



Uche Igwe

July 12th, 2021

Illicit natural resource extraction in Nigeria fuels violence and insecurity

1 comment | 7 shares

Estimated reading time: 6 minutes



The persistence of insecurity in Nigeria is due to the failure to address root causes, combined with a lack of consensus among political and religious elites about the nature of the conflict and methods of mitigation. LSE fellow Uche Igwe describes how the illicit extraction of gold contributes to prolonging violent conflict in states like Zamfara, and suggests how decision-makers can be firm in halting the disturbing trend.

Nigeria's security situation is deteriorating daily. There are rampant kidnappings for ransom in the Northwest, widespread Islamic insurgencies in the Northeast, a string of daily attacks on police in the Southeast and a surge of attacks by criminal herdsmen across other parts of the country, including the Southwest. The Niger Delta Avengers, a militant group in the oil-producing region, have **threatened to shut down oil installations**, citing what they describe as the government's deaf ears to rising challenges across Nigeria – threats President Muhammadu Buhari has **described** as unnecessary. **Clashes between security agents** and members of the

proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra, campaigning for the secession of the country's southeast, continue to **lead to major fatalities**. Many **police stations** and **offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission** have also been attacked and razed by fire, in many instances by **unknown gunmen**. Despite government efforts, the violence appears to be intensifying rather than abating, visible to every segment of the country.

Identifying and prosecuting profiteers from insecurity

A **recent report** released by Global Rights, an international human rights organisation, revealed a glaring spike in violence nationally in which 4,556 persons died in 2020 alone. Another report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) states the insurgency in the Northeast, which has lasted for 12 years, has resulted in the deaths of **324,000 children under five**, a decline of agricultural production leading to food shortage and an overall loss to the country of around \$27.8 billion.

During his Democracy Day speech on 12 June 2021, President Buhari admitted to the **existence of criminals** taking advantage of and profiting from the country's difficult situation. The government promised to profile well-placed Nigerians suspected to be **financing terrorism including businessmen for prosecution** – bandits who live and operate within society. Some of these abductees and their captors trek for hours with their victims without being discovered by security agents. Many of the weapons used for their operations are said to belong originally to security agencies deployed to combat the conflict. A **committee report** set up by the Governor of Zamfara State, Bello Matawalle, indicted top military officers and traditional rulers, including five Emirs and 33 district heads as complicit in the ongoing violence and banditry within the state. In 2020, a court in Abu Dhabi sentenced **six Nigerians to prison** for funding Boko-Haram terrorists, including a government official.

Understanding the role of natural resource extraction in the conflict

In the case of Zamfara State in the Northwest, the illegal mining of huge gold deposits has been identified as one of the underlying causes of the region's conflict.

Security officials insist that a **strong and glaring nexus** has been established between the activities of bandits and illicit mining. Data from UN Comtrade revealed that between 2012 and 2018 about **97 tons of gold worth over 3 billion dollars** was smuggled out of Nigeria. The wave of rural banditry is said to be a result of a fiefdom of deadly gangs struggling for a piece of the pie. **Criminal networks fuel community violence** to provide the necessary cover to continue to exploit these mineral deposits. They do so in collaboration with traditional rulers, politicians and **foreign opportunists**.

In June 2021, officials at the Kokota International Airport in Ghana **intercepted 978 bars of gold** allegedly belonging to the former governor of Zamfara State, Abdulaziz Abubakar Yari, valued at about 8.2 billion naira (£14.5m). Yari was recently arrested for **misappropriation of public funds** and illegal financial dealings by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. Around the same time, the federal government declared a no-fly zone and banned all forms of mining in Zamfara state to pursue non-state actors whose activities are said to be causing chaos in the area.

Discordant voices from the ruling All Progressives Congress

The ruling All Progressives Congress party is **divided** on how to approach issues of insecurity, especially about the farmers-herdsmen crisis, rural banditry and state police. Rotimi Akeredolu, a prominent lawyer and governor of Ondo State, **has openly disagreed** with the Presidency on issues around open grazing and accused a top Presidential aide of a mendacious and pernicious agenda that threatens Nigeria's peaceful coexistence.

There appears a deliberate and often partisan (mis)understanding – as well as narrow definitions – of the origins of the conflict and how best to tackle them. The description of nomadic Fulani pastoralists as herdsmen behind banditry appears to stigmatise the entire community, and prominent Fulanis like President Buhari himself have been accused of repeatedly downplaying the role of criminal herdsmen in the nationwide conflict. Muslim clerics like Sheik Gumi have openly supported and **negotiated with bandits** who have kidnapped many school children, encouraging **dialogue with 'good bandits'** and defending **their cause** in the media.

This lack of shared definition and apparent conceptual confusion continues to blur objective policy debates. The body language of the President appears to cast some doubt on the public perception of the sincerity of the government in tackling the ongoing insecurity. For instance, the proscription of the Indigenous People of Biafra as a terrorist organisation sparked mixed feelings among people from the southern parts of the country. When the military was deployed in the area, citizens openly complained. They believe that at a time when the fight against the insurgency in the Northeast and banditry in the Northwest appears to be waning, deploying soldiers east may be misconstrued as a display of cruelty and extreme punishment for those whose crime is supporting the separatist agenda.

Insecurity may threaten the 2023 elections

Many Governors such as Nasir Ahmad Elrufai of Kaduna State have expressed frustration at the ongoing killings, lamenting how the inability of his colleagues to control the instruments of coercion, **like the police**, affect their function as chief security officers in their respective states. Seventeen governors from the South recently asked President Buhari to **convoke a national dialogue** to address the security challenges in the country. Samuel Ortom, Governor of Benue State, maintains that the country is **no longer safe under Buhari**, alleging that the President is working to ensure that **his Fulani ethnic group takes over Nigeria**.

Ortom's voice joins others in calling on the federal government to declare an emergency on insecurity to avoid the ongoing crisis **threatening the upcoming elections in 2023**. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka says **that he has not seen any proof** that President Buhari understands how much needs to be done to improve national security. In a recent open letter, Yusuf Alli, a member of the ruling All Progressives Congress, called on the President to declare a state of emergency in Kaduna state to save it from what he described as looming anarchy.

Conflict drivers and structural problems need to be revisited

There is a need to establish a political and social consensus on the nature of the conflict to fathom objective actions. Multi-pronged approaches are necessary. Conflict drivers and structural problems need to be reexamined. For instance, it is

misleading to imagine that Boko Haram will be defeated through military action alone. Formal and informal sources of power and **public authority** in these conflict areas must be studied further.

The federal government, moreover, must work with states to achieve a common purpose regardless of existing political differences, and conflict prevention mechanisms must become part of Nigeria's political process. The story about Nigerian Army combatants being overstretched, under-resourced and corrupt is an old one. Verifiable efforts must be made towards effective coordination and ridding the military of corruption. Contentions about the decentralisation of security must be resolved through the recognition of regional security outfits and the establishment of state policing can be codified through enabling legislation.

Crucially, the government should recognise there is a danger of appearing to be protecting people who thrive in illegality through government-sanctioned negotiations with bandits and kidnappers, particularly when whispers abound of offering forms of amnesty. This will end up producing catastrophic, counterproductive results and unintended consequences. Whether and when these disturbing trends will be halted may be a function of how quickly decision makers in Nigeria can exercise necessary political will.

Photo: Soldiers conduct presence patrols during Flintlock 20. Credit: U.S. Army photo by Spc. Miguel Pena. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

About the author



Uche Igwe

Dr Uche Igwe is a Senior Political Economy Analyst and Visiting Fellow at the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa. He is also a Visiting Fellow at International Centre for Policing and Security at the University of South Wales. He may be reached at: ucheigwe@gmail.com.