

## TACKLING INSECURITY IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION: FINDING WORKABLE SOLUTIONS

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**West Africa**, like other regions in Africa, has faced a plethora of security challenges since the end of European colonization in the 1960s, and many of these challenges remain acute. Insecurity in this region spans from governance issues to trans-national criminality, which has resulted in a serious breakdown of law and order. Several efforts have been made by national and regional and international actors such as the United Nations (UN), African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to improve security in West Africa, but many of the problems persist. With a focus on Nigeria, this essay aims to explore the security challenges plaguing the West African sub-region, their causes, and workable solutions.

### **The State of Insecurity in West Africa**

In West Africa today, one of the major concerns of people is insecurity. Wanton murder, destruction, and disturbance have become so common that Fawole & Ukeje (2005) describe the region as "a veritable theatre of violent conflict, political instability and state implosions. This description is backed by the fact that the region has witnessed two inter-state wars, five civil wars with a regional dimension, and over 40 successful military coup d'état and unconstitutional changes of government, as well as many protracted separatist/insurgent conflicts (Issaka, 2006).

The 16 West African countries face almost the same security challenges even though some states have peculiar problems. To an outsider, however, these problems are overshadowed by an illusion of stability and development when compared to the explosive situations in Syria and Yemen, but

it has caused severe damage to the lives of people, their properties, and the economy, making West Africa one of the most unstable regions in the world.

There are daily reports of brutal attacks on people and their businesses, kidnapping, maiming, and killing of women and children as well as disruption of peace (Abdullah, 2011).

For years now, West African countries have been a hotspot for terrorist groups. In Nigeria, the North-East and part of the North-West zones have been under the siege of the insurgent group popularly called Boko Haram, which constitutes the most dreaded terrorist group in Africa, and even eclipsed ISIS for the morbid title of the deadliest terrorist group in 2014 (Huffpost News, 2015).

In Mali, the Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara maintain a huge presence. There is the AL-Mourabitoun in Northern Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast while in Burkina Faso, the Ansarul Islam and Ansar Dine formed the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM). The devastating impact of these groups is almost immeasurable due to their routine bomb detonations, the strategic target of important places like motor parks, markets, churches, and mosques, striking on important days and ransacking of communities.

Their spectrum of attacks has also been extended to schools with the frequent attacks on tertiary institutions in Maiduguri. An example of such a cruel act is the abduction of the 254 Chibok schoolgirls, most of whom have reportedly been

converted to Islam, married to Boko Haram commanders, and some were said to have been used as suicide bombers. Some of these groups also target important international organizations such as the UN whereby its building was bombed in Abuja and several attacks launched against its envoys in other countries.

Conflicts between pastoralists (commonly referred to as herdsmen) and farmers have been another major source of insecurity in West Africa. Countries such as Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Mali, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Congo have had their fair share of the mayhem, but Nigeria remains the worst hit. According to the 2017 Global Terrorism Index, deaths from Fulani extremists resulted in more than 3000 recorded deaths across four countries with 92% of fatalities taking place in Nigeria between 2010 and 2016 (Jamil, 2017). A day hardly passes without the disturbing news of an attack by herdsmen. Reports indicate that they specialize in the destruction of people's farms, attacking farmers who are bold enough to challenge them and they sometimes ransack communities majorly in Southern Kaduna, Jos and Benue. The dismissive handling of this issue by the government has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many Nigerians, as many people continue to live in perpetual fear of the dreaded herdsmen. In addition to the above are ethno-religious conflicts which often arise from hatred and unhealthy rivalry among the numerous tribes and religions in West African countries. Anecdotal evidence further shows that some of these tribal and religious sentiments also play out during general elections, whereby groups resort to violence as a form of protest or resistance to perceived election fraud.

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Kidnapping is also a major problem across the West African sub-region, especially in Nigeria. Previously, kidnapping was popular in the Niger Delta region due to the agitations of militants in the region for control over their resources. However, kidnapping is now rampant across all regions in Nigeria as employees of multinational oil firms as well as other innocent Nigeria, including school children (as in the case of the Epe school children) are kidnaped for a ransom. The proliferation of arms across the region has made this

problem worse because these arms have been used as primary tools of violence, causing deaths and injuries to thousands of people. Moreover, armed robbery, ritual killings, human trafficking, and other crimes are on the rise in the region, the result of which has reduced the ranks of West

African countries to the Global Peace Index.

### **Causes of Insecurity in the West African Sub-Region**

The causes of the insecurity prevailing in West Africa vary according to countries or contexts. However, certain problems cut across diverse situations with serious impacts on human security. In the context of Nigeria, a lot of measures have been put in place to bolster security, including the formation of a Joint Task Force (JTF), empowerment of the State Security Service (SSS), and the movement of the Nigerian military command center to Maiduguri.

Reports of periodic dismissal and appointment of new security officials, and a huge sum of money appropriated to tame security challenges, especially the budgeted N934 billion in 2015 all point to a concerted effort by the state to remedy the situation. Yet, security challenges continue to surge, perhaps due to the presence of

unscrupulous elements in the government who are deliberately sabotaging government effort by diverting funds meant for security to their pockets.

This lack of accountability and corruption has led to the surge of security challenges because security personnel is not well-equipped, not well catered for, and they are also battling with low morale. It has also been reported that the Nigerian Federal government plays politics with security matters as states under the leadership of opposition parties sometimes face difficulty in accessing security funds/votes that is meant for them. Given the lack of cooperation among government officials that ought to bring the country together in harmony, the insecurity war becomes difficult to win.

Since the Nigerian government, like their counterpart in other West African countries, has failed to make public services easily available to people, this condition has created over the years a pool of frustrated people, who are easily provoked by any unpleasant event.

Even though the country earns huge revenue from crude oil, the political elites have failed to deploy the earnings in meeting the needs of the people, a situation Hazen and Horner (2007) described as the "Paradox of Plenty." The failure of governments to embark on developmental projects has produced poverty, unemployment, and increasing criminal activities, especially among youths.

Some observers have also suggested that insecurity in Nigeria, as in other West African states, is a political problem created to serve the interest and agenda of certain political parties and disgruntled individuals.

According to Labaran Maku (2013), "the insurgency in the North-East is as a result of wicked politics and violent politics by some politicians. What they want to do is to destabilize Nigeria and destroy this country."

Although the multi-party system in Nigeria is designed to stimulate healthy competition among political parties and politicians, political rivals instead engage in peace-truncating activities, which are sometimes meant to defeat their opponent or to make an opponent appear incompetent.

On their part, security agencies responsible for the protection of lives and properties also engage in rivalry among themselves, the result of which has been poor coordination of security operations. Apart

from intra-rivalry within the Nigerian Armed forces which consist of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force, there is also inter-agency rivalry between the Police, the State Security Service, and the Armed forces. This has not only undermined the government's effort to end insecurity, the lack of cooperation among

security agencies has also allowed avoidable terrorist raids to take place. Examples of such attacks include the assault on the Composite Group Air force base in Maiduguri, and the attack on one Internally Displaced People's camp where about 100 people died (The Nation, 2013; Vanguard, 2017).

Another problem hindering the efficiency of security agencies in Nigeria is their abuse of human rights, which has turned most of the host communities against them. Given the lack of support from people, insecurity continues to escalate.

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Some of Nigeria's insecurity problems have their roots in religious intolerance or ethnicity. This has risen from distrust and mutual suspicion among various ethnic and religious groups in the country.

Unfortunately, when new security threats arise, religious and ethnic sentiments are used in politicizing important security issues. Leaders of religious and ethnic groups with considerable influence over their followers, now make public inflammatory statements in places of worship, on the media and in public gatherings. While some political leaders are sponsors and motivators of these ethnic and religious bigots, the most dangerous are those leaders who remain indifferent.

Lastly, the neglect of social and corporate responsibility by many companies in Nigeria has led to rising insecurity in many parts of the country. This is because some of the companies and corporations invest little in the various communities where they exploit human and material resources. The increasing level of poverty in some of the resource-rich communities and towns has generated resistance from the hosts, as in the case of the Niger Delta crisis.

### **Tackling Insecurity in Nigeria and the West African Sub-region**

Without any gainsaying, the continuing Boko Haram insurgency and other violent crimes have serious implications for the socio-political and economic development of Nigeria and other countries in the West African sub-region. To end insecurity, the government must put in place a system that would prevent elected and appointed public office holders from embezzling state funds or create loopholes to steal funds allocated for security. The federal and state governments should also transcend party affiliations so they can form a common front that is needed to combat insecurity. This effort should address poverty, unemployment, corruption, injustice, porous

borders, arms proliferation, and herdsmen crises.

Also, the Nigerian government should engage their counterparts in other West African countries in order to foster military collaboration needed to root out terrorists and criminals from the region. This is particularly important for border towns in many West African countries which insurgents have turned into their base of operation. To eradicate poverty in these towns and across West African states, the governments should ensure:

- 1) Access to employment and inputs: lands, equipment, and financial capital.
  - 2) Access to basic social services: housing, food, healthcare, and education.
  - 3) Fair redistribution of income wealth.
- Secondly, security agencies at the regional, national, and local levels should cooperate to harmonize efforts to eradicate insecurity. This is important because unhealthy rivalry among the agencies would not produce a united front with which to defeat criminals and terrorists. Hence, intelligence gathering, and surveillance should be a combined effort. Also, security agencies should evolve a people-centered approach by collaborating with their host communities in a bid to make their work easier.

Evidence suggests that the success recorded by the Civilian Joint Task Force in the north-eastern part of Nigeria attest to this collaborative approach as the arrest of top Boko Haram members was made possible through the joint task force. To improve the performance of security agencies, there should be a complete overhaul and restructuring of Nigeria's security apparatus to reflect international standards. There should regular training of officers, intelligence gathering and sharing via new technology, and a good salary for the motivation of officers.

The political class also has a role to play in promoting peace and security. This idea was demonstrated by the ex-president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 when he stated that "My ambition is not worth the blood of any Nigerian". The current politics of ethnicity and bitterness must cease, and every politician should accept defeat whenever they lose elections. This includes calling their supporters to order and promoting peace and participatory governance.

The two major religious groups also have a role to play in ending insecurity across Nigeria and in other West African countries. Religious teachings is one of the bases of value development, and the role of value in security cannot be overemphasized because value governs behaviors. Hence, worship centers should not be turned into a venue of indoctrination or political rallies where one religious group is instigated against others. Instead, religious tolerance should be taught alongside spiritual messages, which would discourage killing, corruption and violence. Religious tolerance should be taught in schools as well in order to create a tolerant people and society.

Every region has powerful monarchs with far-reaching influence, who command respect among their people. Thus, leaders of ethnic groups should promote peace by encouraging their people to live in peace with people of other ethnic groups. They should not only assist security agencies in mobilizing the support of their people, but these tribal leaders should also condemn hate and violent crime. If they continually speak against criminal activities such as secession and terrorism, sooner or later, crimes will decrease drastically.

According to Elumelu (2004), business enterprises can contribute to the enhancement of security through long-term investments that would create jobs for unemployed youth in Nigeria. This social

and corporate should not be used as an avenue to exploit resource-rich communities where they operate but rather, to complement government effort to provide security and social amenities such as streetlights and security guards. Media houses should constantly air programs that promote peace and stability.

Importantly, efforts should be made by the media to educate people on how to be vigilant and remain security conscious. Lastly, as private individuals, all citizens should cultivate the habit of reporting any suspicious activities to the appropriate authority. Everyone must show a high level of security awareness and alertness because no security agents can protect towns better than the residents.

### **Conclusion**

While a vision of absolute security may seem like a utopia, consistent efforts towards security improvement would move Nigeria and other West African countries towards the desired destination. The solutions discussed above can be explored and implemented by countries in West African nations to tackle insecurity and bring serenity to the region. Without any doubt, a secure region would not only result in an economic boom, but also the preservation of lives and properties.

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