

STATE RESPONSE TO ARMED BANDITRY IN NIGERIA, 2011-2021

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Introduction

The phenomenon of armed banditry has engulfed the entire Nigerian landscape, especially, northern Nigeria, manifesting in kidnapping, armed robbery, raid on villages or settlements and indiscriminate killings, sexual and gender-based violence, cattle rustling, among others. This conflict has escalated and intensified over the past decade (2011-2021), threatening human security and state survival in Nigeria. While the menace of Boko Haram insurgency and farmer-herder conflict perpetuated by herders' armed militia have engulfed and escalated in most of northern Nigeria since 2009, Nigeria has increasingly faced devastating attacks from armed bandits, particularly in the northwestern states of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Niger in the North Central. As Egwu (2015) posits, armed banditry is driven by many overlapping factors, including cattle rustling, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, illicit artisanal mining, youth unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Again, the multifaceted layers of criminality involved, and recurrent nature of the armed banditry call for effective mechanisms to mitigate the threat it poses to peace and security in the affected States. More so, Uche and Iwuamadi (2018) maintain that the phenomenon of armed banditry has resulted in the massive loss of thousands of lives, forced displacement of locals and devastation of monumental proportions in Nigeria.

As Odinkalu (2018) posits, armed banditry has emerged as the new bogeyman for insecurity in Nigeria, joining a long (and still growing list) that includes Boko Haram terrorism, cultism, cybercrime, herders' militia violence, kidnapping and violent agitations. In parts of the northwest and northcentral, bandits are offered as the trope for an intolerable carnage and the inexplicable haplessness of the State in Nigeria. The overwhelming and seeming lack of state capacity to counter and prevent armed banditry in Nigeria calls for critical interrogation. What then is the response of the state to the challenges of armed banditry in Nigeria? Therefore, this study explores the phenomenon of armed banditry in Nigeria and interrogates state responses towards countering and preventing armed banditry in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

i. State

A good starting point in understanding the phenomenon of the state in this work is the view by Max Weber, who defined the state in relation to its claim to the legitimacy of the monopoly of the use of force over any human community within a given territory (Weber, 1919). This means that within the given territory over which it exists, the state is sovereign, no other entity or group has authority over it. Succinctly put, the state has the authority or legitimate power over others within a defined territory. In the Marxist sense, the state is seen as that mechanism by which in any defined territory, the dominant social class maintains and defends its dominance over all the other existing classes. Implicit in the Marxist view is the notion that the state is the focal point of class relations (Ekekwe, 2009). In other words, the legitimate force over which the state has a monopoly is used mainly by the dominant class to keep other classes in check. Consequently, the state cannot be a neutral arbiter in class relations. Suffice to add it that, to be neutral, in any situation, in which one party dominates another, is by definition a posture in support of the dominant party, at least, to do nothing to help the dominated party.

The attempts to conceptualise the state, either from the Liberal or Marxist perspectives, reveals that the control thread runs through that the state is a supreme power in a society and that the state has monopoly use of coercive power and that it is over and above all the constituent structures, institutions and elements. The state is thus, that sovereign power over a recognised human community in a given territory that has supreme authority to make and enforce laws, with the legitimacy and monopoly of physical force.

ii. Armed Banditry

The term *bandit* originates with the early Germanic legal practice of outlawing criminals, termed *bannan* which translates to the English word, 'ban'. In modern Italian, the equivalent word "bandito" literally means banned or a banned person. The New English Dictionary (1989) on Historical Principles defined 'bandit' as one who is proscribed or outlawed. Ahmed and Ahmed (2021) posit that banditry means the occurrence or prevalence of armed robbery or violent crime. It involves the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person with the intent to rob, rape or kill. Banditry is a crime against persons. It has been a common genre of crime, as well as causing violence in contemporary societies.

Thus, banditry is a type of organized crime committed by outlaws typically involving the threat or use of violence. A person who engages in banditry is known as a bandit and primarily commits crimes such as extortion, robbery, and murder, either as an

individual or in groups. Though a vague concept of criminality and can be synonymous for gangsterism, brigandage, marauding, and thievery, we can submit that armed banditry refers to armed violence driven principally by the criminal intent to steal and plunder. It is motivated by the quest for economic accumulation. In Nigeria, armed banditry is characterized by depredations, cattle rustling, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, village raids, rape and illegal toll collection at village markets. These have become recurrent features of several communities in northern Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the conflict trap theory as the framework of analysis. To the exponents of the theory – Collier, Elliott, Hegre, Hoeffler, Reynal-Querol and Sambanis (2003) – conflict trap denotes that once a conflict has erupted, it seems to develop a momentum of its own. Peacemaking becomes elusive and hard to restore. Even when peace is restored it often does not endure (Collier, et al, 2003, p. 3). The theorists ascribed the lengthy pattern of a conflict to a number of interlocking factors. Accordingly, conflicts in multiethnic and plural societies endure possibly on account of their ready vulnerability to the rallying, massaging and mobilization of ethnic and primordial sentiments for both the warring groups and the government.

More so, in a plural society, particularly where the population has significant grievances, conflict usually becomes an effective political strategy for the pursuit of interests and goals. Also, even if the custodians of power and authority in the society are willing to concede to the demands of the groups, they are usually neither trusted nor believed to have credible means of committing the warring factions to an agreement. The warring groups might be afraid that once they hold the olive branch the custodians of power and authority would renege on any agreement (Collier et al, 2003, p. 4). Furthermore, it is also contended that it is even difficult for the custodians of power and authority to concede to demands of the warring groups because such could encourage the flowering, proliferation, mushrooming and radicalization of other groups, which often have opposing objectives. Similarly, a significant pattern to lengthy conflict is an extreme case of distributive injustice. Thus, conflict persists if there is an expansive layer of economic destitute and possibly significantly weak institutions such as the peace and security architecture, which are unable to deter and apprehend violators of the laws. More so, sustaining conflict has become easier because the warring groups have easy access to armaments for prosecuting conflict (Collier, et al, 2003, p. 5).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that once a conflict has occurred a template is raised and it becomes difficult to return to the *status quo ante*. Obviously, conflict reinforces hatreds and shifts the balance of influential interests in favour of

continued conflict. In a similar vein, the conflict entrepreneurs that profit from the conflict would do anything including sabotaging peace process for it to continue. According to Collier et al (2003, p. 12), “violence entrepreneurs, whether primarily political or primarily commercial, may gain from conflict, to such an extent that they cannot credibly be compensated sufficiently to accept peace”. More so, those who see themselves as political leaders benefit from war because they can run their organizations in hierarchical, military-style with power concentrated in their own hands, something much more difficult to justify in peacetime.

It follows from the above assumptions that the conflict trap theory is apt and relevant for the appreciation of the challenges of the farmers-herders conflict and its management in Nigeria. It offers deep insights into the interlocking factors that sustain the conflict. It presupposes that once conflict has occurred it lengthens and becomes challenging to restore peace on account of a number of factors such as ethnic pluralism, a proliferation of arms, existence of income disparities, the existence of expansive republic of hoodlums and the activities of criminal entrepreneurs.

Background to armed banditry in Nigeria

The phenomenon of armed banditry, currently plaguing Nigeria is synonymous with northwestern Nigeria. The northwestern region of Nigeria is one of the Geo-Political zones of Nigeria, consisting of seven (7) states, viz; Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara. Its major ethnic groups are the Hausa and Fulani, who historically share strong cultural ties and are very much intermixed, with other smaller groups especially in Kaduna State. As reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2020), other groups in the region include the Kanuri (in Jigawa State), Jaba and Gwari (in Kaduna State), Bajju (in Kano State), Nupe (in Niger State), Maguzawa (in Katsina State) and Zuru (in Kebbi State), as well as the Zabarmawa and Tuareg minorities in the border areas of Sokoto State. The region's estimated population of 33 million (based on figures from the contentious 2006 census) is predominantly Muslim (Sunni). Most of the population (about 80 percent) are farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, or small-scale entrepreneurs. The region has substantial solid mineral deposits, including gold exploited by artisanal miners in open-pit mines.

Despite its economic potential, the Northwest has the highest poverty rate in Nigeria. As of 2019, all seven states in the zone had poverty levels above the national average of 40.1 percent, led by Sokoto (87.7 percent), Jigawa (87 percent), and Zamfara (74 percent) (National Bureau of Statistics, NBS, 2020). Again, millions of the population in the area lack access to basic health care and clean water, and immunization coverage is far below national goals. While the region has a long and

proud history of Islamic and Arabic scholarship, apathy toward, and inadequate investment in, formal education over the decades have contributed to a literacy rate of 29.7 per cent (NBS, 2015). The zone currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in Nigeria. As reported by UNICEF (2019), in five of the zone's states – Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara and Kebbi – more than 30 per cent of school-age children are not in school. UNICEF further submits that 39% of children in the Northwest, except Kaduna, are out of school. On top of those who do not attend school at all, millions of children are in the poorly resourced and ill-supervised Quranic school systems, or almajiranci which produces cohorts of unskilled youth. Much like the rest of the country, the region also suffers from very poor local governance, characterized by the mismanagement of public funds (ICG, 2020).

Furthermore, the geography and climatic conditions of the North West pose serious challenges for federal and state authorities. Much of the Northwest is savannah, but the region is also interspersed with vast forests, some of which are home to thousands of mostly Fulani herders (also known as pastoralists). According to the ICG (2020), The largest expanses are the Kuyanbana forest straddling Zamfara and Katsina States but also stretching into Kaduna and Niger states; Falgore forest, which stretches through three local government areas (LGAs) – Tudun Wada, Sumaila and Doguwa – in Kano State; Kamuku forest, which covers an area of 1,121 sq km from Kaduna to Zamfara, Katsina, Niger and Kebbi States; Rumah/ Kukar Jangarai Forest Reserve, which covers an area of about 800 sq km from the north west of Katsina State to Zamfara State; and Rugu forest, which stretches from the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna State into Katsina and Zamfara States. Once under the watch of forestry authorities, these forests gradually became hideouts for criminals including cattle rustlers, highway robbers, kidnappers and cannabis growers. In Kaduna State, locals now refer to the Kamuku forest as “Sambisa”, suggesting it has become as dangerous as the Borno State woodlands where Boko Haram established its stronghold (ICG, 2020). The region also shares about two thirds of Nigeria's 1,497km international boundary with Niger Republic, which is weakly regulated. Historical and cultural ties between communities on both sides and regional protocols on freedom of movement have created opportunities for smugglers and criminals. Numerous illegal crossings, coupled with pervasive corruption among border officials, enable the traffic of illicit merchandise such as firearms.

Over the last four decades, Nigeria's northwest has witnessed waves of violence including sectarian clashes, Islamist militancy and electoral violence. From 1980 to 2010, it saw numerous Christian-Muslim and intra-Muslim riots (Sani, 2007). Between 2011 and 2015, Kaduna and Kano States suffered many Boko Haram bombings and shootings, most notably the 20 January 2012 attacks in Kano city that killed about 185 people (ICG, 2014). In 2011, after the then opposition candidate,

Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the far northern Katsina State, lost the presidential election to the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta, protests in fourteen northern states – including all seven north-western states – escalated into ethnic and sectarian riots that left over 1,000 people dead and 74,000 displaced. In southern Kaduna State, a decade-long contest between the Hausa and Fulani, on one hand, and several smaller ethnic groups, on the other, over political offices, economic resources and the fruits of government spending has resulted in recurrent violence, often with significant fatalities.

More recently, starting in 2011 and accelerating since 2014, the North West has also suffered a surge of violence between pastoralists and allied armed groups frequently called “bandits”, on one hand, and farmers supported by community and state-sponsored vigilantes, on the other. The situation has been further aggravated by the proliferation of deadly criminal gangs, thriving in a region awash with arms and which state security forces struggle to control. Largely occurring in rural areas, the violence has spread from its epicentre in Zamfara state to Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto States in the Northwest and into Niger State in North Central Nigeria. Accurate fatality records are unavailable, but several reports point to at least 8,000 people killed from 2011 to the present, predominantly in Zamfara State and mostly over the last five years. Jihadist groups are slowly but surely stepping up their presence in the region, taking advantage of the security crisis and surge in criminality.

There is no gainsaying the obvious that banditry has engulfed the entire Nigerian landscape, manifesting in cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, raids on villages or settlements and indiscriminate killings, sexual and gender-based violence, among others. This conflict has escalated and intensified over the past decade, threatening human security in Nigeria. The ICG (2020) categorizes the violence affecting Nigeria's northwest into three overlapping ways. Accordingly, the first category includes violence pitting mainly ethnic Hausa sedentary farmers and vigilantes acting on their behalf against predominantly Fulani roving herders and associated militias, officially known by the Nigerian authorities as “bandits”. The second category involves violence committed by criminal gangs involved in large-scale cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, pillage, and attacks on gold miners and traders. The authorities sometimes also refer to these gangs as “bandits”. The third and most recent dimension of the violence involves confrontations between government security forces and jihadist groups that are increasingly active in the region. The Nigerian government is often its own worst enemy, due to its overly aggressive counter terrorism strategy. These policies have sabotaged the government's own objectives and resulted in unintended consequences which create more instability and lend themselves to exploitation by extremists' organizations. Accordingly, the Nigerian military's failures have driven

extremists' main pull factor – recruiting through radical messaging – and exacerbated the levels of mistrust between citizens and their government.

At its root, the region's security crisis derives from long-running competition over land and water resources between predominantly Fulani herders and mainly Hausa farmers, both of whom have over time mobilized armed groups (referred to by the authorities as “bandits” and “vigilantes”, respectively) for protection. Climate change-related environmental degradation and high population growth have intensified this struggle. Amid a boom in the trade of small arms and light weapons in the region, organized gangs operating from ungoverned forests have proliferated, engaging in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery, including of miners and traders in the largely unregulated gold mining sector, as well as pillage of communities (ICG, 2020).

Having originated in Zamfara State, gang violence has since spread to five other nearby states, namely Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Niger, the last of which is in North Central Nigeria. As security has deteriorated, the region has steadily come under the renewed influence of jihadist groups, which have sometimes attacked security forces. The spike in jihadist activity in the North West has raised fears that the region could soon become a land bridge connecting Islamic insurgencies in the central Sahel with the decade-old insurgency in the Lake Chad region of north-eastern Nigeria. Similarly, security sources point to a resurgence of the long-dormant Boko Haram splinter group, Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), better known as Ansaru, which was active in north-western Nigeria between 2011 and 2014. Elements of other Boko Haram offshoots, notably the Islamic State in West Africa Province, are arriving in the area.

More so, a poorly secured international boundary, meanwhile, enables the influx of arms and facilitates the movement of jihadists to and from the Sahel, where the Islamic State has been expanding its influence. Violence has had a far-reaching humanitarian and economic impact on the region and created a domino effect of security problems. Over the last decade, more than 8,000 people have been killed – mainly in Zamfara State – with over 200,000 internally displaced and about 60,000 fleeing into Niger Republic. Livestock and crops have been decimated, further depressing human livelihood indices that were already the country's lowest. The violence is aggravating other security challenges: it has forced more herders southward into the country's Middle Belt, thus increasing herder-farmer tension in that region and beyond.

In consonance with the foregoing, Oluyemi-Kusa and Salihu (2015, p. 111), affirm that, “banditry has taken on a life of its own, with dire consequences for the citizenry

in Nigeria”. Many analysts associate the phenomenon of armed banditry with the failure of the State to provide security and basic services for the populace. They also aver that banditry may well be a political economy problem resulting from the absence of equitable access to resources and a deliberate agenda to exclude others from social formations.

As furthermore examined by the West African Network of Peacebuilding (WANEP, 2020), armed banditry, facilitated the emergence of a complex informal security sector in Nigeria, including the growth of armed local vigilante groups established to protect communities against bandits. Many of these groups lack adequate security training and often compete against one another. They have been implicated in acts of criminality including human rights abuses, armed robbery, extortion and appropriation of livestock and other properties from both bandits and their victims, which led a public commentator to label their activities as 'legalized armed banditry' (Rufai, 2018). It was clear that illegal activities perpetrated by these non-state actors contributed to heightened insecurity in many communities of the Northwest region.

On the whole, as a fallout to the prevalence of criminal gangs in the Northwest, kidnapping cases in the rural and urban areas have increased sharply with reports on how families and communities have been terrorized to pay huge ransoms to save their loved ones. Individuals comprising traditional leaders, businesspeople, politicians, civil servants, and a lot more have been kidnapped for ransom of varying amounts. It is obvious that the pervasive armed banditry with its associated threats to human security in Nigeria has become a subject of national security and public concern. As WANEP (2020) submits, the multifaceted layers of criminality involved and the recurrent nature of the armed banditry call for effective mechanisms to mitigate the threat it poses to peace and security in the affected States. More so, Uche and Iwuamadi (2018) maintain that the phenomenon of violent extremism, through armed banditry, which recently gained currency in Nigeria's public discourses, is a fallout of persistent violence in rural communities within the last ten years. The results have been traumatic. Thus, the declining capacity of the state to moderate these conflicts and undertake effective policing of rural areas led to unending cycle of violence. The attendant resort to self-help worsened the security gaps in rural communities.

Since March 2020, at least 1,400 students have been abducted for ransom in Northwest Nigeria. The frequency of abductions has increased since December 2020. The most affected states include Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina and Niger. Frequent attacks by armed men in Northwest Nigeria have hindered economic activities and affected the standard of living of the affected communities. In the aftermath of the attacks, schools are subject to closure and restrictions are imposed

over travel and telecommunications for security reasons, temporarily limiting movement and access to education. Psychosocial support and counselling services for affected parents and students have been identified as a priority in the humanitarian response (<https://www.acaps.org/country/nigeria/crisis/northwest-banditry>).

The responses of the state to counter armed banditry in Nigeria

Over the years, the Federal Government, the governments of the northwest states, international organizations and civil society organizations have responded in various ways to armed banditry in Nigeria. These responses have ranged from security and enforcement measures against all “bandit” groups, including herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs, to offers of amnesty to some herder-allied groups and attempts at dialogue and peacebuilding. These responses are categorised into the responses by the Federal Government and State Governments.

i. Federal Government Responses

The Federal Government's attempts to contain banditry in the Northwest have largely depended on the security forces. Since 2016, the federal police has launched several “anti-banditry” operations, focusing on herder-allied armed groups and roving criminal gangs. Some of these include: Operation Maximum Safety, launched on 5 August 2016; Operation Absolute Sanity, launched on 25 July 2017; and the multi-agency Operation Puff Adder, launched on 5 April 2019, and covering five states in the Northwest and North Central zones (ICG, 2020).

Again, from 2016, the army also expanded troop presence in the region, converting the Falgore forest in Kano State into a permanent training ground, establishing three new forward operating bases in that forest and in the Kafanchan and Kachia Local Government Areas of Kaduna State, and launching five operations under “anti-banditry” mandates. These are: Operation Harbin Kunama (Hausa for “Scorpion Sting”); Operation Harbin Kunama II; Operation Sharan Daji (Hausa for “Forest Sweep”); Exercise Egwu Eke III launched in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi State; Exercise Harbin Kunama III; and, lastly, Operation Hadarin Daji.

It is noteworthy that the Nigerian Air Force, which has become increasingly involved since 2017, has also deployed new units (including Special Forces personnel) and, since 2018, conducted numerous aerial operations targeting forest encampments of herder-allied armed groups and criminal groups. For instance, in 2017, the Air Force established a new unit, the 207 Quick Response Group in Gusau, Zamfara State. In 2018, it launched Operation Diran Mikiya to support the Army's anti-banditry

operations in the North West. On 19 January 2019, it deployed a fighter aircraft, along with support equipment, and a detachment of Special Forces personnel to target bandits along the border between Sokoto and Zamfara States. In April 2019, it launched Operation Tsaftar Daji, which involved Alpha, MI 35, Augusta, Bel 412 and surveillance aircraft, to fight bandits and kidnappers in the Dajin Rugu forest. On 4 May 2019, it established a new facility, the 271 Nigerian Air Force Detachment, at Birnin Gwari in Kaduna State, to serve as support base and blocking force for troops engaged in Operations Diran Mikiya and Sharan Daji.

Suffice it to add that the military operations arguably have had an impact in the anti-banditry war. As reported by the ICG (2020), the Army and Police have arrested hundreds of men suspected of being part of herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs, killed hundreds of others, destroyed some of their forest camps, recovered arms and ammunition, and rescued hundreds of kidnapped persons. More recently, the Police conducted operations in which it reported killing hundreds of roving armed group elements and Ansaru members.

Despite these gains, however, the security forces have been unable to subdue the vast array of armed groups. Even with the stepped-up efforts, the available manpower, logistics and equipment are insufficient to respond promptly to armed groups' attacks. Similarly, troops lack the motorcycles they need to travel on roads that are impassable for cars and trucks. The army also lacks sufficient helicopters to deploy troops rapidly to remote locations. Respondents also averred that although military operations (Operations Harbin Kunama I and II) expelled many criminal groups from their forest camps in 2016 and early 2017, the army failed to consolidate those gains and hold territory, enabling the groups to soon reorganise and return.

Again, many vulnerable rural communities are far from any military post, resulting in late responses to their distress calls, with soldiers sometimes reaching them many hours after attacks. Others under attack are sometimes unable to reach security agencies due to poor telephone services. The government's April 2019 attempt to prohibit all forms of gold mining in Zamfara State, citing possible links between miners and criminals, has also had limited impact. Authorities have struggled to enforce the ban because of the remote location of many mining sites, limited resources for monitoring compliance and resistance by some powerful individuals behind the industry.

Moreover, to the extent that enforcement exists, its immediate impact has been to deprive thousands of artisanal miners and their dependents of livelihoods, creating a new set of problems. In the absence of other livelihoods, the ban could render many

unemployed youths more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and criminals. Furthermore, the government has sought closer security cooperation with other countries in the sub-region such as Niger and Chad to prevent cross-border crime and violence.

ii. State Governments Responses

In their efforts to respond to violent extremism and banditry in their region, state governments in the North West initially responded by supporting federal security agencies with funds and logistics to fight the armed groups, diminishing their ability to address other pressing socio-economic problems. In Zamfara State, for instance, former Governor Yari reported that from 2015 to 2019, the government spent 35 billion naira (about \$95.8 million) on logistics support to federal security agencies, special allowances for security personnel deployed to the state and relief for victims of attacks. Like the Federal Government, state governments also sought to counter attacks by herder-allied groups and criminal gangs through the use of force, by forming and empowering vigilantes, including what they called a Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), to protect communities, a practice that proved to be largely counterproductive. This initiative proved to be of very limited effect, for two main reasons. First, the army, viewing the CJTF as potentially a parallel force, was unwilling to work with it. Secondly, the poorly armed vigilantes were often no match for the groups they were meant to confront. Hundreds of vigilantes were killed in the course of the many confrontations in the North West.

Furthermore, between 2016 and 2018, some northwest governors shifted gears and sought to curb the violence by negotiating peace agreements with herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs. The states offered amnesty, arms-for-cash programmes and promises of spending for local communities, in return for disarmament. While these deals brought some peace for a limited amount of time, after about a year, the programs collapsed, and the mostly herder-allied armed groups stepped up attacks. There are several explanations for this occurrence. First, in Zamfara State, for example, the state government blamed the failure of the deals on the ostensible bad faith of armed group leaders, although several officials conceded that the state had failed to live up to its own promises. Again, it has been reported that the said programme had been compromised by the government's failure to fulfil its promises to different armed groups, including offering rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to those who had signed up and “repented” (ICG, 2020). More so, competition among armed groups worsened over time, feeding yet more violence. The many herder-allied armed groups resumed violent activities at full throttle in Zamfara, and extended these to Katsina and Sokoto States. Partly as a result of such competition, many groups held on to their weapons stores despite their

commitment to disarmament. Thirdly, the state governments' focus on dealing with armed groups was not accompanied by wider Hausa-Fulani reconciliation dialogues, thereby failing to resolve a key driver of violence.

Recently, between 2019 and 2020, the North West's state governments, like those of Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto initiated new efforts to negotiate peace with mainly herder-allied armed groups, but also vigilantes and criminals. The new policy direction followed growing public frustration with federal security agencies' apparent inability to subdue the armed groups through the use of military force, despite President Buhari's repeated vows to do so. Similarly, neither have tighter laws relating to the control of armed groups and violent crime had a substantial effect, given the states' lack of enforcement capacity. Consequently, the state governments engaged in dialogues with predominantly herder-allied armed group leaders, with some governors going out to meet them in their forest camps or inviting them to talks in the state capitals. The governors offered the armed groups amnesties and other incentives to end attacks. They also agreed to release all former armed elements who had been part of herder-allied groups, and who were now in custody, in exchange for all persons the herders were holding in their forest camps. The governors also pledged to disarm and disband vigilante groups (a strong demand of herder-allied armed groups), rehabilitate and reintegrate herder-allied and other armed groups willing to lay down their arms, establish rural grazing areas including settlements with social amenities – schools, hospitals, roads, electricity and water – for Fulani pastoralists, and rehabilitate houses destroyed by violence between herder-allied groups and farmers.

Though, the agreements have been at least partly honoured, yet, these efforts faced multiple challenges and violence later resumed due to several reasons (WANEP, 2020). First, as the herder-allied and criminal gangs lack central command and a common goal, it has been difficult to bring them all to a common conference table, and agreements made with one group are not binding on others. Secondly, these dialogues have largely focused on herder-allied armed groups, with the criminally motivated bandit groups and jihadists showing no interest in engaging with authorities. Thirdly, these dialogues appear not to have taken adequate account of the views of local communities that have borne the brunt of violence and expect the state to deliver forms of compensation, justice and protection as a condition for durable peace. In addition, three states in the Northwest region – Kaduna, Kano and Kebbi – failed to engage in similar peace processes, which could motivate herder-allied and criminal groups in those states to step up their attacks to force those governments to the table. In Kaduna State, where the government has vowed never to negotiate with any armed group, attacks continue to take a significant toll (ICG, 2020). Thus, with

many armed groups not having disarmed, peace deals have collapsed in some states and are at risk of unraveling in others.

Gaps in the responses to armed banditry in Nigeria

The foregoing indicates that there are two major ways the Nigerian government responds to violence, viz, overwhelming use of force or violence especially if the violence threatens perceived interests or harms the status quo. As Wodu (2020) submit, the militarised or kinetic approach to conflict management has largely been ineffective in the face of violent conflicts that are fueled by structural or grievance-based issues like armed banditry. Secondly, where the first approach fails, there is a resort to superficial dialogues that do nothing to acknowledge or address the drivers of that violence. This is in form of peace agreements or settlements that sacrifice long-term impacts for short terms gains. One need not look further than Nigeria's response to armed banditry to buttress this point. Consequently, armed banditry in Nigeria continues to thrive because the Nigerian State conceives of peace as only the absence of overt violence and hostilities. It refuses to see the structural inequalities and suffering faced by people as not only a form of violence, but also as a major driver of violent conflict.

Suffice it to add that nature abhors vacuum and crime thrives in remote locations where the presence of government is not registered such that there's little deterrence and abounding opportunities for criminal activity (Mungadi et al, 2020). Thus, the problem of ungoverned spaces is a major gap in the rise and management of criminality. Most of the North West communities or households are in some cases separated by and interspersed with forest areas. This renders them vulnerable to banditry. This situation is made worse by the absence of effective community policing mechanisms capable of addressing the hinterlands' peculiar security challenges. The state security machinery has so far failed to tackle the scourge of banditry due to a lack of political will, lack of collaborative efforts and operational challenges.

The attempts by the government and other stakeholders to manage banditry and other crimes, especially from the northwest is hampered by porous borders and uncontrolled migration. In this regard, Mungadi et al (2020) argue that the northwest region alone accounts for two-thirds of Nigeria's 1,497km international land border with the Niger Republic. This expanse is weakly regulated as communities along with the borderline share cultural, religious and historical ties hence, regional protocols on freedom of movement have created opportunities for traffickers, smugglers and criminals in their nefarious activities in firearms, drugs and human trafficking.

While the deployment of technology, especially, information communication technology (ICT), as well as intelligence resources to fight crime has proved effective in other climes, Nigerian security forces have continued to rely on analogue systems and coercion. Again, Ashaolu (2012) found that the adoption of techno-driven intelligence analysis will address gaps in the responses to criminality, banditry and terrorism.

Government and security forces are seen to be unresponsive to warning signs and reports of attacks. On the one hand, security responses to reports of ongoing attacks are delayed and attacks and damage done before security agents arrive. After attacks occur, perpetrators are rarely apprehended or prosecuted. Security forces are sometimes seen to be complicit in the perpetuation of violence. For instance, security forces themselves are responsible for outright attacks on civilians. As Dembele (2015) maintains, there have been instances of unwarranted and unsubstantiated attacks from federal troops and local police on both farming and herding communities suspected of being responsible for the violence. These attacks disintegrate relationships between citizens and the security forces and create cultures of mistrust. In these cases, abusers are not held accountable and no justification or reasoning is provided to the victims.

Furthermore, proposed policies, such as grazing reserves and ranches, are often perceived as being power grabs by local elites and usually never make it all the way to implementation. Local communities have often felt they were not consulted, or adequately consulted, in the previous allocation of the grazing reserves and the government has fallen through on its responsibilities for enforcement and upkeep. And as such, there is much resistance to the idea on both sides. Again, farmers feel the allocation of land will be taken from current farm lands and thereby keep a perceived enemy nearby. Alternatively, herders worry that they will be easy targets for cattle rustling and are mistrustful of government upkeep and enforcement. In addition, perceptions of resource injustice and marginalization further chip away at the fragile relationship between Fulani herdsmen and farmers.

Following the lackadaisical attitude of the security agencies and the federal government towards reining in the sophisticated gun-wielding herdsmen, there is a growing perception that otherwise law-abiding citizens may have to make their own security arrangements to secure their lives and property. According to Abati (2016), this feeling that help would not come from official quarters has intensified with the extension of the aggression of the herdsmen to the southern part of the country as more farming communities fall under their unprovoked attacks. Such feeling of insecurity and the compelling urge for citizens to arrange for their own defence can only worsen the situation on ground. Put differently, the incessant attacks by

herdsmen, kidnappers, vandals, cattle rustlers, insurgents and the inability of the security forces to proactively stop them has led to an increasing number of Nigerians vowing to protect themselves and their communities by arming themselves.

It must be stated that an overstretched and fragile Nigerian government and security forces are reacting to these outbreaks of violence and banditry by implementing patchwork and often adversarial responses to violence instead of addressing the underlying drivers of conflict. The responses to the current conflict dynamics, especially armed banditry, have largely been reactive in nature and prone to political manipulation. In many cases, the responses exacerbate pre-existing mistrust and tensions (Bagu and Smith, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Banditry violence has affected populations living in Nigeria generally, but the states of Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina have been under an untold yoke of the menace. About 21 million people living in these states have been exposed to insecurity from the activities of bandits. Unconnected to the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, the banditry violence began as a farmer/herder conflict in 2011 and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence, and killings. It is noteworthy that while the causal factors for banditry and terrorism differ, both phenomena locally thrived on exploiting the fragile or weak state capacity evident in human rights abuses, inequality, poor service provision and unemployment. While banditry, predominantly in the northwest contrasts the predominance of violent extremism in the northeast, both constitute a common thread of the overlapping nature and characteristics of organized crime as well as its mirrored impact on peace and human security in the affected States.

Thus, integrative response approaches that require a combination of conflict management mechanisms such as consultation of actors and communities affected, dialogue, community policing, amnesty, reconciliation and security reforms by the respective State Governments is key to the mitigation of banditry in the Northwest. For instance, the peace initiatives through the amnesty programme launched in 2016 by the Katsina State Government as well as the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) effort by Zamfara State Government are laudable efforts. However, these lacked strong security and alternative conflict management strategies which would have ensured the stability of security beyond the amnesty and the DDR process.

It is noteworthy that the successes of reform processes would be based on inclusivity, credibility, transparency, public participation, appropriate and clear rules of procedures, and an implementation plan. The critical question however relates to the sustainability of the peace process and ensuring that all relevant parties are involved in implementing the agreements. It is important to reiterate that in expanding the peace initiatives, the affected State Governments solicited the support of traditional institutions, community watch groups, Civil Society Organizations (CSO), and other grassroots structures to complement its effort. This is in recognition of the roles of critical non-state actors to peace and development, community policing, including intelligence gathering and conflict resolution. Security operations against armed groups are important to curbing violence in Nigeria's northwest, but they will not secure the region durably. Sustainable peace requires a more comprehensive response by Nigerian authorities, at both the state and federal levels that address drivers of violence in the region.

It is therefore recommended that:

- i. The Federal, State and Local Governments, through their relevant agencies, should strengthen partnerships with traditional authorities, faith-based institutions, women and youth groups, Civil Society Organizations, and the media to enhance existing community-based peace infrastructures and early warning conflict management systems. These should be integrated into the national/state security architecture to respond to and mitigate the effects of structural causes of violent conflicts and the varied threats to human security in the region.
- ii. Governments at all levels must make deliberate efforts to address the challenges of human security by addressing livelihood issues. The government must stimulate job creation and guide inclusive growth to reduce the high levels of poverty, unemployment, and social misery in both urban and rural areas of the Northwestern region.
- iii. Deliberate and concerted efforts must be made towards entrenching democratic governance and providing participatory space to those currently marginalized or excluded from the policy arena so that they can be part of decision-making that affects their daily existence.
- iv. The federal government should engage peace and conflict resolution experts in dealing with issues concerning banditry. This will enable effective dialogues, negotiations, and a win-win resolution while encouraging early warning mechanisms.
- v. Women and youth groups should be empowered and given a sense of belonging through economic and governmental power access.
- vi. Specific steps should also be taken by the State Governments in the

- Northwest region to develop and implement land and agro-based policy programmes and projects that consciously integrate the interests of pastoralists, farmers, and other land users.
- vii. To maximize the utility of dialogue and sustain peace and security, the negotiation processes facilitated by the State Governors, Nigerian Police Force, Civil Society Organizations, Traditional and Religious leaders, amongst others, must be strengthened and sustained to address the root causes of conflict in the States.
 - viii. Civil Society Organizations, in partnership with traditional/religious leaders, representatives of farmers/herders groups, media, community leaders, and other relevant interest-based groups should be constructively engaged to give legitimacy to the ongoing peace dialogue process and ensure that various competing interests are properly addressed.

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