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Buhari has done little to address Nigeria's ongoing terrorism and insecurity

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Nigeria continues to experience increasing insecurity and violence through frequent attacks by terrorists, bandits and criminal herdsmen, despite repeated promises by President Buhari to crush insurgencies. Uche Igwe raises the political and economic undercurrents that may have perpetuated the conflict while drawing attention to the need for greater coordination and stakeholder scrutiny.

Back in 2013, former United States envoy John Campbell wrote *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink*, a book which brought global attention to how Nigeria was fast becoming one of the world's most religious and violent countries. He predicted the likely breakdown of the political system, the rise of insecurity, economic sclerosis and state failure. At that time, many dismissed him as a conspiracy theorist who wished ill on Africa's most populous country. Consequently, heated exchanges almost led to a diplomatic row between Abuja and Washington. Today, most of the book's forecasts have become reality. The *Financial Times* has recently reached the same

conclusion that the **Nigerian state is failing**. Citizens hardly sleep with two eyes closed as a result of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and ethno-religious violence spreading from states like Borno, Yobe and Adamawa up to Zamfara, **Katsina** and Kaduna.

In recent years, the once calm Abuja-Kaduna highway has been described as a **road to death** due to the increasing level of **daily kidnapping of travellers** including security officials. Rampaging criminal herdsmen continue to attack, rape and kill unarmed civilians, especially women, across the country. Last December 2020, about 344 school boys were declared missing after **gunmen attacked a school** in Kankara near Katsina, the President's home state. Although jihadists **claimed responsibility**, the boys were **later freed** with military intervention, arguably after a ransom was paid. Many **ungoverned spaces** and jihadist colonies continue to thrive. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka described the country as a **warzone**. The Sultan of Sokoto, a spiritual leader of Muslims, feels that northern Nigeria is the **worst place** in the country to live. This message came as the vocal catholic Bishop of Sokoto, Matthew Kukah, pointed to the **horrible and inhuman conditions** of a child born in the region. For many, life in Nigeria is fast becoming akin to a Hobbesian state of nature – nasty, brutish and short.

A helpless army with a large presence

The North East remains home to one of the most dreaded terrorist organisations in the world – known as *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), also known as Boko Haram. According to the **Global Terrorism Index (GTI)**, the group's salafi-jihadi insurgency has led to about **37,500 combat** related deaths as at 2018 and the displacement of more than two million others. Various governments have battled and failed to contain these insurgents who kidnapped school girls in Chibok, Dapchi, and later converted **many of them to sex slaves**. Last month, jihadists linked to the Islamic State group **attacked an army base** that led to the death of about 14 Nigerian soldiers. Yet officials commend the military for at least curtailing the terrorists from grabbing fresh territories as they were doing before 2015, thus allowing some internally displaced persons to return home, but the insurgents have consistently carried out successful attacks despite a military presence. For instance, in the last six months at least **two attacks** have been carried out on the convoy of Babagana

Zulum, a former university teacher and governor of Bornu State, leading to many casualties. On the 28 November, between **40 and 110** farmers were killed by Boko Haram fighters at Zabarmari near Maiduguri.

Although officials claim efforts have been made to equip them with newer platforms, the military continue to suffer heavy casualties amidst propaganda that insurgents have been **technically defeated**. Philip Walton, an American, was **kidnapped from his farm** in nearby Niger Republic and smuggled into one of the camps of the insurgents in northern Nigeria. It took the intervention of US Navy commandos to free the hostage after a gun battle with his captors.

Citizens complain that the army appears to be **losing the battle** against these enemies. There have been repeated **calls both from the National Parliament** and other organisations like the **Nigerian Governor's Forum** for the President to fire the service chiefs led by Lt. General Tukur Yusuf Buratai. However, such moves have been **reportedly blocked by the President himself**.

The deliberate politicisation of (in)security makes matters worse

The prevalent perception in Nigeria is that politicians from the northern part of the country are sympathisers and likely beneficiaries of insecurity in the region. Many of these politicians use religious bigotry and ethnicity as potent tools for mobilisation. Insecurity was a major part of the campaigns led to the defeat of former President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 by Muhammadu Buhari, a retired army General. However, earlier in 2012, Boko Haram had **named the same Buhari**, then Presidential candidate of Congress for Progressive Change, an opposition party, as one of their mediators. After his victory in 2015, **Buhari vowed to crush the insurgency**. To date, attacks continue and those who profess Christian faith predominantly remain targets. Many have been abducted given the option of converting to Islam or face execution. The United States recently put Nigeria on a **blacklist** for engaging in religious freedom violations. A recent **report published by Amnesty International** revealed how older people are particularly exposed to the brutality of armed groups, including witnessing the rape of their own children.

Historically, the group founded by the late Mohammed Yusuf was known as the 'ECOMOG boys' and used for political ends, especially to rig elections, but it did not

take long before politicians lost their control and became targets. Many politicians still pay 'protection monies' to these terrorist groups in order to be allowed to visit their constituencies.

Thriving conflict economies may perpetuate the crisis

Reports say that **Africa is set to overtake the Middle East** as the main theatre for jihadism over the next twenty years. There are those who insist that lucrative kickbacks arising from opaque military spending allegedly serves as incentives to beneficiaries who cause the conflicts to linger. For instance, although Nigeria's defence spending remains a secret, it is believed that about **840 billion naira** [\$US 2.1 billion] was budgeted for by the Ministry of Defence in 2020 alone. In addition, the insurgents are said to have taken control of profitable commercial fishing and farming within the Lake Chad basin to fund their operations. About 45% of dry fish consumed in Nigeria comes from Baga town in Bornu State. According to the World Food Program, the combined fish and red pepper trade **contributed \$48 million to the Nigerian economy** annually and employs about 300,000 persons. Some military officers posted to the region reportedly abandon their assignment, diverting their attention to the **lucrative fish and livestock business**. Reports have also revealed that these terrorists **impose taxes** on civilians to fund their operations.

Analysts have put the amount of **ransoms paid** to jihadist kidnappers in North and West Africa at \$120 million. Between kidnappers, bandits, cattle rustlers and terrorists, there is very little difference as one set of activities apparently service the other. The situation has been exacerbated by the existence of porous and poorly policed borders with Cameroon (773km), Chad (87km) and Niger (1,497km).

Terrorists reportedly **smuggle in weapons** all the way from northern Libya across the Sahara desert. They are said to rely on **ransoms paid by kidnapped hostages**. It is a chain of horror that is an integral part of a flourishing underground economy that has come to define and sustain the region's escalating conflict.

Absence of a policy space and effective monitoring mechanism

The fight against insecurity in northern Nigeria, especially the insurgency, needs to be reviewed urgently. President Buhari claims that his government is investing heavily in **acquiring weapons**. That is clearly not enough. The acquisition of

equipment has proven to be necessary but insufficient to halt the conflict and realistically defeat the insurgents. The nature of the conflict is constantly mutating, and therefore new approaches need to be considered with geo-political dimensions of the crisis in mind. Efforts must be made to review and update the **National Counter Terrorism Strategy** and the **National Security Strategy** to incorporate coordinated policy conversations, regional coordination and deepen stakeholder scrutiny. The aloofness of the President and his unwillingness to heed the call to replace military chiefs is unhelpful.

Moreover, poverty **breeds insecurity and the lack of economic opportunities** for the youth continues to promote the incubation of terrorism. More investment is urgently needed to improve access to education opportunities for young people in northern Nigeria. A lot more needs to be done and said through strategic communication efforts to build the trust of citizens and stakeholders. Although, President Buhari promised to **reorganise and reenergise the security apparatus** during his 2021 New Year speech, citizens remain deeply sceptical. Yet they have no choice but to wait patiently to see whether he could ever match his words with action.

Photo: Flintlock 2018 Training in Agadez, Niger. Credit: U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Mary S. Katzenberger, 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne)/Released. Licensed under creative commons (CC BY 2.0).

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