted to radical new religious movements, particularly those that preach equality and adherence to simple and pure religious values. In this century, Boko Haram has emerged in Maiduguri as a new magnet both for uneducated youths displaced from their traditional livelihoods, and for educated youths attracted to its egalitarian, anti-corruption preaching.

Moreover, Boko Haram had shrewdly established economic programs to provide means of employment, augmenting the group's allure for the region's disillusioned youth.

It is not only Nigeria that is affected by the shrinking of Lake Chad, nor have the other nation states bordering Lake Chad remained immune to the violence and instability that Nigeria's Boko Haram insurgency has brought. Despite today's international borders, the region's people maintain ties of kinship, language, trade, cultural and religious interaction: for centuries Lake Chad was an integral part of Kanuri history, culture, folklore, and economy, and way of life for all the peoples who lived by and on it. These same peoples now struggle to survive in the face of increased pressure on dwindling natural resources, the huge decline in fish production, and the reduction in livestock. Border closures and other security measures enacted in response to the Boko Haram insurgency have badly affected trade, and with it, opportunities for legitimate employment throughout the region.

It is true that despite entrenched poverty that is only worsening with the ecological threats that the region faces, insurgency and religious extremism have for various reasons not taken so firm a hold in the other riparian states, notably Niger, as they have in Nigeria.

But this does not mean that the youths of Nigeria's neighbours are insulated from the conflict that has engulfed north-eastern Nigeria: poverty and joblessness continue to provide an ample pool of willing recruits, and in these states Boko Haram's recruitment strategy often relies on financial incentives, rather than the extremist ideology or recruit-kidnapping for which the group is better known.

“If they tell you to set off a bomb and it succeeds, if it kills a lot of people, they will pay you a lot of money,” one of the gang members said. “We are ready for that.”
Gang member in Diffa, Niger Republic

The four riparian states which make up the LCBC maintain that their long-term goal is to replenish the waters of Lake Chad, while also working on whatever short-term solutions may be brought to bear on the present violence. This, in addition to seeking immediate or medium-term measures to raise the human development indicators for the region. But little progress has been made: for all its ambitious plans and projects, the LCBC is yet to move from talk to implementation and action, lacking the heart or political will to achieve concrete change. Yet, without urgent and decisive action the chance of any improvement in either the condition of Lake Chad or the lives of the 30 million people who depend on the lake seems increasingly remote. And without action, the prospects for stability in the region look bleak.



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