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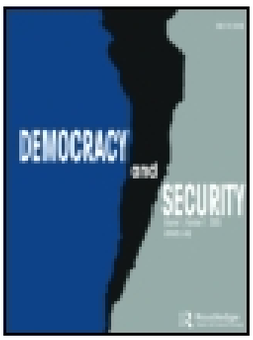

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Forces of Terror: Armed Banditry and Insecurity in North-west Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria has confronted several security conundrums in recent years, including armed banditry, which poses a severe threat to the north-west and the entire nation. North-west Nigeria has been hit by an unprecedented wave of kidnappings, maiming, killings, population displacements, cattle rustling, and disruption of socio-economic activities due to the rise of armed bandits in the region. These events have created a climate of uncertainty that has become a cause for concern for the government and the citizenry. Relying on secondary sources of data, this article examines the causes, manifestations, and dimensions of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria, and its security implications. It provides a survey of both the visible and less-visible actors in the conflict. The article argues that armed banditry in the north-west and other parts of Nigeria transcends pastoralist insurgency, as evident in the dominant narratives, considering the multiplicity of complexly connected causal factors, actors, manifestations, and dimensions that are present in the threats posed by this development. The article also shows the negative impacts of armed banditry on human and national security in the region.

KEYWORDS

Armed banditry; conflict; insecurity; north-west; Nigeria; pastoralism; terrorism; farmer-herder

Introduction

The security situation in Nigeria has become increasingly complex and uncertain. In recent years, various non-state armed groups have emerged and consolidated coercive power to terrorize the population in Nigeria, as evident with the activities of the armed bandits, criminal gangs, separatist groups, Islamic fundamentalists, amorphous kidnappers, and many others often referred to in the Nigerian media as "unknown gunmen." These actors differ in their objectives, tactics, and operational simulations. As a result of the activities of non-state armed groups targeting the civilian population and its attendant security consequences, there are more than 8.7 million people in need of immediate humanitarian assistance in the country.[1]

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Nigeria's north-central and north-west regions are afflicted by a multi-layered crisis rooted in long-standing tensions between ethnic and religious groups, and attacks by criminal groups and armed bandits, such as kidnapping and robbery along major highways. In recent years, the crisis has intensified owing to an increase in bandit attacks, which have resulted in widespread displacement across the region. Northern Nigeria, and particularly north-western states, have witnessed escalating intercommunal violence since 2011. Increasing numbers of armed groups and gangs have contributed to growing violence in herding and farming communities. These armed groups engage in organized attacks that feature cattle-rustling, rape, looting, plundering, kidnapping, and murder. Between 2018 and 2020, at least 4,900 deaths were caused by armed banditry, which also generated hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the north-west.[2] For instance, between January 6 and 8, 2022, armed bandits attacked several villages in Zamfara State, killing more than 200 people and leaving 10,000 displaced.[3] These among other events have claimed several lives and caused significant economic destruction.

The activities of armed bandits in Nigeria are not limited to the north-west, as they also have a significant presence in the north-central states of the country. More than 1,000 cases of kidnapping for ransom were reported in 2021.[4] Recently in March 2022, armed bandits operating in the north-western state of Kaduna attacked a train heading to Kaduna from the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The train attack along the Abuja-Kaduna axis claimed the lives of eight passengers, while several others were abducted.[5] This and other events, such as bandit attacks against military bases and airports, have revealed the growing sophistication of these groups and their capabilities for deadly operations, which have left most states in the North, especially in the north-west region, in perpetual insecurity. This crisis trend cannot be fully understood outside the context of climate change, environmentally induced migration, indigene-settler dispute, contested land and grazing rights, competition over the control of discovered gold and other resources, under-governed spaces and low administrative presence, and the politicization of the conflict, which have metamorphosed into deadly crisis that threatens national security.[6]

Today, armed banditry, which is characterized by armed robbery, kidnapping, murder, cattle rustling, and rape, is the most urgent national security concern in Nigeria.[7] In this case, North-western states of Katsina, Sokoto, Kaduna, and Zamfara are the most directly affected by activities of armed bandits. Moreover, armed bandits and Islamist terrorist groups such as Boko Haram are increasingly cooperating in recruitment, training, logistics, weaponry, and attacks on vulnerable communities. The region's ungoverned spaces offer insights into some of these attacks thereby highlighting the vulnerability of the civilian population to kidnapping for ransom. Moreover, the ungoverned

nature of the bandits' enclaves makes it difficult for security operatives to respond to distress calls of locals. It takes several hours for the state to respond due to massive forests such as Kunduma, Falgore, Subudu, Kamara, Kiyanbana and Kamuk forests shielding the armed bandits from state security interventions.[8] Beyond ungoverned spaces, the phenomenon of relative deprivation is also a principal enabler of armed banditry in the north-west.[9]

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of armed bandits in the north-west, it has been estimated that about 30,000 bandits are associated with different gangs ranging from a few fighters to over 1,000 fighters operating in the region.[10] As evidenced by the scale of violent attacks by bandits in northern Nigeria, the response to these attacks which includes state-led and community-driven efforts have been ineffective in addressing the disproportionate devastation suffered by the population, including women and children.[11] The armed bandits maintain a decentralized structure, with little or no coordination across multiple groups that exist, and their motivations are multidimensional, making it difficult to effectively approach them and address the crisis through dialog. The bandits equally operate like flies, as they attack vulnerable targets and easily take cover in the forests and communities, making them less distinguishable from civilian population and therefore challenging for security agencies to effectively deal with without raising human rights and environmental concerns.[12]

There is a growing number of literature on armed banditry, which are predominantly engrossed in historical review of cattle rustling and gold mining in north-west and other regions of Nigeria.[13] Cattle theft by the criminal syndicates and the illegal extraction and competition over natural resources such as gold by non-state actors creates an enabling environment for armed banditry.[14] In addition, several scholarly works have focused on the subject, with arguments centered on Fulani pastoralists as prominent actors in the armed banditry.[15] This article takes a departure from such existing narratives by exploring the broad spectrum of actors involved in armed banditry in this region. Against this background, the article examines the forces of terror, with emphasis on the distance and immediate causes, visible and invisible actors of multidimensional threats of armed banditry and the implications for peace and security in north-west Nigeria. It adopts secondary sources of data using qualitative-dominated analysis. Accordingly, subsequent sections of this article address conceptual clarification, distance and immediate causes of armed banditry, enablers of crisis, in the north-west. The article then proceeds to discuss the security implications of armed banditry, before the concluding remarks.

Armed banditry: a conceptual clarification

Armed banditry has been used to descried situations where innocent citizens are attacked, killed, kidnapped, ransomed, and raped, and their properties

destroyed and cattle rustled.[16] It can be considered as a form of criminal activities that is typically motivated by economic opportunity.[17] This is a form of organized crime perpetrated by syndicate groups that are involved in intimidation, dispossession, and killing of civilians, and destruction of properties. Accordingly, armed bandits can be referred to as gangs of criminals who terrorize and take valuable possessions of the local populations and travelers, such as their merchandise, money, livestock, camels, and sheep.[18] In this case, armed banditry is characterized by cattle rustling, attack, kidnapping, ransoming and killings of innocent citizens and rapes as a form of sexual violence against victims.[19]

There are various types of armed banditry. These include social, rural-urban frontier, countryside, mercenary, organized, maritime, and petty banditry.[20] Relative deprivation, social inequalities, and grievances often trigger armed banditry.[21] Locational operation defines the rural and urban banditry and the frontier and countryside banditry. Mercenary banditry can be characterized as either an agency or a master–servant relationship, as a case of a group operating under a master who provides necessary logistics. Organized banditry operates across borders through an efficient network and command structure. Maritime banditry operates along the coastal belts, whereas petty banditry is a lone criminal act characterized by robbing citizens of their belongings.[22]

In most cases, armed bandits often live in ungoverned or under-governed spaces, where government presence is mostly limited or absent.[23] These include remote areas and forest enclaves, which are used as hiding places to plan and execute attacks.[24] Such an environment provides bandits with opportunities for operational advantage. Accordingly, armed bandits often operate in rural settings, such that their attacks, kidnappings, and cattle rustlings, lootings, among other criminal activities, are carried out in, from and against villages. Their operational control can therefore revolve around rural and border communities, and uninhabited or less populated spots along major roads or waterways.[25] In this manner, the primary victims of armed banditry are innocent citizens residing in or traveling along remote parts of the country.

Although armed bandits generally live and act in anonymity, they commit violent crimes in the open. This reflects a tactic employed by common criminals, who consider theft as a means to an end, which is often defined in private terms. Considering the nexus between membership and this criminal tactic, Slatta describes armed banditry as forceful and illegal takeover of property by groups of men.[26] This patriarchal position is less sustainable, considering the growing evidence even from Nigeria that both men and women are involved in modern armed banditry.[27] Although the operational, tactical and strategic roles of individual members of armed groups may be shaped by gender differences, the growing sexual diversity of armed conflicts and criminal violence can no longer be ignored.[28] By their nature, women are

more suitable, employed and sometimes restricted to intelligence, counter-intelligence and logistics.[29]

Armed banditry is a synthesis of criminality and local-embedded conflicts, containing inter-ethnic related conflict, warlordism, robbery, and terrorism. Its dynamics are ever-changing, depending on the individual actors and dimensions.[30] Armed bandits constitute a form of non-state armed group, which often capitalize on existing societal grievances among communities and ethnic groups, and against the state, to terrorize civilians. They often demonstrate the capacity to target the vulnerable and pressurize state authorities to conform to their demands. They usually live and operate in ungoverned territories with limited state presence, especially in terms of social infrastructure and security forces. These among others do provide fertile ground for societal grievances, which originate from resource competition, social displacement, unfavorable government policies, marginalization, and injustice. Availability of small and light weapons, and other interrelated factors, has often worked to the advantage of armed bandits. Consequently, armed banditry could be considered as criminal activities that are driven by personal interests and triggered by multifaceted challenges in state-society relations, including weak state institutions, political alienation, poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and ethno-communal grievances.[31]

Armed banditry constitutes a threat to security. Traditionally, security is reduced to national security, a state-centric understanding of power and authority, enforcement of internal law and order, and safeguard of territorial integrity of a state against external aggression.[32] It involves protection and defense of the state from the danger to the political stability, peace, and territorial jurisdiction. However, the danger of armed banditry goes beyond national security. It equally has implication for human security, which involves human/people-centric conception of security. Therefore, both national security and human dimensions of security are relevant to this paper. Human security revolves around personal, community, food, environmental, health, political, and economic dimensions of security, and the protection of minority groups.[33] In this manner, the threat of armed banditry has impacted the welfare of general citizenry and capacity of state to enforce internal security, peace, and order in Nigeria.[34]

Origin of armed banditry in North West Nigeria

As evident in Figure 1, North-west Nigeria is made up of Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Kano, Sokoto and Zamfara. The origin of armed bandits in north-west Nigeria can be traced to precolonial era. The region was a major hub in precolonial international trade and migration, as Kano and Katshina were well placed in the trans-Saharan routes for trade and tourism, with further connection to Sokoto in the West, Borno and others in the East and

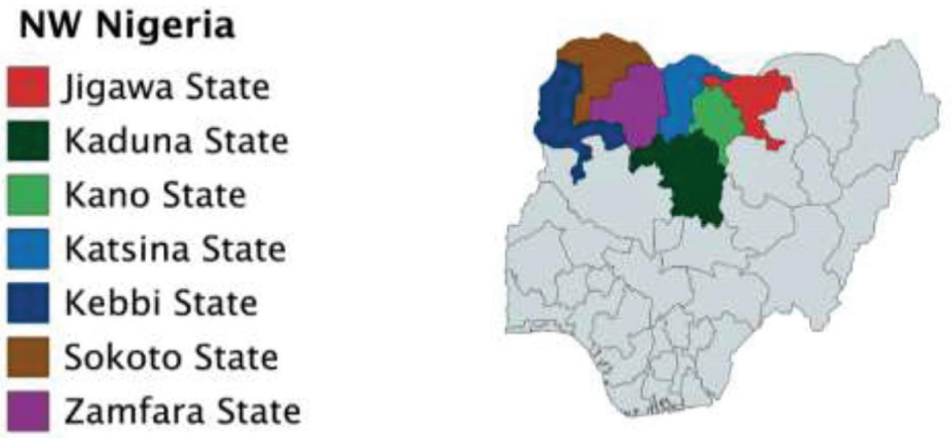

Figure 1. The map of North-West in Nigeria. Source: Balarabe, K. (2021). Dataset on human rights awareness in Northwest Nigeria. *Data in brief, 39*, 107–547.[38]

Benin Empire in the South.[35] Amidst these, armed bandits inhabited these routes, and constituted major threats to caravan trading, tourism, political stability, and territorial integrity of the precolonial states and societies in the region. In Zamfara, for example,[36] Hilltops like Kwotarkwashi and Chafe were frequent destinations for criminals, where they performed their noxious acts, often causing severe security threats. During this period, the inadequate capacity of the affected African states and societies to effectively govern their territories and secure their trading routes are largely responsible for armed banditry. This trend endured till early colonial period. Jaafar summarizes the historical account of armed banditry as far back as 1930s in northern Nigeria as follows:

> In those days, wayfarers and merchants travelling along our local economic roads usually faced the threats and dangers of ambush from nondescript bandits. Armed bandits and criminals were known to be targeting goods ferried on the back of donkeys, camels and ox carts. Those bandits on our trade routes would forcefully take those goods and disappear into the bush. That is just one dimension of the problem then. In other instances, the bandits would sometimes raid farming communities and villages with the intent of willful killing and wanton destruction of property. During such raids, the bandits would destroy virtually everything in their path, including valuables, farm produce, etc. This subculture has been in existence even before the coming of colonialists to the territories of northern Nigeria.[37]

Despite the foregoing, the colonial order reinforced the capacity of the pre-colonial states in northern Nigeria and suppressed the activities of armed bandits, with considerable success.[39] The new order came with Atlantic-oriented trade and socioeconomic system, Westphalia state structure and related policing and defense programs. These among others drove armed bandits to the underworld and minimized their threats in late colonial and

early post-colonial Nigeria. However, political violence, ethnicity, militarization of the society, inadequate policy attention for human development and climate change, and weak institutional capacity of the state in governance and security increased the opportunities and motivations for armed resistance and criminal violence in post-colonial Nigeria. Amidst these, armed bandit groups proliferate across the country, with surge of armed robbery and ethno-communal clashes from 1980s. In Northern Nigeria, and north-west specifically, this development further expanded to include cattle rustling, which became prominent in 2000s. Nevertheless, 2011 can be considered as a landmark in the contemporary reemergence of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria, as armed groups commanded by the Fulanis Kundu and Buharin Daji emerged. Although no one in the group was a young person, they named the group *Kungiyar gayu*, the young guys' association. The group is known to the public as "Kungiyar Barayin Shanu" (the cattle rustlers' association).[40]

In 2012, the manifestation of cattle rustling cases began to appear in the state, illuminating their underlying motive. It is considered a cultural group geared toward emancipating the Fulani from top-down oppression by security agents, politicians, and traditional rulers. Grazing areas in the state were being encroached upon and confiscated at a time when herders were migrating to neighboring states. Prior to the recruitment process in 2011, membership was limited to Fulani. A combination of instruments such as pledge of cash, cattle, sex, leisure, and intimidation were used to recruit Fulanis. Several herders joined the gang to escape harassment by its members after they discovered the gang was rustling livestock. There have been allegations that some prominent Fulani families in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina states have demonstrated their support through donations and moral support to the gangs for fear of bitter consequences.[41]

Figure 2 provides an analysis of the trends of the armed banditry attacks in Nigeria's north-west region between January 2013 and March 2022. It shows the trend and reported attacks by armed bandits in north-western Nigeria. Out of 909 incidents of bandits' attacks, Jigawa experienced 5, Kaduna 342, Kano 1, Katsina 208, Kebbi 14, Sokoto 54, Zamfara 275. The data reveals that Kaduna experienced most of the attacks by armed bandits, followed by Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto states. Kano and Jigawa state experienced minimal incidences of armed banditry. One fundamental question is why Kaduna experienced most of the attacks perpetrated by armed bandits? First, Kaduna had the most alarming record of ethno-communal and religious conflicts in the region. These provided armed bandits with required capabilities for post-conflict criminal lives. Second, the current governor of Kaduna, El-Rufai, unguarded utterances against armed bandits provoke constant attacks in Kaduna. Notably, public infrastructure such as trains, rail lines, and military bases and academies were mostly targeted by the armed bandits in Kaduna. Moreover, the crisis has become salient in Zamfara as well, since the discovery

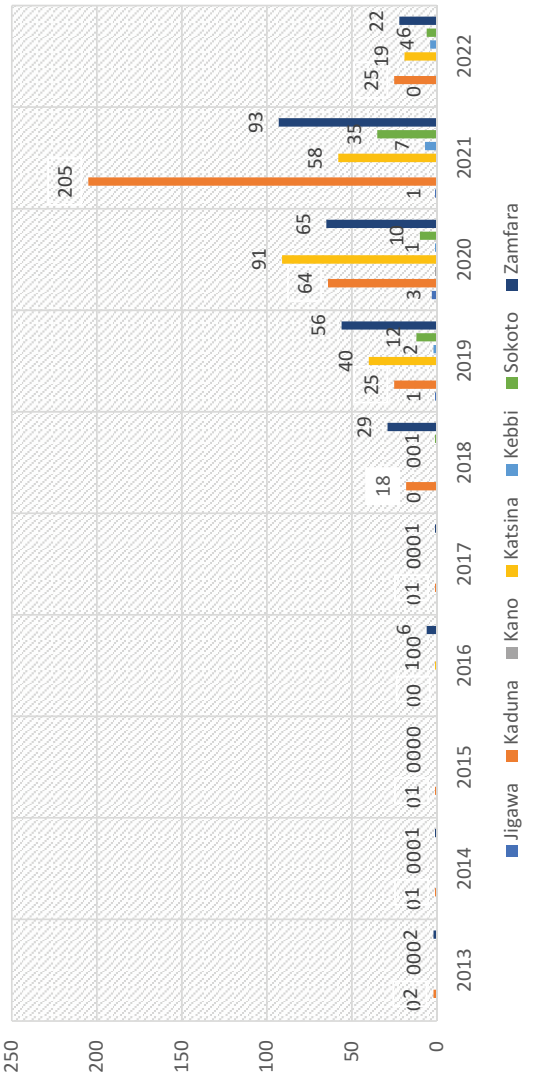

Figure 2. Incidences of bandit attacks in Northwest Nigeria, 2013-2022. Source: Designed by the authors with data extracted from the NST Dataset.[42]

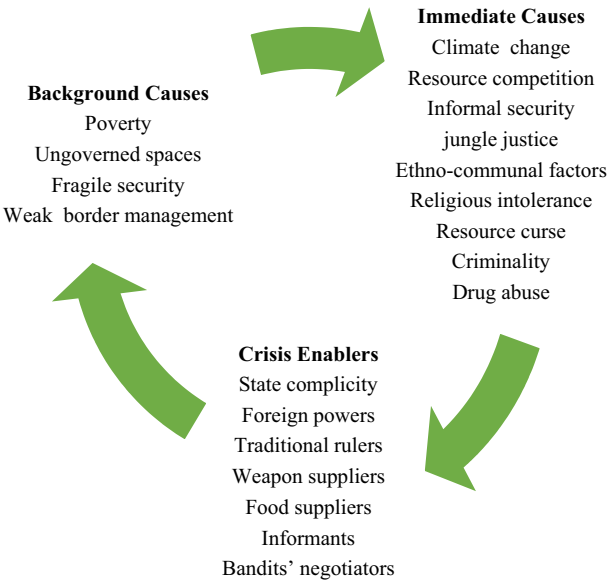

Figure 3. The conflict catalyst cycle. Source: Authors

of gold in the state. Nevertheless, farmer-herder conflicts provided a significant fuel to the rise and spread of the crisis in the region.

Causes and drivers of armed banditry

There are numerous factors that can explain the emergence of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. As evident in Figure 3, these can be broadly considered in three forms: background causes or existing conditions (poverty, ungoverned spaces, fragile security and Weak border management), the immediate causes or triggers (climate change, resource competition, informal security, jungle justice, ethno-communal factors, religious intolerance, resource curse, criminality, and drug abuse), and crisis enablers (state complicity, foreign powers, traditional rulers, weapon suppliers, food suppliers, informants, and bandits' negotiators). These have fueled the recent trend of armed banditry, which remains the most prevalent threat to Nigeria's national security.[43]

Background causes of armed banditry in North-West Nigeria

Nigeria is a product of colonial state formation, where boundaries were divided with little or no consideration for precolonial political systems, socio-cultural affinities and economic relations in inclusion and exclusion of territory, and the interests of the population are at best secondary.[45] The failure and inadequate capacity of the post-colonial state (spanning across all levels of government from federal to the state and local levels) to advance the welfare

and security aspirations of the population have encouraged popular and unpopular, peaceful and armed mobilization and resistance against the system as well as criminal violence, which are manifesting in form of banditry, terrorism, insurgency, militancy and piracy across Nigeria.[46] This section provides background causes that are embedded in Nigerian socio-political space, including endemic poverty, ungoverned spaces, fragile security, drug abuse, and weak border management. This section explains some of the background causes that triggered the rise of armed banditry in Nigeria, including poverty, ungoverned spaces, fragile security, drug abuse, and weak border control.

Endemic poverty

As an indicator of the challenging human welfare, North-West and many other parts of Nigeria are characterized by endemic poverty. Focusing on poverty, unemployment, education, standard of living, and healthcare, the United Nations Development Programme's report on Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) shows that five of the 10 states with endemic poverty in Nigeria are from the north-west. As the data in Figure 4 reveals that the north-west has the highest intensity of poverty (45.0%), followed by the north-east (44.0%), which has been devastated by the Boko Haram insurgency. The north-central region emerged as third with 41.0%. The least is concentrated in the southern parts of Nigeria, which includes the southwest (38.0%), southeast

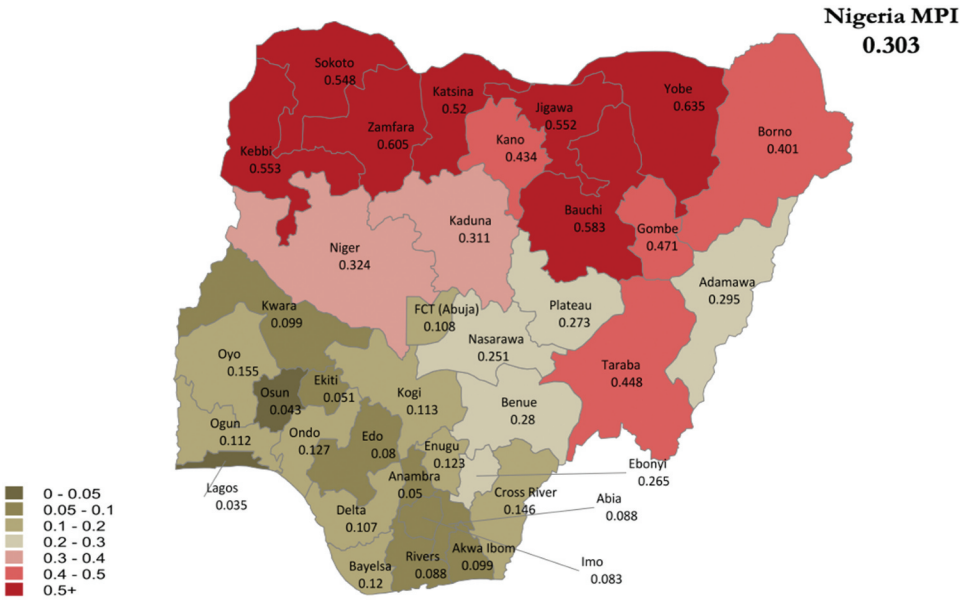

Figure 4. Mapping poverty rates at the sub-national level in Nigeria. Source: Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI)[44]

(38.0%), and south–south (39.0%) geo-political zones.[47] Thus, poverty and armed banditry are inextricably linked. Consequently, the high level of poverty in the northern region contributes to the emergence of armed banditry in the affected regions. The poor human welfare in the region can be considered as a major source of frustration and aggression. Also, those that are involved in banditry and other armed resistance or criminal violence in the region could have embraced such way of live as a strategy to survive harsh condition of living.

Ungoverned spaces, fragile security and weak border management

The criminal activities of armed bandits in the North-West are made possible due to several ungoverned spaces that foster these criminal groups. States like Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, and Kebbi are leading hotspots of armed banditry in the north-west. About 35 out of 92 Local Government Areas (LGAs) have been reportedly affected in the north-west.[48] After years of conflict and favorable land ownership laws for farmers over herders, herders turned to violent criminal lifestyles. They have since set up camps in Rugu Forest, in Zamfara State, mainly composed of Fulanis and Hausas. Dajin Rugu forest covers three states: Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna. Falgore forest in Kano State, which was upgraded to a game reserve in the 1960s, spread across three LGAs, including Doguwa, Sumaila, and Tundun Wada. Kuduru and Kamuku, Kuyambana, Sububu, and Burwaye forests are also some of the deadliest enclaves of armed banditry in the region. Although Kaduna houses a large portion of Kamuku forest, it further spreads along Niger, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, and Kebbi states.[49] These ungoverned enclaves became the hidden territories for attacking nearby communities and travelers across Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, and Niger states. In 2019, Zamfara state was estimated to have more than 10,000 bandits across 40 camps.[50] The weakness of the institutional capacity of the federal and state government in forest management, and the declining role of local government authorities in managing local affairs, offer armed bandits the opportunities to emerge and utilize such ungoverned spaces for their capacity building and criminal activities.[51] Furthermore, armed bandits have exploited the ineffective and deteriorating security climate across Nigeria to perpetuate their agenda. One of the latest factors has been the weak security architecture, specifically the allegation of police extortion, which has led individuals to engage in armed banditry rather than seeking justice.[52] Weak border management is also part of the challenges of Nigeria's security architecture. This has increased trans-Sahel human, weapons, and drugs trafficking as well as spill over effects of armed conflict in the region.

Armed banditry in North-West Nigeria: immediate causes of multidimensional crisis

Armed banditry is a multidimensional crisis that is triggered by several factors in North-West Nigeria. Both internal and external factors elicited the immediate causes of armed banditry. These include climate-induced migration and resource competition, informal security and jungle justice, ethno-communal and religious factors, resource-curse, criminal, pastoral, and terror-crime nexus.

Climate-induced migration and resource competition

Climate-induced migration, displacement and resource competition are prominent among the triggers of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. The conflict over natural resources, such as land, water and pastures between nomadic cattle herders and farmers, triggered by climate change, is one of the primary drivers of armed banditry. The land-use crisis between Hausa farmers and Fulani pastoralists, which created a virulent dissonance between the two ethnic groups in the north-west, was also a contributory factor.[53] The increasing population that triggered resource competition and ineffective land dispute resolution are the escalated discord in the north-west.[54] These, among others, have triggered a series of farmer-herder conflicts in the region. Among the leading causes were the decisions of the Zamfara State government to clear extensive forests and cattle grazing reserves in its part of the Kuyanbana forest and the Gidan Jaja areas of Maru and Zurmi LGAs for farming.[55] Due to the policy, many Fulani hamlets were forced to move between Dansadau and Maradun to Zurmi axes of the state. In these areas, the Fulani cattle herders were previously the victims of hostility and extortion of corrupt district heads, farmers, and police, with weak justice system. This was long before the policy of eviction of pastoralists was enacted. The effect of these conditions resulted in the creation and radicalization of a fragmented group of dispossessed, deprived, and frustrated Fulani. As such, banditry started as criminal cow theft and destruction of farms, but has since become more dynamic lucrative business.[56] This factor gave birth to the rise of some of the earliest known armed groups by the Fulanis simply known as Kundu and Buharin Daji. Others are Kungiyar gayu (the young guys' association), popularly known as "Kungiyar Barayin Shanu" (the cattle rustlers' association).[57]

Informal security and jungle justice dimension

Informal security and jungle justice are also prominent among the factors that trigger armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. In the wake of herder-farmer conflicts and criminal attacks that swept through the north-west, Hausa

communities dominated by farmers began to mobilize themselves to form vigilante outfits known as "Yan sa kai" (volunteer guards). This is considered an informal security architecture that has filled the vacuum of state security. The tools used to combat insecurity are locally made guns, merchets, clubs, and traditional weapons. In addition, many vigilante groups target pastoralist communities of Fulani descent, accusing them of crimes. Such informal security outfits have resulted in extrajudicial killings, torture, unlawful arrests, and cattle confiscations. Thereby contributing to the problem rather than solution. Additionally, the Fulani settlements are usually destroyed, forcing the pastoralists to flee into the forests. This strategy has exacerbated the relationship between the Hausa farmers and the Fulani pastoralists. Fulani pastoralists have also formed militias to counter Hausa farmers' informal security arrangements. Between 2011 and 2014, the formation of armed groups was portrayed as a form of self-defense and ethnic camaraderie, while some Fulani pastoralists were driven by economic motivation, thus escalating the violence.[58]

Ethno-communal and religious dimension

Ethno-communal and religion forces are also prominent among the triggers of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. Nigerians tend to identify themselves based on primordiality, such as communal, ethnic and religious identities, rather than state-centric nationality.[59] In a study conducted in Nigeria by Lewis and Bratton, more than half of Nigerians (48.2%) identified themselves with ethnic origins and 21% with religious affinities.[60] Since 1999, ethno-communal conflicts have heightened, and sometimes occurred as intercommunity, indigene-settler and herder-farmer conflicts in north-west and other parts of Nigeria. A notable example is the protracted conflict between the ethnic minority groups of southern Kaduna, who are predominantly Christians, and the Hausa-Fulani, who are mostly Muslims. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 people have died due to the conflict.[61] These and other conflicts have created deep-sited hatred, which are sometimes channeled through formation and campaign of armed groups, such as communal, ethnic, or religious militias, and criminal or social bandits, to settle old-scores. These conflicts have also destroyed huge infrastructures and private properties and displaced numerous people or denied them sources of livelihood, leaving them to embrace armed resistance or criminal violence as means of surviving.

The resource-curse dimension

Armed banditry has been further triggered by resource-curse in the North-West. The discovery of gold and illegal mining activities have further

contributed to the existence and activities of armed criminal groups, including armed banditry.[62] It was claimed that 80% of mineral resources exploration, especially gold mining, are being carried out illegally.[63] The emergence of illegal gold mining and the involvement of foreign corporations are indicators of poor governance, structural and institutional decay, ungoverned spaces in the region.[64] Some of the illegal miners are politically connected individuals with foreign networks, who transport such natural resources through Niger and Togo, from where they are finally transported abroad, such as Dubai, China and beyond. Poor youths are being recruited and mobilized for such an illegal occupation – artisanal mining. In this case, non-state armed groups are sponsored by millionaire and billionaire entrepreneurs that are involved in illegal gold mining to protect their interests against affected communities, rival business entities, stakes of competing political class, and the state security forces. Amidst these, armed bandits and gangs have emerged with activities that often target sites and workers of rival informal gold miners, hostile or less cooperative communities, security outposts and formations, anti-status quo policymakers and their supporters. This reveals the problems of governance in the country and continued to heighten the security tension in the region.

Terror-crime nexus

Terror-crime nexus is another important trigger of armed banditry in north-west Nigeria. There is growing speculation that the armed bandits are affiliated with Islamist Boko Haram insurgents.[65] Although the insurgent campaign is concentrated in the north-east, Boko Haram as well as its allies such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have maintained significant presence and carried out records of attacks in the north-west.[66] On the basis of common operational terrain, different factions of Boko Haram insurgents are believed to be involved in competition and cooperation with different groups of armed bandits. It is also believed that counterinsurgency forces have successfully degraded Boko Haram, forcing some of its members to embrace less ideological paths, such as banditry and other criminal violence.[67] However, armed bandits are mostly motivated by economic benefits rather than political ideology, while the opposite is often the case with jihadists.[68] Hence, the economic proclivity embedded in armed banditry may be less compatibly ideologically driven violence of the insurgents.[69] Equally, the economic gains of armed banditry can further lubricate a challenging insurgent campaign.

Crisis enablers and armed banditry in North West Nigeria

The crisis in the North West Nigeria has been enabled by numerous visible (combatants) and invisible (noncombatants) players. As noted in the previous section and many other studies, Fulani and other ethnic militias, armed

pastoralists and farmers, vigilantes and other communal armed groups, armed climate/conflict-induced migrants and settlers, Boko Haram and affiliated terrorists and insurgents, and political thugs, illegal gold miners and their security teams are prominent, visible and frontline players in armed banditry in North West Nigeria.[70] However, several other actors are involved in armed banditry, as hidden forces behind the crisis.

State complicity

State complicity is a notable factor in armed banditry in the North West.[71] It is believed that some of the criminals were foreigners invited into Nigeria as political thugs and mercenaries by politicians, especially toward the 2015 general elections that brought Muhammadu Buhari to power and other political office holders. While these mercenaries and their local counterparts were instrumental to the emergence of many current political officeholders,[72] especially in the north, they were abandoned by politicians following the election and left with unfulfilled promises. These informed the grievances of the political mercenaries, which turned to armed bandits, as they are left to survive with the arms and ammunitions in their possession. These explain the lackluster approach of the government in dealing with the armed bandits.[73] In relation to these, following bandit attack on train where several people were killed, injured, and kidnapped along the Abuja-Kaduna, the governor of Kaduna claimed that:

> We know where their camps are. we have the maps; we know everything. We have their phone numbers and listen to their conversation sometimes. We know what they (terrorists) are planning. We get the reports. The problem is for the agencies to take action. Don't wait until they attack before you respond. The Army should go after their enclaves to wipe them out. Let the Air Force bomb them.[74]

While such a claim has raised a mammoth of concerns about the state's recognition of the actors involved, the enclaves and locations of armed bandits, despite the necessary information and intelligence reports at the disposal of the state, the Nigerian security operatives appear to be unable to tame the spread of insecurity in the region. This raises the argument about whether such an insurgency can be considered state-sponsored terrorism:

> Some political leaders, particularly from the northern region of Nigeria, have claimed the group are not terrorists, just a mere business organisation engaging in kidnapping for ransom. The recent chutzpah attacks and killings launched on the hallowed throttlehold of Nigeria's defence institution in Kaduna raise a fundamental question, particularly whether the state backs this group. Several political commentators have argued that this group represents a terrorist organisation that enjoys the support of the state.[75]

In addition, the allegation and suspicious state connivance have also been raised by the opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which claimed that:

> The PDP holds that the decision of the APC-led government to cover the identity of sponsors of mindless mass killings, maiming, raping, kidnapping of our compatriots as well as the endless violent marauding of our communities under the APC watch, validates our stand that such individuals have connections with the APC. The PDP asserts that the refusal by the Buhari Presidency to expose the sponsors of terrorism in Nigeria vindicates its position that the APC government has been providing official cover for terrorists and bandits pillaging the nation. The PDP position is predicated on the declaration of the Buhari Presidency that it was not interested in making public the names of six Nigerians reportedly sent to the Federal Government by the United Arab Emirates as sponsors of terrorism in our country.[76]

Furthermore, as recently claimed by the governor of Kaduna state, the Nigerian Defense headquarter repudiated bombing of armed bandits' camps, which provides another perspective in understanding the political coloration of the conflict.[77] Moreover, the refusal of the Muhammadu Buhari administration to publicly expose the sponsors of armed bandits and other terrorist groups provides a conducive climate for insinuating state involvement and collaboration with armed banditry. In addition, security operatives such as the Nigerian military personnel have been implicated in supplying arms and ammunition to armed bandits in the north-west.[78]

Also relevant is the political class' benefiting from the conflict through illegal mining in the region.[79] On the other end of the debate lies a closer look at the connection between illegal mining and other forms of violence and conflict in the North-Western states, especially in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara. The present security threat of armed banditry is a result of illegal mining activities in the region, as locals in Katsina, Kaduna, and Zamfara states have claimed that:

> Those who sponsor illegal mining also sponsor rural banditry and cattle rustling in mining communities in order to create conflict situations for local cattle breeders. Such conflicts lead to the sacking of villages and the displacement of local populations, which creates opportunities for illegal miners to operate.[80]

Foreign powers

While the foreign powers have also been involved in illegal gold mining, the recent report validates how foreign nationals contribute to the reign of terror in the northwest. For instance, several Chinese nationals engaged in illegal artisanal mining have been arrested by Nigeria's security operatives.[81] The above argument was validated by the current Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed. He argues that the illegal miners sponsor armed

banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and cattle rustling. A group also claimed to know the names of those sponsoring armed bandits and jihadist groups. The group stated that:

> We have a list of their names, from state governors down to political influencers, youth organisations, as well as clandestine organisations under their payroll.[82]

This instability creates an enabling environment for the illegal exploration of natural resources. Therefore, it can be argued that contestation over mining zones among the political elites fuels the prevalence of armed bandits. However, some of the illegal miners enjoy the protection of the state authorities, who consider themselves above the law.[83]

Traditional Rulers, Weapon Suppliers, Informants, and Bandits' Negotiators, Illicit drugs

Another perspective includes the traditional rulers and citizens' complicities. Some highly placed traditional rulers were deposed due to their involvement in armed banditry, with some of the prominent local rulers often playing the important role of intelligence gathering for the armed bandits. A recent report claims that:

> Some unpatriotic persons, including highly placed traditional rulers in the areas, were identified as helping the bandits with intelligence to perpetrate their nefarious actions or to compromise military operations.[84]

The case of two prominent individuals from Zamfara and Kaduna who attempted to smuggle weapons into the north-west using their connections in the Sahel region through porous Nigerian borders.[85] In addition to these prominent Nigerians, many middlemen and vendors were also involved in the weapons transfer to forests inhabited by armed bandits.[86] In addition, it was reported that weapons suppliers receive more cash than field fighters. Moreover, the role of informants cannot be jettisoned. There were several instances of informants being arrested who disguised as community members so that they could assist the armed bandits with necessary information.[87]

The importance of negotiators in armed banditry cannot be overstated. Negotiators for bandits have played a crucial part in several cases of kidnapping for ransom. For example, two prominent Islamic individuals are identified as negotiators who liaise between the families of the kidnapped citizens and the bandits. They play a vital role in negotiating the ransom to be paid by the families of abducted victims and acting as a link between the bandits' and the victims' families. This has been a standard operating procedure in Nigeria's illegal economy of armed banditry. Furthermore, the recent arrest of one of the bandits' negotiators, accused of illegally possessing incriminating documents such as military uniforms and a substantial amount of foreign currency, demonstrates the existence of such a criminal economy of kidnapping often

perpetrated by armed bandits. Some have grown extremely wealthy as a result of such illegal activity.[88]

Among the most neglected factors is the use of hard drugs especially among the youth population. The nexus between drug abuse and criminality has become another dimension of security concern. It has been argued that the use of illicit drugs among the youth population fueled armed banditry in Nigeria. Popular hard drugs for armed bandits include tramadol, codeine, intravenous drugs, marijuana, Boska, hydro-caffeine, and Pentazocine.[89] Therefore, the use of hard drugs is an enabler of criminal complicity with respect to armed banditry in the region.[90]

Security implications of armed banditry in North-West Nigeria

Fatalities and humanitarian impacts

Armed banditry has had negative implications on human and national dimensions of security in North-West and Nigeria generally. Notably, it is responsible for records of fatalities and loss of human freedom. Bandit attacks in the north-west have resulted in the deaths of many civilians, especially in the rural communities, of which cases are largely underreported by the government, media and security agencies.[91] As evident in Figure 5, armed bandits killed 8,300 people, including seven in Jigawa, 1,917 in Kaduna, 1,416 in Katsina, 202 in Kebbi, 644 in Sokoto, and 4,114 in Zamfara between January 2013 and March 2022. Some other source shows that more than 3,600 people were kidnapped, 8,000 were killed, and 200,000 were displaced due to the crisis in Zamfara alone.[92] In addition, the region experienced over 1,000 kidnappings

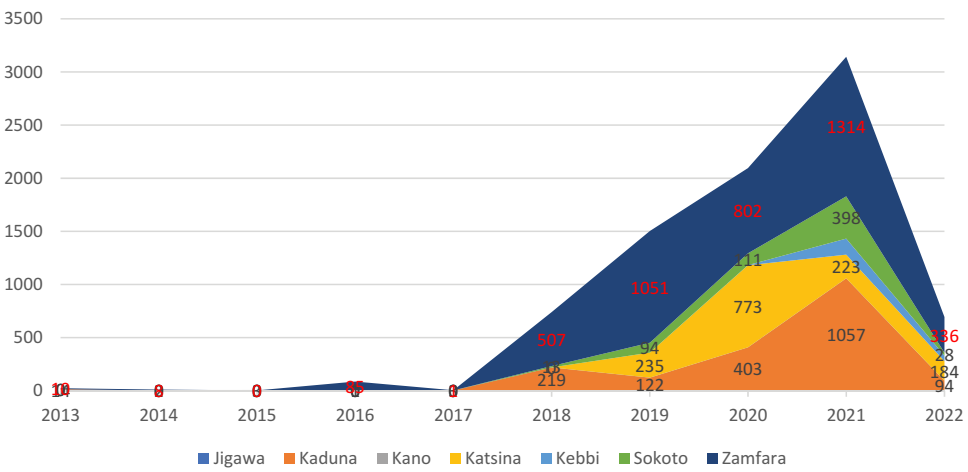

Figure 5. Total fatalities from armed bandit conflicts in Northwest Nigeria, 2013-2022. Source: Designed by the authors with data extracted from the NST dataset.[98]

for ransom in 2021.[93] These among others show the threats posed to lives and human freedom by armed banditry in the affected region.

The conflict has also ensued a humanitarian crisis where many people were displaced due to armed banditry. A joint evaluation by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons claimed that 210,354 people from 171 communities had been displaced in the north-west. Out of these, Zamfara accounted for 144,996, Sokoto had 35,941, and 29,417 were in Katsina.[94] However, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) reported that 105,463 people were displaced in Sokoto state alone.[95] The crisis is also estimated to have displaced over 210,000 people in north-west Nigeria as of March 2020, and generated 35,000 refugees that crossed the borders to places like Maradi in Niger Republic.[96] Moreover, livelihoods of many have been affected, and their mounting concern on the relationship between the displaced people and host communities with their growing competition for scarce resources, such as water, land, and food. As a result of inadequate resources to cater for the displaced people, it was reported that the living conditions of the displaced people in Internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps are horrible, characterized by poor sanitation and health, shortage of food supply, and inadequate shelters.[97]

Economic and educational impacts

The effects of armed banditry on Nigeria's economy are devastating. In its report on the economic value of peace, the Institute of Economics and Peace (IEP) claimed that insecurity cost Nigeria 8% of its GDP ($132.59 billion) in 2021.[99] Moreover, data from Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) suggest that 26.95% of Nigeria's GDP has been affected by the disruption of agricultural-related activities.[100] Similarly, data from the Manufacturers' Association of Nigeria (MAN) claimed that in the half of 2020, there was a decline of 56.5% in local raw materials against the 64% recorded in the first half of 2019, revealing a 7.5% reduction over the period.[101] This is because of the high-risk business environment soiled by insecurity. These have had negative effects on poverty alleviation and standard of living of millions of Nigerians, as the cost of living is rising with inflation, while a growing number of people are losing their means of livelihood. Notably, farming and animal husbandry are the primary economic activities in the north-west Nigeria. Accordingly, cattle rustling, destruction of farmlands and rural communities, as well as killing and kidnapping of farmers, pastoralists and agricultural marketers have further worsened human poverty and inequality in the region.

Armed banditry has further heightened food insecurity in North-West and beyond. With several cases of attacks on farming communities, and attendant

kidnapping for ransoms and the killing of farmers, many have abandoned their farmlands for safety. For instance, following a warning issued by armed bandits to farmers to stay away from their farms, about 26 farmers who failed to comply bandit directive were killed in Batsari LGA of Katsina state.[102] Moreover, many farmers have also been kidnapped for ransom. The region has also witnessed payment of levies to armed bandits by farmers as a precondition to access their farmlands. For instance, in Shiroro LGA, armed bandits demanded $1,100 as levies from the farmers to access their farms. It has been claimed that more than 5,884 farmlands covering more than 58,330 hectares have been abandoned in Katsina by the farmers due to insecurity ravaging the north-west.[103] Equally, pastoralists have endured several cases of cattle rustling in the region. Between June 2017 and January 2018, it was reported about 1,000 Fulani herders and their families were murdered and two million cattle stolen across Nigeria, of which north-west is a major hotspot.[104] These among other developments have affected agricultural activities by farming communities and pastoralists, crippling their food production capacities, and leading to shortage of available, marketable, accessible, avoidable, and acceptable foods in the region and across the country.

The effects of armed banditry also extend to education, with a series of attacks recorded against schools, students, and teachers. Data from the NST database show that no fewer than seven bandit attacks targeted schools in north-western states of Katsina, Kaduna and Zamfara, from where 519 students and staff were abducted between 2019 and 2021.[105] However, there are indications that the record of cases and victims are not exhaustive. In December 2020, for instance, more than 300 students were kidnapped by armed bandits at the Government Boys Science Secondary School in Kankara, Katsina State.[106] Subsequently, armed bandits attacked and abducted 317 female students at Government Girls Secondary School Jangebe, Zamfara State; and 39 students at Federal College of Forestry Mechanization; with 29 students and three non-teaching staffs of Greenfield University in Kaduna state. Since December 2020, it was reported that armed bandits have attacked education targets and kidnapped more than 700 for ransom.[107] At different points in time, therefore, schools have been closed due to the threat of armed bandits in seven states, including Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger, and Zamfara.[108] These have severe implications for intergenerational human capacity development, as armed banditry has reduced school enrollment and increased out-of-school children in the northwest. As evident in Figure 6, northwest has 3.49 million out of school children, the highest in the country. These children can become set of new recruits into the criminal and resistant groups, thus recycling membership and fighters, which will ensure the crisis is protracted and insecurity endure.[109]

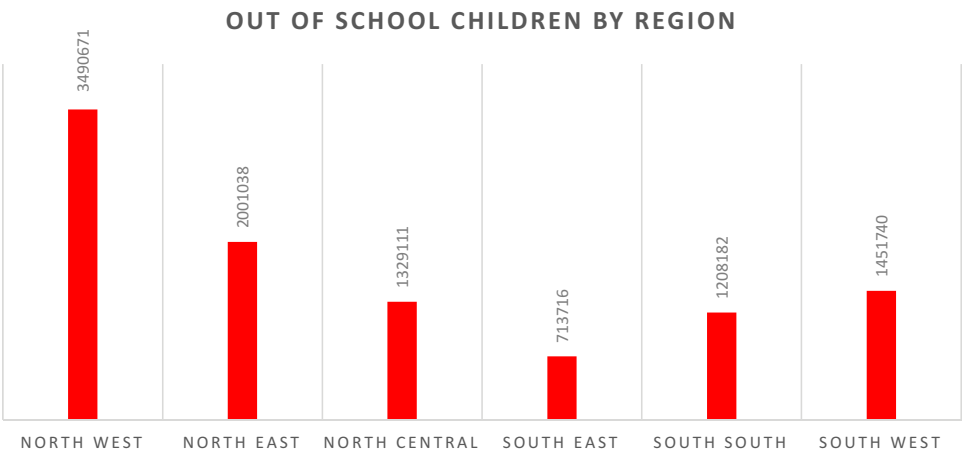

Figure 6. Out of school children by geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Source: Adapted from Premium Times, 2021[110]

Gendered-differentiated effects

The crisis also has gender dimension, as it holds negative consequences for women and children. Many men and boys have been killed or kidnapped for ransom, while many have been dispossessed of their livelihood.[111] It was reported that 11,000 men were killed in Zamfara state by armed bandits as of the first quarter of 2019.[112] Several women are now widowed due to the killing of their husbands, who served as the breadwinners of their families. The implication of this trend can be imagined in a region with conservative culture, where women are largely less educated and reduce to full housewives with limited socioeconomic empowerment. However, women and girls have also been sexually abused by armed bandits. There is a growing record of rape during bandit secluded attacks or siege of rural communities and kidnapping of young women and girls to serve as sex slaves or as subjects of forced marriage.[113] More alarming, most of the affected women that were raped and impregnated by their abductors are left with trauma with limited consolation, as their communities often anathematized them. These have set the stage for a generation of children without proper care, which may also grow up with feeling of deprivation, frustration, grievances, and desire for vengeance. Accordingly, the effect of the crisis on children cannot be ignored. In Zamfara alone, 44,000 children have lost their parents to the banditry.[114] These trends will further worsen homeless child and street beggars in many cities in the region and beyond.

National security

Finally, armed banditry in the North-West has further undermined Nigeria's fragile national security. Bandit attacks on government entities, military bases,

police stations, public office holders and their families, and host of citizens in the region have created a mammoth challenge for the state authorities. The crisis has driven people southward, where influx of Fulani herders has further triggered resource-related conflicts between the immigrant or settlers and the host communities in the north-central and from south-west to the south-east. This development has exacerbated the challenges of Nigeria's national security and overstretched the military and other security agencies. As of 2018/2019, Nigeria maintained one-third of its military strength for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations in the north-east, and further mobilized about 6% against armed banditry in the north-west and north-central.[115] Inadequate resources, personnel, responses and performance of the security forces against armed bandits in north-west and the spill over effect in the north-central and the southern parts of Nigeria have also encouraged the rise of jungle justice, mob violence and subversive armed and unarmed radical groups as well as establishment of regional security outfits and attendant political division. Accordingly, secessionist advocates of Oduduwa Republic emerged, even as the governments of South-Western State created Amotekun in response to influx of pastoralists from the north and the attendant crisis in region.[116] Their counterparts in the south-east equally created Ebube-Agbu as a regional security outfit for the same reason.[117] These have further deepened ethno-regional and other forms of conflicts and criminal violence that undermine internal security of Nigeria. There was even an allegation that armed bandits in Katsina were planning to dawn presidential pane in 2021.[118] This is a development that can create major political instability in the country. Moreover, the growing record of bandit attacks against military targets, including personnel, bases and other assets are detrimental to Nigeria's defense and power projection.[119] The crisis has further given Nigeria a bad international image as regional giant with critical security situations and inhospitable destination for tourism and foreign direct investment (FDI).

Conclusion

Armed banditry remains an emerging security threat in north-west Nigeria. Its dynamics and trends are still evolving. This article explains the multiple factors that are fueling the reign of terror by armed bandits in Nigeria's north-west and its spill over to other regions. Bad governance, poverty, inequalities, youth unemployment, marginalization, and weak institutional capacity of the state in local governance, forest management, justice system and security are the root causes of armed banditry in the region. It is against this background that the current wave of terror in the north-west are triggered by multidimensional and complex forces of politicization of security, ethno-communal conflict, climate change-related migration, illegal gold mining, resource competition among diverse ethno-communal groups, and conflicting interests

of the political elites, especially in the northern part of the country. Amidst these, this article shows the complicity of the state institutions and the political elites as well as some faceless business interests (in illegal mining and weapon merchants) that are crisis enablers and complicit in the reign of terror by the armed banditry in the north-west. Nevertheless, the threats of armed banditry in the region cannot be ignored for the sake of human and national security.

The negative consequences of armed banditry in the north-west has been felt on security of lives and properties, human freedom, local and national economy, agriculture, environment, food security, education, gender, political stability, national security and defense, and image in the international community. Accordingly, there is an overriding need to tackle the threats of armed banditry and attendant security crisis in the north-west and beyond. To address the crisis, authorities at different levels must be on board and pursue multidimensional approach to crisis management. Proffering solutions to such challenges in the north-west require committed efforts to solve governance-related problems. Committed efforts are equally required toward improving human welfare, with emphasis on poverty alleviation and reducing inequalities, as well as access to justice with human development and security. Such an approach will mitigate the motivations that are driving criminal violence and resistance that characterized the security landscape of the region and the rest of Nigeria. In addition, the capacity of the security agencies should be improved to neutralize and deter armed banditry and associated crisis. All these will not be possible without political will and commitments to promote relevant policies to address armed banditry and other security challenges in the north-west and other parts of Nigeria.

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