



Banditry in northwest Nigeria: Complicating Nigerian security challenges

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Abstract

Banditry has become a very serious crime and has potential for transforming into other felonious offenses, such as physical violence, financial victimisation, and murder. This paper did not focus only on the consequences of banditry but also examined its predisposing factors in Nigeria. Thus, the objectives of the study are: to examine the nexus between terrorism and banditry; to investigate the mutual reinforcement between corruption and banditry; to find out if banditry and poverty are correlated; and to examine the consequences of the problem. Using secondary qualitative data, the study found out that banditry has been taking place in Nigeria due to the activities of insurgent groups in the North East region, but it increased with the emergence of “Boko Haram” terrorism in the North-Central Nigeria; corruption is not strongly related to banditry, but they have indirect connection whereby youth political thugs served corrupt political leaders and turned out to become bandits, sometimes for ransom from political opponents; poverty and unemployment is correlated with banditry in Nigeria; and there are multiple consequences of banditry, such as financial victimization, rape and even death of the victims. The paper therefore suggested that for banditry to be eradicated in Nigeria, poverty, youth’s unemployment and corruption must also be significantly reduced. The paper also suggested that terrorism and insurgency should be fought as they involved abductions of vulnerable people, females and children in particular; thus, for Nigeria to address the banditry phenomenon, strategic security action should be onslaught against terrorism and insurgency, etc.

Keywords: banditry, insurgency, security, kidnapping and terrorism

Introduction

The rising insecurity in the northwest—vicious attacks on local communities and kidnapping of people by criminal groups in the region—is being described by state officials as banditry. Banditry violence has affected populations living in Nigeria’s Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina states in the northwest. About 21 million people living in these states have been exposed to insecurity from 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. The violence has affected about 35 out of 92 local government areas in the South West zone of Nigeria.

According to ACAPS (2021), the discovery of gold mines and the activities of illegal miners competing for the control of gold reserves have served to further intensify the existence and activities of armed groups in the northwest. By March 2020, more than 210,000 people have been internally displaced. More than 35,000 refugees have crossed communal borders to Maradi in Niger Republic by the beginning of March 2020. These refugees are hosted in Madaou in Tahoua region, Dan Dadji Makaou, Garin Kaka and Guidan Roudmji

In addition to displacement, the violence has hampered agricultural activities and heightened the risk of acute food insecurity. Livelihoods have been disrupted, fear and insecurity among the population have increased, and IDPs

and host communities are competing for scarce resources such as water, land and food. Protection concerns are heightened for women, children and the elderly.

Conceptualizing Banditry

Banditry refers to the incidences of armed robbery or allied violent crimes, such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, and village or market raids. It involves the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person or a group of persons in order to rob, rape or kill (Okoli and Okpaleke 2014). Economic or political interests motivate banditry. The former refers to banditries motivated by the imperative of material accumulation while the latter has to do with those driven by the quest to rob, to assault or to liquidate a person or a group of persons based on political or ideological considerations. Various forms of banditry have been identified in literature. Table 1 highlights these categories of banditry in an attempt to propose a typology of the phenomenon.

Theoretical Explanation

The primary goal of sociological enterprise is to understand and explain social phenomena; and the criminological enterprise is to create valid and accurate theories of crime causation. The paper will adopt two theories: one crime causation theory (social exchange theory) and one victimisation theory (lifestyle theory). Social exchange theory was propounded by George Homans (1961, as cited in Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2016) and the theory is an off-shoot

of rational choice approach, which views “human behaviour as being guided by hedonistic principle or pleasure-seeking” tendency (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2016, p. 81). Homan’s main interest was on the history of rewards and costs, which lead people to do what they do. Basically, Homans argued, people continue to do what they have found to be rewarding in the past. Conversely, they cease doing what has proved to be costly in the past. To understand behaviour, we need to understand an individual’s history of rewards and costs. Using exchange theory, kidnapping and receiving a ransom for returning hostages can be viewed as special kind of give and take. The reciprocal characteristic of this type of crime is that, it involves give and take because the kidnappers ask for money or make demands for something other than money (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2016: 85). The second theory to be used in explaining kidnapping in Nigeria is lifestyle theory. The major premise of lifestyle theory is that victimisation risk is increased when people have a high-risk lifestyle. The theory contends that “placing oneself at risk by going out to dangerous places results in increased the likelihood of victimisation” (Siegel, 2010, p. 81). Thus, victimisation risk is increased by such behaviours as associating with young men, going out in public places late at night, and living in an urban area. Conversely, one’s chances of victimisation can be reduced by staying home at night, moving to a rural area, staying out of public places, earning more money, and getting married (Siegel, 2010). The basis of lifestyle theory is that crime is not a random occurrence but rather a function of the victim’s lifestyle. For example, due to their lifestyle and demographic makeup, college campuses contain large concentrations of young women who may be at greater risk for rape and other forms of sexual assault than women in the general population. The strength of the theory, according to Siegel (2010), is that it explains victimisation patterns in the social structure. Males, young people, and the poor have high victimisation rates because they have a higher-risk lifestyle than females, the elderly, and the affluent. Based on some empirical data, Siegel (2010, p. 77) mentioned that groups that have an extremely risky life, such as young runaways living on the street, are at high risk for victimisation; the more time they are exposed to street life, the greater their risk of becoming crime victims. Teenage males have an extremely high victimisation risk because their lifestyle places them at risk both at school and once they leave the school grounds. They spend a great deal of time hanging out with friends and pursuing recreational fun.

The Origin of Banditry in Nigeria

According to Anyadike (2021) ^[1], in Zamfara, as in the rest of the northwest, the term “bandit” is shorthand for nomadic Fulani pastoralists. The elision not only stigmatises an entire community but skates over a complicated shared history with the politically dominant majority Hausa population. Competition with Hausa farmers has sharpened over the past decade with both the intensification of agriculture and a drying climate. The expansion of farms across stock routes has meant access to both grazing and water have become issues of lethal contention. Fulani herders are typically accused of ignoring boundaries, and their young men of being quick to violence. But the Fulani have also been victims of land-grabbing by the well-connected, and of extortion by local authorities when it comes to the levying of fines.

Organised Fulani raids began on Hausa villages from around 2014 in an escalation of what had been more localised conflicts. In self-defence, vigilante groups formed with the backing of the state government, but their revenge was often indiscriminate – turning towns into no-go areas and driving some Fulani communities into the forests. Fulani militia responded with even greater ferocity – and better weaponry – calling on nomadic kin from across the region for assistance. Sweeping into Hausa villages on motorbikes, they typically killed all the men they could find, on the assumption they were all vigilantes.

What has resulted from the mayhem are two groups of forest-based armed men who both kill. There are Fulani militia that claim to defend their own, but equally intimidate their communities; and then there are hardcore armed criminals that are predominantly Fulani, but include Hausa – and anyone else attracted to making money.

In Tsafe, about an hour out of Gusau, is the run-down office of the local chapter of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACABAN) – the main lobby group for Fulani pastoralists. There’s a hole in the ceiling, outdated calendars on the walls, and the only furniture is a wobbly chair for guests.

“Some of the bandits have gone too far, but they are still part of us.”

The men gathered to talk try to thread a needle between disavowing the violence, but also argue that the militia are their only protection against what they see as ethnic cleansing by the local Hausa community and the security forces that turn a blind eye.

“Some of the bandits have gone too far, but they are still part of us,” said Bello Muhammed, the local finance secretary. “They are killing for a cause – any place there is killing means there is a bigger problem.”

That cause, they said, is to force the government to provide services and to end Fulani “marginalisation” – a word repeatedly used. “Bring schools, roads, and development and [the insecurity] is over,” said Umah Mohammed, the association chair, in the embrace of a more settled lifestyle.

According to Adedeji (2021), banditry violence is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. The history of banditry in Nigeria can be traced to pre-civil war period when government deteriorated in certain parts of the old Western region resulting in political violence, crime and organised insurgency. Odinkalu (2018) ^[4], maintains that during the civilian reign, local bandits were reportedly stealing domestic animals. Recently, in the Northwest area of Nigeria particularly in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Niger, Kaduna and Kebbi States, the activities of Bandits have been particularly worrisome. The activities of these bandits’ ranges from kidnapping to murder, robbery, rape, cattle-rustling, and the likes. Their modus operandi involves maiming and killing their victims when they least expect. Usually, they mobilized themselves through the forests into the neighborhood riding on fast motorcycles especially in the nights and shoot at will. Sometimes in the afternoon, once they were sure there were no security presence of the police or military around, they unleash terror in the communities. This growing threat is claiming victims in hundreds. Several children have been orphaned and women became widows overnight while the issue of food security as well as humanitarian tragedy will further make life unbearable for many Nigerians

Causes of Banditry in Nigeria

Nigeria is highly susceptible to violent attacks by the various terror groups due to a combination of mutually reinforcing factors. Primary factors include:

It is important to note that the newest Northwest conflict started because of fight over depleting lands and water resources between the farmers and the herdsmen with the farmers belonging mostly to the Hausa people and the herdsmen being predominantly Fulani. (International Crisis Group Report; 2020) ^[5] As a consequence, there has been massive deforestation because of the impact of the Sahara Desert spreading south. (Nduka, 2020) ^[6]

Also, in an area where poverty is deeply rooted and illiteracy extremely high, rearing cattle is the preoccupation of many Fulani'. Thus, whenever this source of livelihood is threatened, whether by nature or human intervention, they are willing to do anything to survive. In addition, there is the problem of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the area, inequality and as John Campbell puts it, "weakened, stretched and demoralized security services. There are also problems of failure of local justice and ethnic division as well as uncoordinated and under policed borders. Indeed, in recent history, banditry also became the order of the day because of government's inability to protect lives and property as well as failure to put the welfare of the people first.

Other reasons adduced for the rise of banditry in Nigeria includes:

- **Porous Nigeria-Niger borders and difficult terrain.** Nigeria's border with Niger spans 1,497 km and is poorly policed by the Nigeria Custom and Immigration Services. The porous nature of these borders heightens the potential spread of terrorist activities into northwest Nigeria from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The vulnerability of the border to the infiltration of terror groups is compounded by the forest reserves in the region. The vast, rugged terrain, sparse population, and dense vegetation make surveillance difficult—making the forests ideal hiding places and operational bases for the terror groups. Furthermore, the forested landscape constitutes ungoverned spaces, where the presence of the authorities is either nonexistent or, at best, sporadic. (Oluwole, 2021) ^[18]
- **Arms and weapons trafficking:** The groups terrorizing northwest Nigeria are known to deploy sophisticated weapons in their operations; again, often due to the porous Nigeria-Niger border and subsequent arms trafficking. The illicit proliferation of weapons exerts a considerable impact on peace and security and increases the incidence of terrorists' activities in the region.
- **Poverty/poor governance:** Adeolu (2018) noted that the failure of successive administrations in Nigeria to address challenges of poverty bewildering the nation has made life worrisome and only the fittest survive. Adebayo, (2018 pp. 3) concur with the view of Adeolu, (2018) when he noted that "Nigeria has overtaken India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians, or around half of the country's population, estimated to be living on less than \$1.90 a day". However, the present study has a similar view with Alao, Atere & Alao (2015) ^[11] when he linked terrorism to poverty. Although not all forms of terrorism could be linked to poverty it has been noted that economic deprivation influences people to resort to illegal means of meeting their daily needs. In a study by Epron, (2014) ^[22] it was discovered that because of the attractive benefits for carrying out any insurgent activity, most people especially the youths tend to join the insurgents in the Northeast of Nigeria.
- **Poor governance, poverty, and climate change-fragility nexus:** In many instances, the rising incidents of violent attacks are symptoms of weak, exclusionary, or exploitative governance systems in northwest Nigeria. Compounding factors include weak institutional capacity within the police; extreme inequality, poverty, unemployment; and citizens' alienation from the government. Indeed, five of the country's 10 poorest states—Sokoto, Katsina, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Jigawa—are in the northwest region. Evidence suggests that population explosion, poor governance, and high incidence of poverty could render many unemployed youths more vulnerable to recruitment by terror groups in the region. Closely connected to this is the intensive desertification of the Sahara. Climate change is wreaking havoc on people's livelihoods and facilitating the recruitment of poor farmers and vulnerable youths into terrorist groups in the region.
- **Overburdened security apparatus and diminishing presence of the federal government:** The state security response to the rising insecurity in the region is compromised by the decadelong war with Boko Haram in the northeast, deteriorating security in the Niger Delta, farmer-herder conflicts in north-central and southern Nigeria, and other forms of criminality across the country. In fact, the Nigerian military services are on active deployment in no fewer than 30 states of the federation, tackling internal security threats that ordinarily should have been left to the police to contain. With security forces stretched, terror groups have been able to operate with little resistance in the northwest. Furthermore, terrorists and criminals appear to be emboldened given the federal government's weakening engagement.
- **Controversial peace agreements between some state governments and criminal groups:** In an attempt to stop these attacks, and due to larger failures on the part of the federal government, the state governments of Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara initiated direct negotiations with these criminal groups. As part of these negotiations, the governors offered the criminal groups amnesties and other incentives to end violent attacks. Some have even agreed to release all arrested persons from such groups in exchange for hostages. So far, these agreements have failed for a number of reasons: First, these criminal groups lack central command and a common goal, so it has been difficult to bring them all to a common negotiation. Moreover, agreements made with one group are not binding on others. Second, the dialogues excluded the local communities that bear the brunt of violence and expect the state to deliver forms of compensation, justice, and protection as a condition for durable peace. Collapsed negotiations have led to renewed attacks by the criminal groups, while the farmers and vigilantes acting on their behalf have also remained completely unaccountable.

Beyond these negotiations is the problem that the state governments have no capacity to enforce the agreements and are barely equipped to address many of the underlying causes of insecurity, including shrinking space for grazing and porous borders.

- **Illegal mining activities:** Competition over access to mineral resource deposits in Katsina and Zamfara states exacerbates already-existing tensions. Often terror groups control the minefields and are able to act with impunity because of the undue patronage they benefit from the authorities through connivance. The syndicates also fund banditry and cattle rustling in mining communities, displacing and inciting violence among Fulani pastoralists and farming communities.

Consequences

The rise of banditry and armed attacks has severely disrupted means of livelihood and the distribution of essential services for people across the northwest region. Since 2011, nearly 200,000 people have fled bandit violence and remain internally displaced within the northwest region. Approximately 77,000 Nigerians have fled to neighboring countries, and humanitarian efforts to respond to emergencies in Nigeria as well as crises in neighboring Sahel and Lake Chad are overstretched. The majority of those displaced do not receive organized assistance and are in desperate need of basic necessities.

The Jihadist terrorist organization, Boko Haram, aims to expand its base beyond northeast Nigeria and has begun forming alliances with bandit groups in the northeast. Boko Haram faction leader Abubakar Shekau claimed responsibility for the mass abduction of over 300 school boys in Kankara, though bandits were likely responsible for the attack and may have transferred some of the kidnapped schoolboys to Boko Haram in return for money or weapons. This concerning alliance between violent extremist and criminal groups has escalated security problems and expanded the capabilities of non-state actors across the country.

Why Government Efforts in Curbing the Evil Monster is Failing

Government has responded at both state and federal level. The initial reaction was the bombardments of the various abodes of the bandits by the military and police under different code names, but this did not yield much significant result. The state governments have also tried to negotiate and give amnesty to repentant bandits. While this initially worked, the result did not last.

Nigerian security forces have utilized a variety of tactics over the years to combat banditry. Initially, the federal government embraced an aggressive approach by deploying police and military operations to the states of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger, and Sokoto. While the security response has pushed back attacks, destroyed hideouts, and killed and arrested hundreds of bandits, attacks have continued. In 2019, a peace deal was secured between the armed bandits and the governors of Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. The deal encompassed disarmament, the release of kidnapped civilians, and pardoning for the bandits. Although the number of fatalities decreased from August to November due to reconciliation initiatives, attacks picked up again in 2020.

Though routinely denied, the Nigerian federal and state

authorities have often paid ransom to keep victims alive and secure their release. Mass kidnappings have become a major source of income for criminal and extremist groups since Nigerian authorities often pay ransom to keep victims alive and secure their release, but it also provides incentive for bandits to continue their malign activities.

There are salient reasons why government interventions are not yielding fruit till date. A major factor is the topography of the area. The terrain is such that security presence is virtually unavailable for most people in the area particularly, those living in remote areas. It takes hours sometimes for security personnel to respond to distress calls of victims. This is further propelled by the massive forests surrounding the areas which is shielding the bandits from being easily captured especially as they make use of forests such as the Falgore, Kamara, Kunduma, Subudu, Kamuku and Kiyabana forests. This makes it difficult for the military to secure the lives and property of the people residing in the areas especially without modern technology systems. So, what is the way forward?

The Nigerian government has complained about not having adequate modern equipment to give to her security personnel to work and had appealed to the international community to help in this regard. Fighting terrorism or banditry is not a tea party. Government must be proactive and partner with affected communities to bring a lasting solution to it. How do these bandits' source for guns and tools to fight with? Where are they hiding? How do they access finance? Do they have records that can be accessed? Is it possible to trace their roots and linkage? How can information leakage among security personnel's or civilians partnering with them be reduced? Answers to these questions will show that the threats of bandits can be reduced if not nullified.

Civil-military cooperation is a necessity and infrastructural development is a must even to rural dwellers as well as access to communication, police presence and protection. Not only these, the vigilantes that have been formed in the various communities in the north to combat the activities of these bandits must also be professionally trained and well organised by the government to work better and aid their communities. Movement of small arms and light ammunitions through the porous borders must be checked in cooperation with other countries in the region but ultimately, poverty must be drastically reduced, and providing good education to all citizens must become the priority of the government.

Strategies that can Curb Banditry in Nigeria

Improved law enforcement: Furthermore, the federal government must prioritize law enforcement solutions in tackling rising insecurity in the northwest. Policing is critical to intelligence gathering in identifying and tracking the cells of criminal groups in the states and aiding community response to insecurity.

Collaboration with neighbors: Another effort toward border security is the creation of a bilateral joint task force between Nigeria and Niger to serve as a trans-border security force resourced and managed through the immigration and custom services of both countries. The joint task force should be matched with immediate and precise action to prevent wide-scale terrorist and bandit movements across the borders.

Strategic investments in human and infrastructural development: Such investments can work to solve the long-term, underlying challenges created by poor governance and deepening poverty that feed such insecurity.

Concerted local engagement: The federal and state governments must collaborate with the established religious and traditional institutions to build community resilience against terrorism.

Conclusion

This study has found that banditry resulted in a multi-million-naira criminal business in Nigeria, and it further elaborates on the concept of banditry in its historical context. The study broadly identified causes of banditry through a descriptive and historical method, which include abject poverty, corruption and fraud, political influence, joblessness, terrorism, lack of capital punishment by the government, the changing value system, quick-money syndrome. As a result of that, this study's submission is to ensure that government has significantly played a major role in stemming the tide of banditry, to also reposition the constitutional capability over the menace of banditry, rediscover the political implications of the phenomenon and provide the panacea to stem the tide of banditry in Nigeria.

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