

Forest Governance and Rural Banditry in Nigeria's Northwest Region: Interrogating the Implication for National Security

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Abstract

Since the past few years, rural armed banditry in the North-western Nigeria has come to take the centre stage in the theatre of the country's national security discourse. The reason is not far-fetched as the upsurge in armed banditry and kidnapping in the rural communities and villages within the region has become a common phenomenon. On a daily basis people are brutally murdered or kidnapped for ransom, and farmlands and homes destroyed. Besides, the humanitarian challenge has been astronomically devastating as many of the residents have been made homeless, women widowed and many of the children orphaned, to the extent that many residents of the affected communities or villages now take refuge in neighbouring Niger republic; thus, constituting a national security threat. With the use of content analysis of secondary data, from national and international assessment reports, individual studies, other security briefs from relevant government agencies and media reports, the study found that majority of these attacks and kidnappings are planned and launched from forests within the affected communities. It also discovered that most of the affected communities and the areas that have witnessed these attacks lack security presence. Thus, making it easy for the bandits to operate without being intercepted by security forces. The study argues that the high incidences of armed banditry in the region is connected to the near absence of effective governance structures in the rural areas. The study therefore recommends amongst others the presence of governance and effective security structures in the rural communities and the forested areas, and enhanced military and other security agencies capacities to flush-out the bandits and criminal gangs from the forests.

Keywords: Banditry; forest governance; national security; ungoverned space; insecurity; and northwest

Introduction

Northwest Nigeria in the past few years has come under severe security threat resulting from the menace of armed banditry in the rural communities and villages in the different states of the region. The most affected states are Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states. Niger state, though located in the Northcentral zone of the country is also heavily affected due to its contiguous boundary with the Northwest. These states have seen more frequent attacks from bandits in recent years than any other state in Nigeria,

despite heightened security activities in the region (Premium Times, 20 January, 2021). Unimaginably, armed banditry and kidnapping have become common phenomena in these states, as people on a daily basis are either being kidnapped for ransom or butchered, security personnel are often ambushed and killed, cattle are rustled, farmlands and farm produce stores are destroyed, women and young girls are abducted, molested and raped, including illegal mining of state's mineral deposits and other nefarious activities (CDD, 2015).

Statistics from our research showed that between December 2020 and April 2021, the region has recorded the worst incidents of deaths, kidnapping, rape and SGBV across the country resulting from banditry attacks. About five schools were attacked and more than 600 students taken away to unknown destinations during the period. Though some were eventually released after huge ransoms were paid by different State governments, lives of people around the region are being threatened on daily basis, socio-economic activities are partially shut-down, educational and health sector are rolled back for fear of being kidnapped or killed, and resources meant for development programmes and projects have increasingly been diverted to combating insecurity.

In addition, the humanitarian catastrophes across the affected states have been unimaginably high. UNOCHA (2020) assessment report of Katsina, Zamfara and Sokoto states revealed that experiences of deadly intercommunal conflict and organized crime in the states have resulted in the displacement of more than 200,000 people, and the death and disappearance of thousands. Similarly, Assessment Capacities Project (2020) revealed that about 35 local government areas out of the 92 in 4 states of the northwest region are affected by violent attacks from bandits. And majority of the attacks were launched from the forests close to the affected communities and villages in the states (Onwuzuruigbo, 2019; Okoli & Ugwu, 2019, Kaduna State Government Security Update, 2021). Summarily, the overall national security of the country is threatened.

However, these were not without the intervention by various states government of the affected region and the federal government in the bid to contain and totally flush-out banditry in the region. Despite the efforts, armed banditry and kidnapping for ransom have continued to increase both in frequency and intensity, to the extent that they are now spreading to other parts of the country, particularly the southern part with its

accompanying deaths and humanitarian disaster. It is against this background that the paper interrogates rural armed banditry and forest governance in relation to Nigeria's national security. The aim is to unravel the national security implication of banditry and forest governance to Nigeria's national security, the challenges of combating armed banditry in Nigeria's Northwest region, so as to come up with policy direction to contain or totally eradicate the rising incidences of armed banditry that is destroying the region.

Methodology

The study relied largely on the use of content analysis of secondary sources of information and data gathering for the analysis of the phenomenon under study. These include the review of existing literature on the subject matter and the use of documentary reports, news reports, etc. It also involves the use of trend analysis as its research technique, as the matter is still ongoing, and the dynamics continue to evolve.

Conceptual Overview of Rural Armed Banditry, Forest Governance and National Security

The term "rural armed banditry" is derived from the word "banditry or armed banditry". While banditry or armed banditry refers to occurrence or prevalence of armed robbery or violent crime, which involves the use of force or threat to intimidate a person or a group with the intent to rob, rape or kill, rural armed banditry or otherwise known as rural banditry on the other hand depicts the geography of the banditry. Okoli and Okpaleke (2014) define rural banditry as armed banditry perpetuated by criminal opportunists and syndicates in the country side and frontiers of the country. It is mostly planned and perpetrated in the forest, and comprises acts of armed criminality targeted at human lives or property which include armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling and allied violence. Similarly, Okoli (2019) refers to rural banditry as armed violence driven principally by the criminal intent to steal and plunder. It is motivated by the quest for economic accumulation. The victims are individuals and communities with material valuables. The most common examples of rural banditry in Nigeria are armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling and village raids.

Extant literature on armed banditry have provided evidence that tends to link armed banditry to forested areas. Scholars like Pelusi (1994); Humphrey (2006) are of the view that the absence of governance structures to protect the forests, leaves the forest open

for all manner of illegal activities including criminalities. Onwuzuruigbo (2020) observes that many African countries since the return to democracy have been bedevilled with insurgency, terrorism, herders-farmers conflicts, and rural banditry mainly because much of the forests in Africa have been poorly and defectively governed. He further stresses that weak forest governance yields ungoverned forest spaces that currently provide safe haven for bandits in Nigeria's northern flank.

These views as expressed by Pelusi, Humphrey and Onwuzuruigbo take us to the meaning of forest governance. The International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2005) define forest governance as the *modus operandi* by which officials and institutions acquire and exercise authority in the management of forest resources. Giessen and Buttoud (2014) refer to forest governance as comprising all formal and informal, public and private regulatory structures; i.e., institutions consisting of rules, norms, principles, decision procedures, concerning forests, their utilization and their conservation, the interactions between public and private actors there in and the effects of either on forests, the absence of which can lead to the wrong use of the forest and criminalities. According to Ladan (2014), evidence has shown that forest anywhere in the world by virtue of their complexities as areas of land with collection of trees and other forms of vegetation can provide cover for thieves, criminal armed groups, insurgents, and terrorists.

The above assertion re-echoes the report of the State of the World's Forest (2005), which states that many violent conflicts across the world, especially Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia occur in forested regions. The Report stresses that certain geographical features possessed by these countries help to create safe havens for armed conflicts to thrive. These are remote and inaccessible terrain; vegetative cover; vulnerable natural resources in areas where property rights are uncertain or disputed; high proportion of poor households; poorly integrated into national democratic institutions; few public services; several ethnic and religious groups; secluded places where insurgents can hide and exploit valuable natural resources to finance military activities (State of the World's Forest Report, 2005). It further stresses that these areas are likely to experience armed banditry and other related crime including subversive elements because the characteristics they display tend to provide the means and motives for criminality. These

features are typical of northwest, Nigeria where armed banditry and kidnapping have become a threat to national security.

Reflecting on the notion of national security, Lipmann (1943) insists that a nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war. This conception of national security by the realists laid the foundation for the definition of national security by Harold Brown, the United States Secretary of Defense (1977-1981), as the ability to preserve the nation's physical integrity and territory; to maintain its economic relations with the rest of the world on reasonable terms; to preserve its nature, institutions and governance from disruptions from outside and to control its borders. However, developments emanating from several issues that have threatened security of nation-states across the world have laid the foundation for the various transformations in the conceptualization of national security from the realists' military might standpoint.

The National Defence College of India (1966) defines national security as an appropriate and aggressive blend of political resilience and maturity, human resources, economic structure and capacity, technological compliance, industrial base and availability of natural resources and finally the military might. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (1994) captures the concept of national security within the purview of human security which emphasizes on safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, oppression and protection from sudden and hurtful impact in the patterns of everyday life. Its objective centres on safeguarding the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats in such a way that is consistent with long term human fulfilment (Alkire, 2002). The understanding of national security as an all-encompassing concept aimed at ensuring the security and welfare of the citizenry prompted Anyadike (2013) to state that national security has evolved to encompass non-military concerns such as ecology or climate change, economy, energy, natural resources, computer and many more which impinge on the security of a nation and the values espoused by the nation. A major point in the definitions is that it involves protection of a country's core values, interests, assets and well-being of her citizenry by the government using all available resources. These resources can be economic, human, military, technological, scientific, etc. In this regard, rural banditry with its associated deaths and humanitarian

disaster threatening the security and life of people in Nigeria falls within the purview of national security threats (National Security Strategy, 2019), which is why efforts are being made by the government through all available means, kinetic and non-kinetic, to contain or totally flush-out the menace of banditry in the country.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the ungoverned space theory propounded by the duo of Jennifer Keister and Andrew J. Taylor in the 1990s for the analysis of this study. The choice of this theory is based on its ability to draw out the nexus between ungoverned forested areas and rural banditry in the Northwest region and their impact on the country's national security. The theory emerged in the 1990s and became prominent because of its ability to explain the threatening effects of ungoverned, ill-governed, defectively governed, contested and exploitable areas in contemporary state system, as well as their implications for subversive groups and criminality in the State (Taylor, 2016). According to Taylor (2016), ungoverned space emanates from the absence of a state as the authoritative allocator of value, provider of collective goods, and holder of a monopoly of legitimate coercion. Therefore, the obvious remedy is state building. This apparently simple formulation obscures the complexity and variability of ungoverned space and so the reason for the theory emerges.

The doctrines of ungoverned space theory are inherent in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotic, stabilization, reconstruction and peace-building (Clunan & Harold, 2010). Hence, the reason why political scientists tend to invariably equate ungoverned areas with 'security threat' and all that it implies.

Taylor (2016) argues that ungoverned spaces can pose security threat to governments because of their transformations as enclaves for subversive elements and criminalities. Although, they are rarely responsible for the creation of governance structure, however, the reason for their emergence is to occupy the space created by poor governance structures as a result of state capacity problem. The gaps or deficit created by the state are exploited by aggrieved, disgruntled or criminally motivated elements to perpetrate violent crime against the people and the state (Rabasa, et al., 2007). This assumption provides the connection between forest governance, banditry and national security which forms the basis of this study. The situation in the northwest has shown that failure

of government to provide governance structures in the vast expanse of land or forested areas in northwest has been the major contributor to the phenomenon of rural banditry in the region.

Rural Banditry and Security Calculus in Northwest Nigeria

The Northwest which comprises Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states is one of the six geopolitical zones that make up the Nigerian state. The region covers an area of 216,065 Sq. Km or 25.75 percent of the country's total land mass, which is close to the size of the United Kingdom. Its major ethnic groups are the Hausa and Fulani (African Portal, 2020). The population of the area is put at 35,794,944, making it one of the most populated zones in the country, and also one of the largest in land mass (PADEAP, 2019). About 80 percent of the total population are farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists or small-scale entrepreneurs (African Portal, 2020). They are predominantly Muslims with a handful of Christians. The economic potential of the Northwest is rooted in its substantial solid mineral deposits, including gold exploited by artisanal miners in open pit mines. Despite this economic potential, the region ranks second to the northeast with the highest poverty rate in Nigeria; with millions of people lacking access to basic healthcare and clean water, and immunization coverage is far below national goals. As of 2019, all seven states in the region had poverty levels above the national average of 40.1 percent, led by Sokoto (87.7%), Jigawa (87%) and Zamfara (74%), and majority of the youths are out of school (African Portal, 2020). The UNICEF report of 2019 revealed that 39 percent of children in Northwest, except Kaduna, are out of school (Premium Times, 27 August, 2019). These negative human security index including the high number of out-of-school youth population provided the impetus for banditry to thrive in the region.

For the past one decade, the northwest region has been thrown into a state of insecurity, due to the incessant violent attacks on communities and villages in the region. Though governments (State and Federal) are making efforts towards the containment of the menace of banditry, the circumstances are deteriorating by the day. The BBC News report (5 July 2020) described the bandits as motorcycle-riding armed bandits (about 200 in number, each bike carried a passenger) operating out of abandoned forest reserves that come out in large numbers wielding AK-47 rifles, ransacking communities in Nigeria's

northwest. According to the report, the groups are the latest to join Nigeria's lucrative kidnap for ransom industry, and are quite brazen in their operations.

The growing trend in banditry in Northwest is claiming victims in hundreds. Several children have been orphaned, women have become widows overnight, and young women are raped and molested while the issue of food security and humanitarian tragedy are further exacerbated, to make life more difficult for many Nigerians within the zone and beyond. Collated reports from the media on banditry related crimes and deaths in the northwest region show that between January 2018 and April 2021 banditry has tremendously altered the region's human security index. The international assessment agencies (ACAPS, 2020 and ICG, 2020) in their respective reports revealed that about 1,100 people were murdered in the six states of the Northwest in 2018; over 2,200 were killed in 2019; 1,600 killed between January and June 2020; about 247,000 persons displaced, and that the criminal activities by bandits have resulted to the production of more than 41,000 refugees in the region. According to ICG (2020) report, in Zamfara State alone over 8000 people have been murdered in the last decade, 200,000 displaced internally and others fleeing to neighbouring states. Also included were the destruction of livestock and crops, thereby further depressing human livelihood indices.

The BBC News report (5 July 2020) revealed that Katsina State, the home state of the President suffered several violent attacks by armed bandits between the months of April and June 2020. The attacks resulted to the death of more than 100 persons. On two separate occasions the bandits had actually targeted villagers who had received food handouts from the government during the Covid-19 lockdown. Also in Sokoto State, more than 250 people were reported to have been killed in about 20 attacks (Daily Trust, 29 May 2020). The situation is so alarming that it was reported that the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammadu Abubakar Saad, suggested that bandits now move in the north from house to house with AK-47 rifles, lamenting that the region has become the worst place to live in Nigeria (Thisday News, 26 November 2020).

On 11 December, 2020 while the governors of the states of the northwest were negotiating with the bandits against the backdrop of rampant attacks and kidnappings in the region, armed men attacked Government Science Secondary School for Boys in Kankara, Katsina State and kidnapped an unknown number of students. More than 300

students were rescued the following week, but that was after a ransom had reportedly been paid. Though it is not clear at the time whether that was to total number of students that were abducted from the school (Daily Herald, 17 December 2020).

On 17 February 2021, a school pupil was killed and 27 others were abducted by armed men at around 3.00am from their school in Kagara, Niger State (Aljazeera News, 17 February 2021). Three members of the school's staff and 12 of their relatives were also abducted. Within the same period 42 passengers travelling in the Niger State Transport Authority (NSTA) vehicle were reportedly kidnapped (Thisday, 3 March 2021; Daily Trust 3 March, 2021). The incident occurred at Kundu town, a few kilometres from Zungeru where bandits mounted a road-block operation. However, following a negotiation of ransom by the state government and the bandits, on the 27 February 2021, the government of Niger State announced that all the 42 people abducted including the Kagara School pupils had been released by the bandits and received by the Niger State government (DW News, 27 February, 2021).

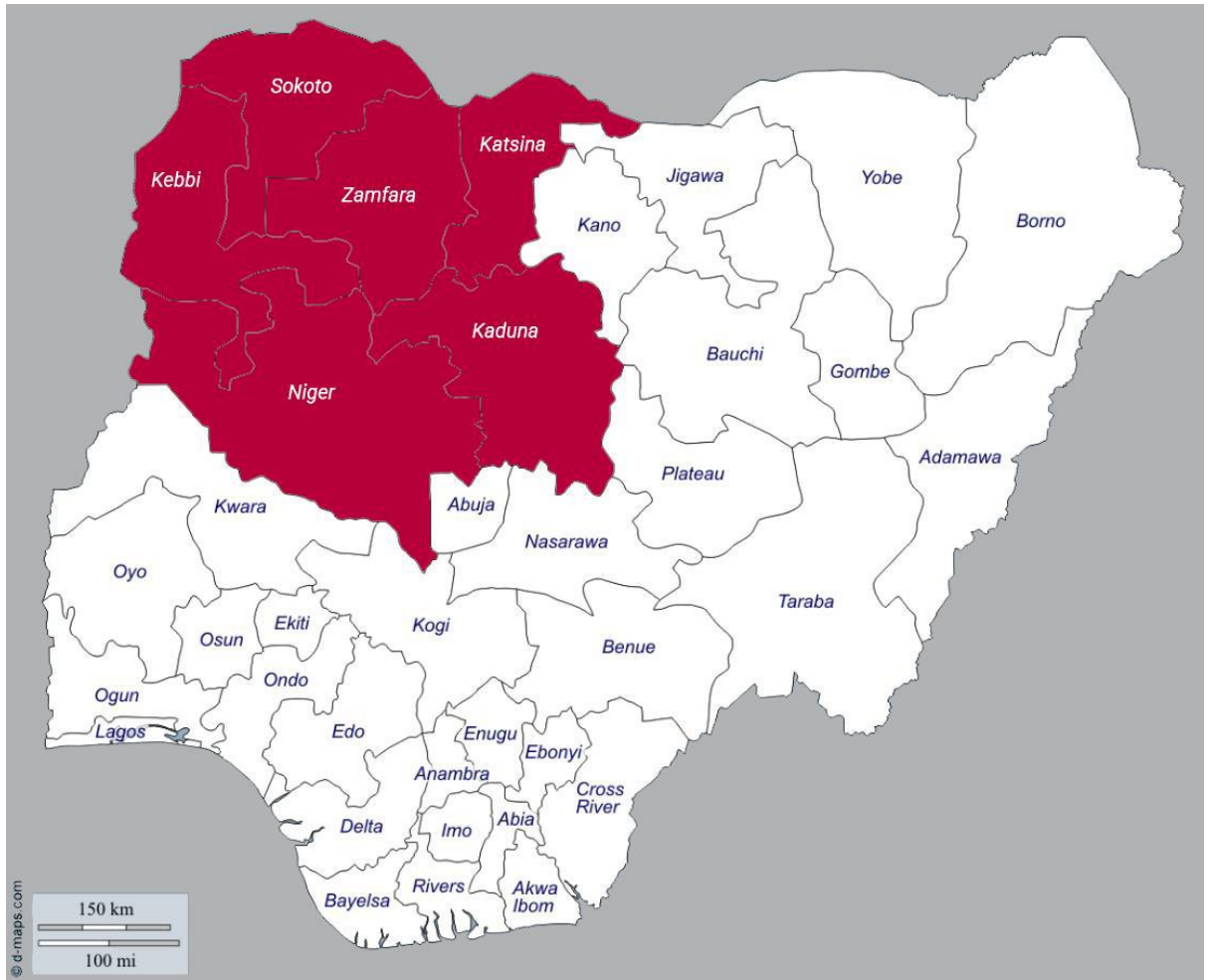
On 26 February 2021, the BBC News reported another incident of kidnapping of 317 students of Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara state (BBC News 26 February 2021). On 12 March 2021, Reuters reported the abduction of about 30 students by gunmen, in an overnight raid on the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization, located in Kaduna, northwest, Nigeria on Thursday, 11 March 2021. The abducted students were reported to be a mixture of males and females (Reuters, 12 March 2021). It was reported that the number would have been more if not for the intervention of the military in response to a distress call, which led to the rescue of 180 people in the early hours of Friday, 12 March 2021 (Reuters, 12 March 2021). African Press put the number of the kidnapped students at 39 (AFP, 12 March 2021).

On 15 March 2021, the Guardian news online reported the kidnap of some pupils and three teachers in a primary school in Kaduna state. The primary school is a Universal Basic Education school located in Rama, a village in Birnin Gwari Local Government Area of Kaduna State. The bandits were reported to have come in about 12 motorcycles around 9.am while pupils were trooping into the school. However as at the time of this research, the actual number of abductees were still not accounted for. Also, on 2 March 2021, bandits were reported to have taken over the Tegin-Minna in the Rafi Local Government

Area of Niger State, and kidnapped no fewer than 18 people. The passengers were reported to have been abducted from three commercial vehicles and taken to unknown destination while the vehicles were left by the roadside (Thisday 3 March 2021). However, they were later rescued by the State Government after a ransom was negotiated and paid two weeks after the kidnap (The Guardian 22 February 2021). In another development, armed bandits were reported to have attacked Gidigori town still in Rafi Local Government Area, abducted unknown number of villagers, set ablaze five cars and carted away valuables. And again, in Manta town in Shiroro Local Government Area, one person was reported killed while several others were kidnapped when bandits raided the area (Daily Trust 3 March 2021).

What appeared to be the crescendo to banditry attacks in the zone was recorded in the month of April 2021 where each week was tainted with bloody attacks by the bandits: On 3 April 2021 a total of 14 persons including six soldiers and one policeman were killed by gunmen numbering about 200 in an attack on a military base and some communities in Niger State (Xinhua News Africa, 26 April 2021). On 23 April, Gunmen attacked Greenfield University, Kaduna, killed one staff member, and abducted 20 students along with three non-academic staff. In a related development three students were later found dead in a village close to the university (Aljazeera, 03 April, 2021). Also, on 6 April 2021, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a church bus killing one person, injuring four others and abducting four. The incident occurred along Kaduna-Kachia road near Kasuwa Magani around 20 miles from Kaduna city. In another development, on April 23, 2021 series of deadly attacks that led to the death of 83 persons were recorded in 4 villages (Gobirawa, Gora, Rini and Madoti Dankule) in Maradun and Bakura LGAs of Zamfara state (Vanguard, 23 April 2021). According to the report, the attacks appeared well coordinated, as the bandits were said to have moved from village to village unleashing mayhem, unchallenged because of the absence of security agents in most of the affected areas. These incidents have in turn triggered off extrajudicial killings and reprisal attacks between vigilante and bandits (Vanguard, 23 April 2021). The aforementioned cases are some of the major reported cases of attacks by bandits between 2018 and April 2021.

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing the Northwest Region



Source: <https://www.acaps.org/country/nigeria/crisis/northwest-banditry>

The Implications of Banditry in Northwest Nigeria for National Security

Given the height of destruction of lives and properties including livestock and farmland in rural communities and villages across the Northwest zone of Nigeria almost on a daily basis, its implication for the country's national security is huge and ominous. About 80 percent of the region's estimated population of 33 million (going by the 2006 census) are farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists or small-scale entrepreneurs. With the incessant attacks on farmers both at their homes and in the farmlands, as well as the destruction and burning of farmlands and grain stores, the effect is obvious on both the economy of the region and food security of the entire nation. Worse still, the substantive solid mineral deposits, including gold that are meant to attract investors, and contribute to national revenue and also aid development in the region, have been hijacked by the bandits. The gold deposit is now largely being exploited by the bandit-miners who are trigger-ready

to maim or kill any human found in the area, thus deterring the government and genuine investors from participating. This clearly undermines that revenue potentials of both the federal government and the governments of the states that make up the region. As it stands presently, the zone has become economically unproductive, socially and politically devastated and abandoned with severe effect on the economy of the country.

Another implication is the rising humanitarian crisis in the region. The rate of increase in IDP is astronomical. People have been chased out of their ancestral lands and made homeless in their country (ACAPS, 2020; ICG, 2020). In September 2019, a joint assessment mission of the UN High Commission for Refugees and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, citing local government authorities estimates, reported that 210,354 persons have been displaced from 171 towns and villages in the Northwest (UNHCR/NCRMIDPs, 2019). Of these displaced persons, 144,996 were in Zamfara state, 35,941 in Sokoto, and 29,417 in Katsina state. Incidentally, there is no officially recognized IDP camp in Zamfara and Katsina, rather what is obtainable in these states are makeshift camps scattered in towns and villages, which complicates the scale of displacement. This is the reason why most of the displaced persons in these region seek refuge in the neighbouring Niger Republic. The ICG report (18 May 2020) indicated that about 60,000 of the displaced persons fled over the border to Niger Republic for refuge despite the insecurity along the border areas. Majority of these displaced persons are crop farmers and pastoralist farmers who are expected to grow crops and animal to contribute to the nation's economy but have been affected by banditry. The implication is the exacerbating increase in the poverty index of the region.

Another area that has been affected by banditry in Northwest region is the social services sector, particularly the healthcare system and the education sector. The desire to avoid strife and its attendant consequences has led to the rolling back of education and healthcare. State Governments' allocations that would have been committed to providing social services have instead been diverted to responding to the security challenges (ICG, 18 May 2020). Even where governments have built hospital and schools, many remain unused or under-used as the local population has been displaced or residents stayed away as a result of fear of being attacked by bandits (ICG 18 May 2020). As at December

2020, it was reported that northwest region is the poorest region in Nigeria, and millions lack access to basic health care and clean water, and immunization coverage is far below national goals (ACAPS, 2020; ICG, 2020). The situation has continued to worsen as a result of insecurity and the fear of being kidnapped. Health workers are confronted with the fear of being kidnapped and killed by bandits. In the same manner, deprivation of education in the Northwest region has been exacerbated by armed banditry due to the mass displacements in affected communities. The escalation of banditry and the incessant abduction of school children from their schools have contributed to a high number of out-of-school children in the region. United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report released to the media shows that 39 percent of children in Northwest except Kaduna, are out of school (Premium Times, 24 August 2019). It further revealed that Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states have 30 percent out of the 10.5 million out of school children in Nigeria. Therefore, the insecurity in the communities has a negative impact on young boys and girls, as school activities in vulnerable areas have been disrupted. The few existing schools were unable to operate properly for fear of kidnap of students, attacks or killing by bandits (UNICEF, 2019). Between December 2020 and March 2021 about five schools were attacked and more than 600 students taken way to an unknown destination by bandits (although some have been released), thus exacerbating the fear by parents towards allowing their wards to go to school (BBC News, 2 March 2021). The situation highlights a worrying development in the country's security.

Another area that has been seriously affected by banditry in the northwest is the human rights of people. In most of the affected areas, people's lives are being threatened and abused on a daily basis. Thousands of men and boys have been kidnapped or killed, maltreated and abused. Some have been robbed of their means of livelihood, and others conscripted into banditry in the region. There have also been growing incidents of sex and gender-based violence (SGBV); young girls and women are being abducted, raped and sexually assaulted during raids or forced into "marriage", to members of the armed bandits (ICG, 18 May 2020). The violence is also taking its toll on children; some of them have been orphaned and some abducted and used for child labour in the camps of the

bandits. ICG (2020) report shows that in Zamfara alone, over 16,000 children have been orphaned as a result of violent attacks on communities by armed bandits.

Rural armed banditry has also facilitated the emergence of a complex informal security sector in the region, including the growth of armed local vigilante groups established to protect communities against bandits (WANEP, 2020). A lot many of these groups due to their lack of adequate training and unquestionable characters of some of their members have been implicated in acts of criminality including human right abuses, armed robbery, extortion and appropriation of livestock and other properties from both bandits and their victims (WANEP, 2020). Many have also engaged in unnecessary competition with one another trying to out-do the other, thereby creating another form of insecurity and tension in the communities they are meant to protect against the bandits.

Another implication of armed banditry in the northwest to national security is the insecurity and conflict it is activating across the entire country. Herders fleeing violence in the affected states, particularly Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina are migrating to the southern part of the country, destroying farmland and crops in the Middle Belt and southern regions. Moreover, some of the bandits or criminal gangs fleeing security forces onslaught alongside the herders are causing mayhem across the country and implicating the genuine herders in their associated banditry. The uptick tends to be exacerbating tensions in the southern region: the southeast, southwest and south-south. These regions have been reporting increasing herder-farmers clashes, often degenerating into deadly violence and posing additional security challenges for affected communities and the governing authorities (Daily Trust, 23 September 2016; Leadership, 12 October 2019).

Government Response to banditry in Northwest

Following the high incidences of armed banditry in the Northwest zone and its attendant security implications in the country, the state and federal governments have taken different measures aimed at curtailing the menace. These measures range from negotiation by some of the state governments with the bandits, the use of investigative Committees, and the adoption of a peace agreement to the federal government use of Joint Military Operations. For a better understanding, these measures would be discussed under two sub-headings: The Non-Military Response; and Military Operations intervention.

The Non-Military Response to Banditry in Northwest Zone

In a bid to find a lasting solution to the incessant violent attacks by armed bandits on rural communities and villages across the northwest states, some of the states like Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto adopted peace initiatives as a solution to the menace. For instance, in 2016 the Government of Katsina State through an amnesty programme launched a peace initiative. The peace initiative was aimed at Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of “repentant bandits” into the society. The initiative was praised for the laudable efforts. It succeeded in convincing several bandits and herdsmen to surrender arms to the State Government in return for amnesty in 2018. Although the programme attracted large weapons withdrawal and destruction programme, with over 6,000 manufactured guns destroyed, however, the momentum was not sustained as armed banditry, kidnapping and other related crimes resumed that same year with higher level of intensity (WANEP, 2020). Based on the modest success of the programme, the Governments of Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina states in July 2019 established dialogue/amnesty committee to determine appropriate roadmap to address banditry in their respective states. As part of the negotiated agreement, the affected State Governments embarked on the release the so called “reformed bandits” in their custody and provided social amenities, rehabilitated and reintegrated them to their communities in exchange for the submission of their weapons and release of captives (WANEP, 2020). However, the programme seemed to have worked contrary to the desired objectives as the gestures appeared to have emboldened the bandits instead of dissuading them from banditry. A development that prompted the Governor of Katsina state, Alhaji Aminu Masari to condemn any act of negotiation with bandits in the state (Thisday, 5 November, 2020). On the contrary, the Governor of Zamfara state insisted that his administration would continue to negotiate with the bandits despite all odds since, according to him, that option remained the only viable solution to the insecurity in the region for now (The Daily Times, 03 April, 2020).

Military Response/Operations

The federal government of Nigeria being the only level of government that has authority over the military and other coercive apparatuses of the Government has initiated several military and joint security operations against banditry in the Northwest. Some of the

operations were conducted by the military alone and some in collaboration with other security agencies such as the police, Department of State Security, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps as well as the local vigilantes in the various states. Such operations include Operations:

Operation Diran Mikiya: A joint Military operation that involved operational airpower of Nigerian Air Force (NAF) and the land fire support of the Nigerian Army (NA). It was launched by the Nigerian Air Force in July, 2018. Its operation base was Umaru Musa Yar Adua Airport Katsina with air target to other forests in Kaduna and Sokoto (NAN, 31 July, 2018).

Operation Sharan Daji: A joint operation involving the Nigeria Army, Air Force, Police, DSS, NIA, DIA, and NSCDC as well as the local vigilantes launched in 2015 and revamped in 2018. Its operation covers Zamfara and Katsina states (Nigerian Army Press Release, 23 June 2019).

Operation Hadarin Daji: It is a continuation and reformation of Operation *Sharan Daji*. It came as a result of the success Operation *Sharan Daji* achieved. It was launched in 2019 to reinvigorate its anti-banditry operations in the Northwest (Nigerian Defence Headquarters, 23 July 2019).

Operation Thunder Strike: Operation Thunder strike as put in place to flush-out banditry and kidnapping along the Kaduna-Abuja axis. It was launched in 2019 by the Defence Headquarters. It has the mandate to reorganize and coordinate the existing security structures along the axis and rail line, in order to bring the security situation under control.

Operation Accord: Operation Accord was launched in June 2020 by President Muhammadu Buhari in response to the deteriorating security in Kaduna State (Premium Times, June 16, 2020). It is a joint military task force (Army and Air Force) in collaboration with the police and local vigilantes. It is specifically targeted at identifying and clearing bandits from their bases in the five most volatile states: Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto and Zamfara (Ayandele, 02 February 2021).

Operation Sahel Sanity: Launched in July 2020 by the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Lt Gen Tukur Yusuf Buratai to compliment the efforts of Operation *Hadarin Daji*. Its operational base and headquarters is the newly established Nigerian Army Super Camp

IV in Faskari, Katsina State (Nigeria Army Press Release, July 2020). It started as a military exercise, subsequently, it dovetailed into a full military operation. The target states are Katsina, Kaduna, Zamfara, Kebbi, Sokoto and Niger States. The operation was billed to end on 31 December 2020, but due to its successes, it was extended to 2021 to pave the way for the soldiers to consolidate on the gains made so far.

Operation Puff Adder I & II: This Operation was a police operation aimed at tackling banditry along the highways of Abuja-Kaduna road, Katina, Kogi, Niger and Zamfara states. It was launched in April 2019 by the then Inspector of Police, Mohammed Adamu in Katari Bishin District, Abuja-Kaduna Express where high incidences of kidnapping were recorded. The operation involves the combined support of the military and the DSS (Thisday, 16 February, 2021). At the end of the PUFF-ADDER I, the second phase PUFF-ADDER II was launched in February 2021 to replace the first one. The mandate of the operation is to dislodge armed banditry in Northwest and Northcentral.

It is important to note that President Buhari in 2017 had ordered a military crack-down on bandits. To enable the military, achieve the mandate, the President approved the stationing of a full battalion of Special Forces in Zamfara State and the operationalization of a new Order of Battle (ORBAT) to be domiciled in the newly established 8 Division of the Nigerian Army in Sokoto. He also ordered the movement of the 1 Brigade of the Nigerian Army from Sokoto to Gusau, Zamfara State upon the take-off of the 8 Division. The first joint operation was code named Operation 207 Quick Response. However, despite all the operations towards ridding out banditry and other related crimes in the Northwest, they keep increasing in frequency and intensity. Thus, presenting the operation as an effort in futility despite the modest achievements so far. Many of the affected communities have been reported to have been deserted, with some of the displaced unable to return home for fear of a resurgence in attacks and the perception of unguaranteed safety in view of the capacity deficit faced by security agencies in fighting banditry in the region.

Challenges Militating Against Government efforts at combating Rural Banditry in Northwest Nigeria

Porous borders

The geography of the northwest states with contagious and porous border with neighbouring Niger republic makes it vulnerable for terrorist infiltration from neighbouring countries with prevalence of terrorism like Mali to enter the country. For instance, between Nigeria and Niger international borders, there are about 1,497 Km geographical space, poorly policed by the Nigerian Customs Service and Immigration Service (Ojewale, 2021). More so, its proximity with conflict ridden northeast makes matters even worse.

Ungoverned forests and lack of governance structures in the rural areas

The existence of large expanses of dispersed, uninhibited and unpoliced forested spheres and the lack of governance structures to check against nefarious activities creates the atmosphere for banditry to incubate. Evidence has shown that majority of attacks and high profile kidnapping involving large number of people were launched from the forests within the communities. Moreover, majority of attacks were successful, due to the non-interference from security agencies. An indication of the lack of presence of security forces in the rural communities. Therefore, the rise in banditry in the region is symptomatic of poor governance structure in the Northwest.

Poverty and Illiteracy

Poverty and illiteracy are two strong features that gave flesh to criminality. Given the poverty and illiteracy level of youths who are the majority in the area, banditry becomes the next big business opportunity for them. Evidence suggests that population explosion, poor governance and high incidence of poverty could render many of the unemployed illiterate youths more vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs. Closely connected to this is the rise in the use of political thugs in the region which has provided the window for massive use of these vulnerable category into criminal activities.

Easy Availability of SALWs

Evidence has shown that there is smuggling of all manners of contraband good including arms and ammunition are made easy in the Northwest, due to the porous nature of the borders from other countries like Niger, Chad and even the Northeast Nigeria conflict zone. For instance, it was reported in 2018 that 70 percent of arms and ammunitions trafficked in West Africa ends up in Nigeria, and majority of them are in the North. (Daily Trust, 2018). In other words, the porous borders exert a considerable impact on the easy

availability of arms and ammunition and these arms in return exacerbate banditry in the region.

Illegal Mining Activities

The mineral deposits in the region, especially Zamfara and Katsina (gold and zinc) remain a major attraction for the bandits in the states. The competition between the illegal miners over access to these mineral resources has been a major driver bane of banditry in the state. Evidence has it that often time criminal gangs control the minefields and are able to act with impunity because of the undue patronage they enjoy from the authorities as a result of connivance (Ojewale, 2021).

Weak Security Architecture and Overburdened Security Apparatus

For the fact that internal security challenges can be allowed to escalate to the magnitude of the nature of armed banditry we have in the northwest without being nipped in the bud at the level of the state by the Nigerian Police, the State Security Services and other para military like the NSCDC is symptomatic of a weak security architecture. In addition, the involvement of the military in almost all the insecurity across the country has overstretched the military thus affecting their operations. The military has more than 30 operations across the country which ordinarily would have been left to the police, the DSS and NSCDC to handle as internal security challenges, instead of military actions. These weaknesses have provided the impetus for the rising insecurity in the Northwest.

State Governments Complicity in the Crime

The “kid gloves” manner with which different State Governments in the Northwest, particularly Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara State governments initially handled banditry in their states contributed in worsening it. The wrong negotiation approaches and mishandling of the DDR approach and the amnesty programme contributed to emboldening banditry rather than eradicate it

Way Forward

It is a fact that armed banditry has become a national security challenge, due to the negative tendencies it is bequeathing on the nation’s security, be it physical security, human security, economy, and the diplomatic image of the country. Although, the challenges are most prevalent in the northwest region, but its spill over to other regions constitute a dangerous omen to the unity of the country. The paper therefore highlights

policy solutions that if adopted would help to contain the rising incidence of armed banditry in Northwest and bring about peace to the region and the entire country. These include:

- i. ***Adequate Border Security:*** Due to lapses recorded in border security in Nigeria, particularly the northern Nigeria axis as a result of the porous nature of the borders, it is important for the federal government to strengthen border security to ensure that such lapses are blocked. The managers of the Nigerian borders; the immigration and Customs services should be equipped with more personnel and modern technologies required for the protection and security of the borders.
- ii. ***Enhanced Military and other internal security agencies Capacities:*** The rise of banditry has exposed the weakness of Nigeria's security architecture, thus, the need for enhancement of operational capacity of the military and other security agencies towards combating the new security challenges. These would help to raise the morale of these agencies in the war against criminality and subversive elements in the country.
- iii. ***Governance presence in the ungoverned spaces:*** The presence of government and governance structures in such areas as forests, border communities and rural areas where insecurity, banditry, kidnapping and other related crime are prevalent will help to contain the rising acts of criminality in the areas. This is because evidence has shown that the rising incidences of criminalities and banditry in the rural areas is as a result of the lack of governance presence and the inability of state governments to live up to their primary responsibility of governance. Thus, creating opportunities for criminal elements to establish own structures to carry out their nefarious activities.
- iv. ***Strategic investment in human resources and Infrastructural development:*** Investments should be made towards provision of basic education and infrastructure to reduce the high rate of illiteracy and poverty in the northwest and other zones of the country. More so, investments that meet young people's needs in education, healthcare, and economic

opportunities should also be made to take the youths off delinquencies. Such can work to solve the long-term underlying challenges created by poor governance and deepening poverty that benefits such criminality as banditry, kidnapping and other related crimes across the country.

- v. **Concerted stakeholders' engagement:** There is need for both the federal and state governments to collaborate with established religious and traditional institutions as well as relevant civil society organizations to build community resilience to check criminality in the region. Such should serve as early warning measures to check against criminality in the region.
- vi. **Collaboration with Neighboring Countries:** Effort should be geared towards collaborating with neighbouring Niger Republic to serve as a trans-border security force resourced and managed through the lead border security managers (Immigration and Custom Services) of both countries. The joint border security task force should be properly funded and monitored for effective control of the borders to prevent transhumant and trans-border criminalities that enabled banditry and other related crimes.

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