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The increasing nexus between bandits and terrorists in Nigeria's northwest

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As banditry and terrorism in Nigeria's northwest region accelerates with country-wide effects, policy solutions must be multipronged. While the government's strategic military operation is commendable, says Oluwole Ojewale, policing and targeted socio-economic interventions to ameliorate poverty are critical to address a rapidly worsening situation.

In spite of government **efforts**, Nigeria's security situation is fast **deteriorating**. The ongoing conflict **between herders and farmers** in north-central Nigeria has been rated six times deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency. The abductions of schoolboys **in Kankara community, Katsina State, Zamfara state and Niger State** are more examples of the deplorable state of security in the country. The unprecedented increase in violent attacks is defying the **sustained narrative** among analysts that the northwest is relatively peaceful compared to the northeast – even though the northwest is poorer, worse governed in some areas and has **lower levels of human development**.

Vicious attacks on local communities and kidnappings by criminal groups in the region is being described by state officials as 'banditry'. But this menace has over a century-long **history**, going back to a notorious incident in 1901 when bandits attacked 12,000 camel-laden caravans travelling between Hausaland and Tahoua region, stealing goods worth £165,000 and killing 210 traders.

The resurgence of banditry in recent times started with a lone criminal gang in 2011 and grew from a single cell, mainly operating in Zamfara, to over 120 gangs across six states in 2021. There has been a progressive transformation from its rudimentary and isolated roots to a complicated transnational and rapidly spreading security threat.

Nigeria's National Security Strategy shows that banditry constitutes about 40% of national insecurity in Nigeria. **Bandits** are a loose collection of criminal gangs operating predominantly in areas of limited statehood. Recently, they have become emboldened and carried out strategic attacks on the nation's foremost defence academy in **Kaduna** and a military base in **Zamfara state**. On both occasions, 14 officers were killed, one abducted and military weapons were carted away. These isolated cases marked a major setback in the campaign to curb violent crimes across contiguous states.

The sheer **humanitarian consequences** of these attacks remain alarming. Since 2011, nearly 200,000 people have been displaced within the region, and an **official report** shows that at least 6,319 people were killed, 3,672 were kidnapped and more than 500 villages were burnt by bandits in in Zamfara from 2011 to 2019. Over 6,000 persons were also injured from bandit activities, with more than 250,000 cows rustled, and over 3,000 hectares of arable land, more than 600 commercial stores and 336 vehicles **destroyed**. Their activities are precipitating food insecurity – a threat **highlighted** by President Buhari as **food prices** grow at the fastest pace in more than 15 years.

These effects are **enabled** in the northwest by poorly managed resource conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, the illegal mining of gold, declining rural livelihood support, poor management of Nigeria's international borders and inadequate presence of policing actors.

The banditry and terrorism nexus in Nigeria

Distinct patterns have **emerged** regarding the nexus between bandits and Islamist fundamentalist groups in the northwest. Bandits and terrorist groups are both

recruiting youth from rural communities blighted by poverty, and the north-western states are replete with independent and well-resourced gangs who can be co-opted for criminal pursuits and influenced for ideological purposes.

Geography also plays a significant role in cementing the nexus between bandits and terrorist groups. The northwest is naturally endowed with **vast and rugged forestlands**, some of them sitting astride porous borderlines across state frontiers that bandits have colonised and made largely ungovernable. Furthermore, the forested landscape are so-called '**ungoverned spaces**', where the presence of the authorities is either non-existent or, at best, sporadic. These ungoverned spaces have become a haven for fundamentalist groups who desperately seek an operational foothold in the region.

Mutual usage of logistics and arms also presents evidence of a nexus between the bandits and terrorists in the northwest region. There has been **records** of arms trading between these groups, particularly the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The progressive sophistication of arms borne by bandits point to the existence of a network of international arms smuggling.

Both have shown a mastery of the political economy of kidnap for ransom and extortion, as a means to locally fund their criminal enterprise and acquire sophisticated arms. This points to a mutual understanding or copying of operational methodology. Bandits are able to fund their operations largely through the lucrative **kidnapping for ransom** that particularly targets school children, similar to that earlier deployed by Boko Haram with the kidnapping of children in Chibok and the **subsequent payment of ransom** before their partial release.

Pathways to a solution

The policy solutions to these challenges in the northwest must be multipronged. While the occasional military operation is commendable, policing remains a critical to rolling back their proliferation. An extensive review and amendment of section 214 of the 1999 constitution must take place, which centralises policing power within the federal government. Decentralised policing can create a system of localised and community-focussed policing system that affords communities organisational, operational and human resources input into the policing outfits that secure communities.

National and subnational governments must also prioritise targeted socio-economic interventions to ameliorate poverty and a lack of opportunities. Some affected states

have the worst governance indicators in Nigeria, highlighting the role of unemployment, poverty and climate change in worsening the crisis. Mass investment in agriculture, infrastructure, education and other avenues to increase youth employment is sine-qua-non to solving these problems.

Lastly, the review of the **ECOWAS protocol on transhumance** is sacrosanct. Putting into perspective increasing regional conflicts between farmers and pastoralists, and associated linkages, according to the evolution of banditry in the northwest, the ECOWAS Protocol on transhumance, after two decades of operation, needs technical revisions. Its original spirit should be maintained.

Photo: A Nigerian soldier posts security while conducting tactical combat casualty care training. Credit: U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Heather Doppke/79th Theater Sustainment Command. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

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