

THE RISING HERDSMEN MILITANCY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Does human life still matter in Nigeria or have cows better economic values than human beings? These questions agitate the minds of the authors hence the choice of this research topic. It is unfathomable and unimaginable the magnitude of violence and security challenges facing the Nigerian state in recent times. Human beings are slaughtered almost on daily basis and given mass burials following the recent phenomenal wave of the rising herdsmen militancy especially in the north central states of Nigeria. No doubt, this new phenomenon has added to the surging wave of Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast. The main thrust of this paper is to examine the causes of this obnoxious herdsmen militancy and the incessant attacks on farmers, farmlands and communities. We shall be investigating the sources of the deadly weapons at the disposals of these herdsmen and efforts so far made by the federal and state governments at quelling the violence and bringing the perpetrators to book. This will lead us into the assumption that since they are sponsored by some powerful unseen hands hence their untouchable nature. Descriptive approach will be used in the gathering of data. The nature of this research also warrants the conduct of interviews which the writers will not ignore but explore as a means of eliciting useful information on the issue under discourse. This research identified that these groups of militant herdsmen are no foreigners as claimed but bunch of incorrigible Fulani dancing the tune of some unseen drummers. This paper recommends that federal government must show sincere commitment towards disarming these herdsmen and to ensure that justice is served in this issue. Furthermore, the communities in collaboration with the state governments should not fold their hands but must rise up to the occasion to protect their communities instead of desertion.

Keywords: Militancy, Herdsmen, Security, Nigeria, Fulani

Introduction

The Fulani Herdsmen crisis remains a major issue in Nigeria. So far, thousands have either been maimed or killed and many have been forcefully evicted from their homes with properties worth millions destroyed, while the Nigerian federal government appears to be indifferent and unwilling to initiate any forceful action against the perpetrators of this obnoxious crime. Rather, they are requesting for pieces of land from states in order to provide the rampaging herdsmen with permanent feeding ground. This act leaves the researchers with the perception that cows' lives matter more than human lives. This unfortunate phenomenon as pathetic as it is must be addressed quickly before it escalates to an unmanageable magnitude.

The Nigerian state has never encountered enemies as terrifying as the Fulani herdsmen. They are the heathen hordes that seek to conquer and enslave our people as they rape, murder and pillage their way across the country and no one seem to curtail and tame this rampaging marauders. They are obsessed to destroy, conquer and take over ancestral lands from their owners. To Wole Soyinka, they are 'marauders' who 'swoop on sleeping settlements' and whose 'weapon is undiluted terror.'

Suffice however to observe that Nigeria in recent times has witnessed an unprecedented level of insecurity which has made national security threat to become a foremost issue for the government and has prompted huge allocation of the national budget to security. Unfortunately, there is little to show for this huge resource allocation especially in tackling the issue of herdsmen militancy.

With the lingering security challenges posed by the rising herdsmen militants and the inability of the security apparatus of the government to guarantee the security of lives and properties in the Nigeria, the question that agitates everyone in Nigeria today is "do human lives still matter or has it been replaced with that of cows? Is security of lives and properties achievable? In the views of these writers the present Nigerian government at all levels has not done enough at confronting bluntly the situation and dealing with it decisively. This leaves the researchers with no other option than to conclude that the situation has a political undertone or inclination calculated to serve the interest of certain sections of this country.

Concepts clarification

a. Militancy

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, defines militant as “Having a combative character; aggressive, especially in the service of a cause.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines militant as “aggressively active (as in a cause).” The English word militant is both an adjective and a noun, and is usually used to mean vigorously active, combative and aggressive, especially in support of a cause, as in 'militant reformers.' It comes from the 15th century Latin “militare” meaning “to serve as a soldier.” The related modern concept of the militia as a defensive organization against invaders grew out of the Anglo-Saxon Fyrd. In times of crisis, the militiaman left his civilian duties and became a soldier until the emergency was over, when he returned to his civilian occupation. The meaning of militancy does not usually refer to a registered soldier: it can be anyone or group who subscribes to the idea of using vigorous, sometimes extreme, activity to achieve an objective, usually political.

For this paper, militancy represents a new form of local resistance against internal and external oppressions. In the case of the Niger Delta, it is a coordinated resistance by the youth against the oil companies who they blame for environmental pollution and degradation. It is also believed that the Federal Government of Nigeria has aided and abated the marginalization suffered by the region. Therefore, militancy in the Niger Delta manifests itself in forms of kidnapping of oil workers, hostage taking and incessant attacks on oil installations as well as the use of confrontational or violent methods in support of a political or social cause.

b. Security

According to Nwagboso, (2012) security is the act of being safe from harm or danger, the defense, protection and preservation of values, and the absence of threats to acquired values. Security is about survival and the condition of human existence. Security also exists when people live together in a certain environment without disturbance or violent. Adejumo (2011), states that security is the act of keeping peace within the governing territories. This is usually done by upholding the national law and defending the internal security threats in different areas of the country.

Furthermore, Adebakin,(2012) also observes security as freedom from danger or threats, and the ability of a nation to protect and develop itself, promote and cherish values and legitimate interests and enhance the wellbeing of its people. This can be maintained through internal security system. Usually, internal security system in any society is very important because it is use to prevent violence and criminal activities in different societies. Internal security also ensures freedom of people from any criminal disturbances and ensures the absence of criminal tendencies which can undermine internal cohesion and co-operate existence of the nation and its ability to maintain its core values and meet the legitimate aspiration of the people.

Rather than experiencing the above defined situations as expressed by these scholars, what has become the recurrent scenario in Nigeria is the situation of insecurity leading to gratuitous loss of lives. Ubong King, described insecurity as “the state of fear or anxiety, stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection.” It refers to lack or inadequate freedom from danger. This definition reflects the situation currently witnessed in Nigeria where citizens can no longer sleep with their two eyes closed. The level of insecurity in Nigeria is becoming heightened by the day from physical insecurity which nourishes into other forms of insecurity such as economic security and social security.

c. Herdsmen

These are largely group of nomads who parade through streets and towns with their cattle mostly of the Fulani extraction. In Nigeria, the Fulani and the Hausa people dominate the northern states, with a sizeable population. Notably, Fulani herdsmen are seen on major roads, streets and farmlands and with impunity, crops are destroyed without living the poor rural farmers at the mercy of these marauders who are ready to kill at any slightest challenge.

Who are the Fulani?

The Fulani are an ethnic group, thought to be the largest in the Sahel with a population of 20 to 30 million. Traditionally the Fulani are semi-nomadic cattle herders, and communities who would travel vast distances along grazing routes to find places for their herds to eat. In Nigeria, the Fulani are mostly concentrated in the north. But a combination of political instability and drought is pushing them further and further south, where they are coming into conflict with local farming communities. Over the

past few years, tensions between farmers and herdsmen have risen sharply (www.vanguardngr.com).

Why the violence?

There are divergent views on why the herdsmen turned violent. While some are of the view that it is as a result of climate change result in desert encroachments, others are of the view it is due to shortage of grazing land space in the north. Whichever reason that may be accepted by anybody, the fact remains that there are enough open and empty lands to graze in the north but these herdsmen have willy-nilly decided to take to the south causing mayhem and untold economic hardship on their host communities.

These herdsmen, move from one place to another in search of pasture. In this process and for whatever reason the herdsmen have reportedly been seen carrying arms about and the authorities seem to wink at this ugly phenomenon. During their journey, they frequently trespass farmlands owned by locals in their host communities, destroying crops and valuables. Attempts by farmers to prevent them from causing havoc are met with stiff and violent resistance. Often, the farmers are overpowered, injured and killed, while other remnants are evicted from their homes. Sometimes, the herdsmen are accused of taking these opportunities to steal, rape, raze houses and kill innocent members of the communities they pass through. Most of these acts do not result from confrontation from the farmers but stems from state laws banning open grazing. Most of the communities attacked by these militant herdsmen were conducted either early in the morning or late at night while the members of these communities were asleep leading many either burned alive or butchered with machetes.

The conflict has increasingly been ethnic (Fulani vs other Nigerian ethnicities), religious (Muslim herders vs Christian south), and cultural (nomadic vs sedentary) in dimensions, says Dr Roudabeh Kishi, director of the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which monitors and maps conflict (www.vanguardngr.com).

Fulani attacks on farmers are primarily practical rather than ideological; competition for suitable grazing land over the autumn and winter months. Though this has historically been seen as a reoccurring seasonal problem for many of the area's farming communities, last month's

uncharacteristic level of violence has demanded attention of the national government and military,' says Kishi.

For Buhari, it is a core issue on which he has campaigned for over a decade. In several interviews, he has warned that if the livelihoods of the herdsmen, mostly from his own Fulani ethnic group, are not protected as part of a coherent agricultural and livestock strategy, mayhem will ensue. No doubt, this declaration is the true picture unfolding over the past three years of the President (www.vanguardngr.com).

Implications of herdsmen militancy in Nigeria

Prior to 2016, herdsmen have been conducting their activities around the country without crisis what has turned these Fulani herdsmen into militants is inexplicable to these writers. Another pertinent question that must be asked is why are these herders not grazing the farmlands in the north but prefer the south and most especially the “food basket of the nation”. The economic implication of this new found militant grazing cannot be overemphasized. The loss of lives is already alarming while the food insecurity in the long run will be unbearable. The food crisis is already looming as many farmlands have been destroyed and many farmers sent to an untimely grave.

From Agatu in Benue State, Akure in Ondo State, Bukuru area in Plateau State, Oke Ogun area in Oyo State, Gassaka and Bali local government areas in Taraba State to Nimbo in Enugu State, rampaging militant herdsmen seem to be on a mission of bloodletting. Almost on weekly basis since 2017, bloodbath seems to be a recurrent decimal especially in the north central states highlighted above. Everywhere these herdsmen appear in recent times, sorrow, tears and blood trail them. Curiously however, they operate in such audacious manner that makes mockery of our national security arrangement. Herdsmen militancy has also exploited the existing fault lines of religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. It's evolving into a complex identity conflict that is sowing seeds of destabilisation throughout the Middle Belt, which runs through central Nigeria. In Kaduna, Taraba, Plateau and Nasarawa States, herdsmen attacks have been focused rather selectively on non-Muslim communities in a fashion that suggests a religious character to the attacks. In other places like Zamfara and Kebbi States, the attacks have been targeted on non-Fulani villages. So, in most of the attacks, it would seem victims are targeted on religious or ethnic grounds.

An observation by a former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve Bank, suggests that “if you allow an intolerable economic situation to persist without solution for too long, suddenly there are no good solutions left.” Nigeria might be reaching that stage when the intractable problem of herdsmen/farmer clashes will evolve into mini-wars between herdsmen and entire communities. It is obvious that farmers can no longer farm peacefully because of the activities of herdsmen who are bent on unleashing terror on the farmers. This Unfortunate development has led to the distrust of President Buhari, by the majority of those affected by the conflicts. Buhari has allowed himself to be boxed into a corner without any form of solution sight. He is now widely perceived as a strong and subjective advocate of the herdsmen such that the tough solutions that will be required to avert further economic losses cannot possibly come from him (www.vanguardngr.com).

The development as pointed out earlier has added to the humanitarian challenges in the country. Equally very disturbing is, the fact that the activities of the herdsmen have without doubt aggravated the feeling of mutual suspicion between host communities and herdsmen. The herdsmen who before now peacefully coexisted with communities all over the country are now perceived to be enemies.

A cautious assessment of threats to national security reveal the activities of the armed herdsmen more than any other security challenge in the country at the moment constitutes, the most dangerous. In the last one year, the activities of the armed herdsmen have resulted in unimaginable destruction and displacement of many communities and loss of thousands of lives. Communities especially in the North and elsewhere never had serious disagreements with Fulani herdsmen in the past. It was a common practice in the north to invite them to stay on the farms in communities after the harvest for purpose of enriching the farmlands. All these seem to have eroded due to the ongoing attacks. Also, seen in the context of peaceful coexistence the attacks by herdsmen are heating up the polity and deepening the already existing polarization of the country along ethno ethnic and religious divides. This phenomenon is seriously compounding the rather fragile situation. In addition to this, the utterances of some individuals, as well as the inactions on the part of government are leading into a bitter herdsman – host communities war that may become intractable. It is rather unfortunate that people from some quarters are criticizing those calling on the communities to defend

themselves, saying that the call for self-defence is unjustified and smacks of subversive intent that can only happen in a failed state. What more is the evidence needed to prove that the security challenges confronting Nigeria is clear evidence that it is typical of a failed state?

The Fulani Herdsmen have unabatedly continued to wreak havoc, mostly in the north central states area of the country. The inability of the Nigerian security agencies to contain them may spell greater doom for lives in susceptible areas. This situation is made more precarious by the silence of President Muhammadu Buhari on the herdsmen crisis.

Incidents of recent attacks by the Fulani Herdsmen

The Fulani herdsmen have been known to inflict mayhem in certain communities in Nigeria, and the rate at which they commit these obnoxious crimes has increased exponentially. According to statistics provided by the Institute for Economics and Peace, 1,229 people were killed in 2014, up from 63 in 2013 and Benue State seems to be the hardest hit in recent times. Barely five days to the end of Governor Gabriel Suswam's administration in May 2015, over 100 farmers and their family members were reportedly massacred in villages and refugee camps located in the Ukura, Per, Gafa and Tse-Gusa local government areas of the state. According to reports, in July 2015, suspected herdsmen attacked Adeke, a community on the outskirts of the state capital, Makurdi. Last December, six persons were killed at Idele village in the Oju local government area. A reprisal attack by youths in the community saw three Fulani herdsmen killed and beheaded.

One afternoon in February, 2016, late that month, the villages in Agatu LGA a community in Benue came under attack by Fulani herdsmen. The invaders came prepared - dressed in war gear, armed with Ak47 riffles - and unleashed mayhem on the community. They razed houses, destroyed crops and trees and killed hundreds of people, including women, children and old people. In Logo and Guma LGAs of Benue State between January 1 and 6, 73 people were massacred by herdsmen during co-ordinated attacks on communities.

In February, 2018 as a result of a clash between herdsmen and farmers in Benue State, 40 more people were killed, about 2,000 displaced and not less than 100 were seriously injured. Most recently, more than 92 Nigerians were massacred by suspected Fulani Herdsmen in Benue and

Niger states. Also, before this time, there have been reported attacks by the Fulani Herdsmen in southern states of the country, including Enugu, Ekiti and Ondo states.

From March till May a number of deaths occurred and victims were given mass burial as typified in the pictorial displayed below. Besides those given mass burial by the Governor of Benue state, 2 priests and some worshipers met their untimely death also in Benue state (www.vanguardngr.com).

Attacks attributed to Fulani herdsmen have become recurrent in Benue in recent months. Since the introduction in November 2017 of a controversial law banning open grazing by herders in the state, attacks have been carried out on an almost daily basis.

In January 2018, 80 people were killed and 80,000 forced to flee in a spate of violence in the state. The funerals on 11 January for 73 victims in Makurdi, Benue's capital, were broadcast live. Among those killed were seven members of the Benue State Livestock Guards – a special paramilitary unit set up by the state governor to ensure the full implementation of the grazing law.

In February 2018 Benue state witnessed one of the deadliest attacks in Nigeria in recent years, when over 500 villagers were massacred and over 7,000 displaced from 10 villages. In Taraba, which neighbors Benue state, 38 members of a United Methodist Church were killed during a village-wide siege that same month. Following the Fulani herdsmen violence, it is found that more than 1000 Christians had been killed since November 2017 a typical evidence of ethnic cleansing.

In an account published in the Nigerian Vanguard newspaper of April 25th, 2018 “The services had barely started and worshippers were still coming for the Mass, after which a burial ceremony would take place, when sounds of rapid gunshots rent the air.

“People started scampering and wailing: 19 persons, including Reverend Fathers Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha, who were holding the morning Mass, were gunned down in cold blood, while many sustained injuries, including bullet wounds. “After attacking the church, the invaders descended on the community and razed over 60 houses, farmland, food barns, after carting away what the people had in their barns. “As usual,

after killing the helpless worshippers and razing the community, the attackers fled from the scene.”

Responses from various stakeholders

Many Nigerians had expected the president to come out openly and vehemently condemn these incessant attacks but has deliberately shied away from commenting on the crisis, as it is widely known that he is nourishing sympathy for his kinsmen the Fulani ethnic group.

As a result of attacks by herdsmen in Ekiti State, the governor of the state, Ayodele Fayose, came out openly and instructed his people to take up arms to defend themselves. He also gave the go-ahead to vigilante groups in the affected area of the state, charging them to kill any Fulani Herdsmen attempting to rape their wives or kill their children. In the same vein, Gen. T. Y Danjuma called on his people also not to run away from their homes but to rise up to defend themselves.

It is rather unfortunate that the Interim National Secretary of the Gan Allah Fulani Association (an umbrella body of Fulani associations in Nigeria) sentimentally, rose in defence of his kinsmen specifically on the Fulani Herdsmen attack in Agatu (LGA in Benue) in February, saying it was a reprisal attack, meant to revenge the killing of a prominent Fulani man.

A lawmaker, Zainab Kure, sponsored a bill in the Senate. This unpopular bill regarded as the ‘Land Grazing Bill,’ is aimed at securing areas for Fulani Herdsmen across the federation and for the mapping out of grazing routes. Beyond that, the bill seeks to establish a National Grazing Reserves Establishment and Development Commission.

The successful signing of this bill into law means there will be a limited areas reserved for the Fulani Herdsmen and their cattle. On the land required for the grazing routes, Nigeria’s Minister of Agriculture, Audu Ogbeh, said that many northern states have donated several pieces of land for the project. However, states in the southern part of the country have kicked against the idea, noting that they cannot be forced to give out their land for this purpose. Despite the controversy that comes with the proposal, the bill has scaled the first reading in the Senate. We do hope this unpopular bill dies a natural death because it will not be in the interest of the south drawing the lessons of history.

Recommendations

In order to ameliorate the incidences of this herdsmen militancy, the federal government should as a matter of urgency embarked on criminalization of the activities of the herdsmen. There is no gainsaying in the fact that they are terrorists and should be labelled as such. Recently it went on record in Nigeria as the Indigenous People of Biafran movement was declared a terrorist organization though without arms and has never maimed any life. There is need for fundamental surveillance as well as investigation of these herdsmen criminal related activities that is heightening the physical security around the country especially in the Middle Belt region. This should be targeted at deterring or disrupting these wanton attacks. The security agencies if they are really sincere should wake up to their responsibilities by harnessing the security facilities within their disposals at nipping in the board the reckless killings perpetrated by the Fulani hoodlums posing as herdsmen. Despite the massive acquisition of arms and quantum spending on security, the level of insecurity in the country is still on the increase. The writers therefore call on the Buhari led government to overhaul the security chiefs of Nigeria to prove there is no undertone attachment to the level of killings going on in this country. A situation where all the security chiefs of a multi-ethnic nation such as Nigeria are people from the North calls for scrutiny and this anomaly must be corrected if the security challenges confronting the nation will be addressed. In addition, the state governments as chief security officers of their states should as a matter of urgency push strongly for the establishment of state police through the state houses of assembly in order to effectively secure their environments.

Conclusion

Herdsmen militancy has been ongoing in Nigeria for a long time but in recent years the incidents have become a lot more organized, sophisticated and complicated. With security compromised due to the Boko Haram insurgency, attacks have increased.

At a glance, these conflicts seem to be fuelled by the quest for grazing land by Fulani herdsmen. But a closer look shows a complex mix of politics, identity, religion, terrorism and criminality. All flourish because of a weak political and security environment. Conflict between herdsmen and farmers are often triggered by attempts to prevent the cattle of

nomadic herdsmen from grazing on crop farms.

Arguably, nomadic herders are struggling due to political and environmental changes. Their livelihoods are being threatened by changes in weather patterns as well as modern land-use policies and urbanisation. Most African countries don't support their itinerant herding and nomadic lifestyle. What this means is that the average nomadic herder lives in an environment he considers hostile and indifferent to his needs, where he must struggle to fend for himself and to survive. This struggle for survival has become a way of life for herders who are ready to defend or redeem their endangered livelihood with their blood.

It has become pertinent to check the excesses of the herdsmen through strong regulations. Open itinerant grazing should be restricted and grazing routes and reserves established. The ranch system of animal husbandry should be promoted as a substitute to mobile pastoralism. The above suggestions must be implemented with caution and should be established within the northern region of the country. This suggestion is better understood in the light of the Usman dan Fodio jihad in northern Nigeria in 1804. The usurpation by Usman of the political apparatus of the north was conducted under the pretext of purification of Islamic religion but ended up in changing the political landscape of northern Nigeria. This single incident that brought the Fulani to dominating the political space of the north cannot be taken lightly in view of the federal government's position on the creation of cattle colonies across the states in Nigeria. In addition, all perpetrators of violence under the pretext of farmer-herder conflict should be brought to book and punished severely to deter impunity and wanton criminal behaviours.

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