

Quiet Charisma: Fatima Akilu at the Neem Foundation

When Fati Ibrahim lost her husband and eldest son after Boko Haram insurgents attacked their town of Gwoza in north-eastern Nigeria, she wasn't alone. She was one of dozens of women who lost family members, homes and livelihoods. Three years later, she found herself queueing outside a tent near Maiduguri, the city at the epicentre of the uprising, waiting to go inside and get the help she still desperately needed.

But instead of the food, shelter or medicine that many relief efforts focus on, she – and the many women like her – were waiting for something less tangible: someone to help them process their trauma.

The free counselling sessions were set up in 2017 by the Neem Foundation, a non-profit that helps people impacted by the 12-year insurgency that has seen Boko Haram kill more than 40,000 people and displace millions more.

Boko Haram

Nigeria's militant Islamist group Boko Haram continues to wreak chaos in the most populous country in Africa through bombings, assassinations and abductions.

The movement – which is now so large that many experts call it a 'pseudo state' – is fighting to overthrow the government and create an Islamic caliphate.

Boko Haram's version of Islam is rejected by the vast majority of Muslims in the world today. It forbids Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with western society, which includes voting in elections, wearing shirts and trousers, and receiving a non-religious education.

Boko Haram regards anyone who is not a member as a non-believer, regardless whether they are Muslim or not. By targeting neighbouring states and countries, its military campaign is growing exponentially.

Ibrahim, 28, heard about Counselling on Wheels from a friend. "She told me that they will be able to help me if I come here," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation while attending a session.

The Neem Foundation set up the programme to provide psychological and social services to people in some of the most remote parts of Maiduguri. The foundation also runs deradicalisation programmes; not only for the women and children rescued from the militants – whose beliefs they often adopt while under their control – but the soldiers themselves.