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COI QUERY

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Information on Vigilante anti-crime group in Edo State, including structure and activities; whether membership included former Black Axe members; incidents of targeting by state and non-state actors, including Black Axe or other criminal groups; availability of state protection

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January 2016 to 27 September 2023

Topic(s)

1. [Background information on vigilante groups in Nigeria](#)
2. [Vigilante anti-crime group in Edo State](#)
3. [Membership, including former Black Axe members](#)
4. [Incidents of targeting by state and non-state actors, including Black Axe or other criminal groups](#)
5. [Availability of state protection for former members](#)

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COI QUERY RESPONSE - Nigeria

Information on Vigilante anti-crime group in Edo State, including structure and activities; whether membership included former Black Axe members; incidents of targeting by state and non-state actors, including Black Axe or other criminal groups; availability of state protection

1. Background information on vigilante groups in Nigeria

A paper on vigilante groups in Nigeria by Dr. Felix Oyosoro, a researcher at the Department of History and International Relations at Veritas University, Abuja¹, identified vigilante groups as major non-state actors in the country. Dr. Oyosoro described the vigilante groups as ‘inherently unstructured, mono-ethnic, highly unstratified and [they] often have an identical political ideology’². Vigilante groups in Nigeria were created to fight crime, including banditry and extremism, and they enjoy varied support from the authorities across the country.³ Some vigilante groups are contracted by local governments, others by private individuals, while others consist of volunteers.⁴ An article published by International Crisis Group noted that vigilante groups in Nigeria ‘range from neighbourhood watches to country-wide organizations’.⁵ According to the United States Department of State (USDOS) annual human rights report covering 2022, ‘[s]tate-sponsored vigilante groups proliferated in recent years as the security situation deteriorated’.⁶

According to a report on vigilantism in Nigeria by International Crisis Group published in April 2022, there are ‘thousands’ of vigilante groups across the country, and there is no database in place making it possible to know what their exact number is. They are diverse and have different modus operandi and relationship with the authorities.⁷

While the vigilante groups in Nigeria have traditionally enjoyed a level of acceptance from the population⁸, they were also accused of committing human rights violations including torture, killings, and enforced disappearances.⁹ Sources reported on a lack of accountability for their

¹ Veritas University, Veritas University Staff Directory, n.d., [url](#)

² Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 3

³ ADF, The Vigilantes of Nigeria, 24 August 2022, [url](#). For more information on the relationship between the vigilante groups and the authorities, see also: Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), p. 17; International Crisis Group, Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity, 21 April 2022, [url](#), p. 11

⁴ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 4

⁵ International Crisis Group: Beyond Vigilantism: Towards Lasting Security Solutions, 11 May 2022, [url](#)

⁶ USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 38

⁷ International Crisis Group, Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity, 21 April 2022, [url](#), pp. 8-9

⁸ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), pp. 2-3

⁹ International Crisis Group, Beyond Vigilantism: Towards Lasting Security Solutions, 11 May 2022, [url](#); Nextier, Nigeria Security Situation Analysis Report, 2022, [url](#), p. 38; Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria:

actions.¹⁰ The 2021 study by Dr Oyosoro found that the authorities ‘have been accused of inaction and neglecting to investigate, and when required, arrest and prosecute members of armed vigilante groups’.¹¹ According to the USDOS annual human rights report covering 2022, vigilante groups enjoyed ‘near impunity’.¹²

Activities conducted by vigilante groups in Nigeria reported by sources included:

- they were involved in fight against Boko Haram in the northern states,¹³ and were described as one of the groups in Nigeria aimed at ‘fighting terror and keeping the peace’,¹⁴
- in the southern states of Nigeria, the role included searching and interrogating criminal suspects,¹⁵
- they were hired by private individuals as security guards,¹⁶
- they protected communities from armed groups and criminal gangs,¹⁷
- they cooperated with the army and the police in activities such as intelligence sharing and handing over suspected criminals,¹⁸
- they could be mobilized by politicians to suppress the opposition,¹⁹
- they helped to diminish banditry in some communities.²⁰

2. Vigilante anti-crime group in Edo State

Sources indicated that the officially recognised vigilante group in Edo State is called the Edo State Security Vigilante Network (ESSVN).²¹ Additionally, a research paper on vigilante groups in Nigeria by Dr. Oyosoro listed ‘Edo State Integrated Vigilante Service’, or ESIVS, as a non-state actor responsible for the security in the Edo State that is supported by the government,

the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 12; USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 38-39

¹⁰ International Crisis Group: Beyond Vigilantism: Towards Lasting Security Solutions, 11 May 2022, [url](#); TNH, What’s at stake in Nigeria’s high-risk elections, 23 February 2023, [url](#); USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 38

¹¹ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 13

¹² USDOS, 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 38

¹³ Felbab-Brown, V., Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria’s North-East not going away, 14 April 2020, [url](#), p. 67; Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 8

¹⁴ UNDP, Understanding and managing vigilante groups in the lake Chad basin region, 2023, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁵ Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), p. 16

¹⁷ International Crisis Group: Beyond Vigilantism: Towards Lasting Security Solutions, 11 May 2022, [url](#)

¹⁸ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 11

¹⁹ CSIS, Identity, Insecurity, and Institutions in the 2023 Nigerian Elections, 23 February 2023, [url](#); International Crisis Group: Beyond Vigilantism: Towards Lasting Security Solutions, 11 May 2022 [url](#); International Crisis Group, Mitigating Risks of Violence in Nigeria’s 2023 Elections, 10 February 2023 [url](#), pp. 11, 18

²⁰ REACH Initiative, Navigating the in-between: IDPs’ Search for Security in Northwest Nigeria, January 2023, [url](#), p. 15

²¹ Edo Updates, Impersonation: Edo govt bans use of unauthorized vigilante uniforms, reveals authentic inscription 21 November 2022, [url](#); Punch, Obaseki donates 150 motorcycles to Edo Vigilante Security Network, 31 August 2023, [url](#)

and ‘Vigilante Group of Nigeria’, or VGN, as the group present in the Edo State that is sponsored by private persons.²² However, the same source noted that ‘vigilante groups spring up wherever there is a need for it from the communities. Hence, there exists informal vigilante groups not registered with the Vigilante Group of Nigeria’.²³ Information on the structure of ESSVN or ESIVS could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

The VGN is active in all of Nigeria, including in the south.²⁴ It was created in the 1980s and officially registered as an NGO in 1999.²⁵ A 2016 report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) reported that while some of the Nigerian states had already adopted laws governing the VGN, others, including the Edo State, had such legislation pending.²⁶ In March 2023, Punch, a local news provider, reported that the VGN appealed to the president of Nigeria to sign the VGN (Establishment) Bill 2022 into law, passed by the parliament in 2022.²⁷

A research paper by Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown, Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution, published in April 2020, described the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) as ‘a nationwide vigilante group and private security company’ that combated Boko Haram in the North East and adopted ‘various vigilante anti-crime functions’ in other parts of Nigeria.²⁸ On their own website, the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) describes itself as ‘a grassroots-based community associations whose main aim is to secure lives and property and any service that the community might request for its development and prevention of calamities’.²⁹ The VGN consists of six regional offices present in all geopolitical areas of the country, including in the South-South, where Edo State is situated. Each of the regional offices is run by a regional commandant.³⁰ A September 2020 article by the Blueprint Newspapers reported that the VGN was present ‘in all 774 local governments areas in Nigeria’.³¹ According to a study by Dr Felbab-Brown, published in 2021, the number of VGN members varied between 20 000 and one million members³², while the Commandant General of the VGN, in an article by Vanguard from January 2023 stated that there were ‘over 1 million members’³³. The same source noted that VGN members were volunteers.³⁴ Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

²² Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²³ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 6

²⁴ Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), pp. 16-17

²⁵ Oyosoro, F. I., Alternative security sources in Nigeria: the ambiguity of Vigilante groups, 2021, [url](#), p. 11; USIP, Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

²⁶ USIP, Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria, 2016, [url](#), p. 6

²⁷ Punch, Vigilante group begs Buhari to sign bill before May 29, 26 March 2023, [url](#)

²⁸ Felbab-Brown, V., Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria’s North-East not going away, 14 April 2020, [url](#), p. 79

²⁹ Vigilante Group of Nigeria, About us, n.d., [url](#)

³⁰ USIP, Understanding the Informal Security Sector in Nigeria, 2016, [url](#), p. 4

³¹ Blueprint, Security: Vigilante group set for nationwide sensitisation, road march, 14 September 2020, [url](#)

³² Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), pp. 16

³³ Vanguard, VGN already functioning as State Police, require support- Commandant General, 24 January 2023, [url](#)

³⁴ Vanguard, VGN already functioning as State Police, require support- Commandant General, 24 January 2023, [url](#)

Edo Updates, a local news provider, reported in November 2022 on persons with various names including “Special Forces”, “Special Squad”, “Anti-Cultism Vigilante”, “Special Anti cultism Vigilante”, “E-surveillance”, “Special Tactical Team”, “Homeland Commando”, “Gallant Vigilante”, “VGN” who were pretending to be members of the ESSVN in the Edo State.³⁵

In 2020, This Day, a local news provider, reported that ‘[t]he Edo State Government has launched a vigilante network’ to help provide security.³⁶ In May 2021, PM News reported that members of the ‘Edo State Community Vigilante Security Network’ will be trained at the police academy in Benin, the capital of the Edo State.³⁷ An article by Daily Trust published on 12 September 2022 reported that the VGN ‘have arrested three suspects who specialise in stealing armoured cables in Benin City’.³⁸

In January 2023, The Guardian Nigeria News reported that ‘[t]he Edo State Government has charged operatives of the State Security Vigilante Network to ensure protection of life and property, eschew violence and discharge their duties within the ambit of the laws’.³⁹ In August 2023, 1 500 vigilantes received a training at the Benin’s Police Academy.⁴⁰ Following the training, the trained ESSVN members were expected to work in ‘intelligence gathering, community policing’.⁴¹ On 31 August 2023, Punch reported that the ESSVN received 150 motorcycles from the Edo State government to ‘boost their operations in ensuring security of lives and properties across the state’.⁴²

3. Membership, including former Black Axe members

Information on membership in vigilante groups in Edo State was scarce among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints. However, the following information may be relevant.

According to an undated article by Nigerian Finder, a website aiming at providing information about life in Nigeria, members of the VGN are volunteers and anyone older than 18 years old can join, if they possess ‘First School Leaving Certificate’ as a minimum requirement.⁴³ Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

Speaking in general about vigilante groups in Nigeria, International Crisis Group stated in a report published in April 2022 that ‘[r]ecruitment practices vary widely. Some of the better

³⁵ Edo Updates, Impersonation: Edo govt bans use of unauthorized vigilante uniforms, reveals authentic inscription 21 November 2022, [url](#)

³⁶ This Day, Edo Launches Vigilante Network, Tasks Members on Insecurity, 2020, [url](#)

³⁷ PM News, Edo vigilante operatives to train at Police academy, 10 May 2021, [url](#)

³⁸ Daily Trust, Vigilantes Burst Cable Theft Syndicate In Benin, 12 September 2022, [url](#)

³⁹ Guardian Nigeria News (The), Edo charges vigilante network to enhance security of life, property, 19 January 2023, [url](#)

⁴⁰ Punch, Edo trains 1,500 vigilantes in weapon handling, 2 August 2023, [url](#)

⁴¹ Edo Updates, Edo graduates 1,500 security personnel to strengthen intelligence gathering, community policing, 10 August 2023, [url](#)

⁴² Punch, Obaseki donates 150 motorcycles to Edo Vigilante Security Network, 31 August 2023, [url](#)

⁴³ Nigerian Finder, Vigilante Group of Nigeria: History, Objectives, Operation, n.d., [url](#)

structured groups enrol only long-time residents of the operating area who are older than eighteen and have no criminal record. Many recruits are nominated by ward or village heads, senior government officials, local politicians, religious leaders or veteran members. Vetting sometimes includes screening by the police or State Security Service.⁴⁴

The same source noted, that '[i]n the great majority of groups, however, recruitment procedures are ill-defined or inconsistent, leading them to sign up individuals who have been involved in violence or other criminal activities'.⁴⁵

According to the 2021 study by Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown, members of the VGN 'tend to be retired soldiers and police officials. They apply for VGN membership at a local office, producing two guarantors, and passing an interview'.⁴⁶

Information on whether former members of the Black Axe were part of vigilante groups in Edo State could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within the time constraints of this query.

4. Incidents of targeting by state and non-state actors, including Black Axe or other criminal groups

Information on incidents of targeting by state and non-state actors, including Black Axe or other criminal groups, could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

5. Availability of state protection for former members

Information on availability of state protection for former members could not be found among the sources consulted by EUAA within time constraints.

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity, 21 April 2022, [url](#), pp. 9-10

⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity, 21 April 2022, [url](#), pp. 9-10

⁴⁶ Felbab-Brown, V., The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria, in: United Nations University, 2021, [url](#), p. 16

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Germany - BAMF; Human Rights Watch; Insecurity Insight; International Crisis Group; The Netherlands - Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Norwegian Refugee Council; Sahara Reporters; Small Arms Survey; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); United Nations Security Council; The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)