MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (Reuters) - The Nigerian Islamist sect Boko Haram denied on Monday that 20 of its fighters had been killed in a raid by security forces in the northeastern city of Maiduguri the day before, saying all those killed were civilians.

A security officer said a mixed military and police force, tipped off about a Boko Haram meeting on Sunday, had been fired on when they approached the site and killed 20 "terrorists" for the loss of one soldier in the ensuing shootout.

The Islamist group, modeled on the Taliban, is fighting to create an Islamic state in Nigeria, whose 160 million people are split evenly between Christians and Muslims.

Boko Haram spokesman Abu Qaqa told a teleconference for journalists in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state and the sect's heartland, that his fighters had not been meeting at the place where the military said it killed them.

"They only succeeded in killing civilians," Qaqa said. "Twenty of us cannot risk sitting in a volatile place to hold a meeting ... It is not possible."

The Islamists have killed hundreds in gun and bomb attacks in Nigeria, Africa's top energy producer, since they launched an uprising in 2009.

The violence has centered on Maiduguri and other parts of the predominantly Muslim north, but has spread across central Nigeria in the past year.

Many important figures in the sect have been killed or arrested in a military crackdown that appears to have weakened it since the beginning of the year.

But many civilians have also died or been beaten and harassed in the crackdown, fuelling resentment that helps generate support for the movement.

The United States is urging Nigeria not to use excessive or indiscriminate force in the north, an aide who went to Nigeria with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week said.
The death of Boko Haram's leader in police custody in 2009 was seen as the event that transformed it from a rebellious clerical movement into a dangerous militant group.

(Reporting by Ibrahim Mshelliza; Writing by Tim Cocks, editing by Tim Pearce)

© Thomson Reuters 2011