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# Nigeria

31 August 2023 | POPULATIONS AT RISK



## RISK LEVEL: CURRENT CRISIS

*Attacks by armed bandit groups, as well as continued violence by Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa, leave civilians in Nigeria at risk of mass atrocity crimes.*

## BACKGROUND:

Since 2011 recurrent violence between herding and farming communities, rooted in competition over scarce resources, has escalated in central and north-west Nigeria. Largely in response to these growing tensions, armed groups and gangs, including so-called “bandits,” have formed and perpetrated widespread abuses, including organized cattle-rustling, kidnapping, plunder, murder and rape. Armed bandits are also occupying vast swaths of farmland. Consequently, many farmers have abandoned their land out of fear of attacks by bandit groups. During 2019 armed bandits were reportedly responsible for half of all violent deaths in Nigeria.

In January 2022, under the Terrorism Prevention Act, the Nigerian government designated these groups as “terrorists.” In attempts to curb the activities of armed bandits, the

government has intensified its military operations in affected areas since late 2021, including through airstrikes where such groups operate. Over 100 civilians were killed in government airstrikes in December 2022 and January 2023 in Nasawara, Benue and Zamfara states. On 2 February the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide issued a statement urging the Nigerian authorities to ensure that counterterrorism operations are conducted in full respect of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and called upon the authorities to investigate the airstrikes and hold perpetrators accountable.

Violence perpetrated by armed extremist groups, namely Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), against civilian and military targets has also resulted in mass atrocities in northern Nigeria. More than 35,000 people have been killed since 2009 when Boko Haram launched its insurgency aimed at overthrowing Nigeria's secular government and establishing an Islamic state. Their tactics include killings, suicide bombings, abductions, torture, rape, forced marriages and the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as attacks that are directed against government infrastructure, traditional and religious leaders and civilians. During 2022 the UN verified 524 grave violations against 307 children in north-east Nigeria, including forced recruitment, abductions, killing, maiming and sexual violence. The UN also verified 10 attacks against schools and hospitals attributable to ISWA. These groups have also perpetrated attacks in neighboring countries, killing and displacing civilians in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. In 2015 the African Union authorized the regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat armed extremism.

During counterterrorism operations, Nigerian security forces have reportedly committed human rights violations and used excessive force, including extrajudicial killings, rape, torture and arbitrary detentions against suspected Boko Haram and ISWA members, as well as civilians. The Nigerian military has allegedly run a secret, systematic and illegal abortion program in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states that has terminated at least 10,000 pregnancies since 2013, according to an investigation by Reuters. Many of the women and girls in the abortion program had been kidnapped, forcibly married, beaten and repeatedly raped by members of Boko Haram.

On 11 December 2020 the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced the completion of a preliminary examination into the situation in Nigeria, concluding that there is reasonable basis to believe that Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the security situation has resulted in a humanitarian emergency, with more than 8.3 million people – approximately 80 percent of whom are women and children – requiring urgent assistance. There are almost 2.4 million internally displaced persons in the northeastern states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe where Boko Haram and ISWA are active.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

During the first week of June 2023 approximately 132 people were killed by armed bandit groups in Sokoto, Zamfara, Benue and Katsina states in northern Nigeria. On 3 and 4 June at least 36 people were killed by armed bandits in six villages in Sokoto and Zamfara states. On 24 July at least 34 people, including 7 soldiers, were killed by bandits in the Dan Gulbi district of the Maru Local Government Area, Zamfara State.

Meanwhile, since May violence between herding and farming communities in Plateau State has increased, displacing more than 80,000 people. Between May and June approximately 200 people were killed in clashes between the predominantly Christian Berom farming communities and the predominantly Fulani Muslim herding communities in the Riyom, Barkin Ladi and Mangu areas of Plateau State. On 15 May armed men, allegedly Fulani herdsmen, attacked at least 20 villages in Mangu, killing at least 100 people, including many women and children. On 22 June at least 16 people were killed in two separate attacks in Riyom and Mangu areas.

## ANALYSIS:

Nigeria's armed forces have been deployed in two-thirds of the states in the country and are overstretched as Boko Haram, ISWA and bandit groups continue to expand their areas of operation. Despite notable progress by the MNJTF against Boko Haram, civilians remain at risk of attacks and identity-based violence.

Violence between herders and farmers has increased in recent years as population growth has led to an expansion of the area dedicated to farming, leaving less land available for open grazing by cattle. Growing desertification has also exacerbated tensions between communities as the loss of grazing land in the north has driven many ethnic Fulani herdsmen southward into areas farmed by settled communities that are predominantly Christian. While armed bandit groups are driven largely by criminal motives, many bandits are ethnic Fulani and prey on settled farming communities, exacerbating existing ethnic tensions.

## RISK ASSESSMENT:

- Patterns of violence against civilians, or members of an identifiable group based on their ethnicity or religion, as well as their property, livelihoods and cultural or religious symbols.
- Multiple security crises caused by a proliferation of armed groups, criminal gangs and terrorist groups.
- Climate and weather extremes causing increased competition over and exploitation of scarce resources.
- Increased politicization of identity, past events or motives to engage in violence and growing radicalization or extremism of opposing parties within a conflict.
- Lack of awareness and training on IHRL and IHL for military forces, irregular forces and non-state armed groups.

## NECESSARY ACTION:

While the lack of adequate military protection for vulnerable populations needs to be urgently addressed, social initiatives and political reforms remain crucial for confronting the root causes of conflict, including poor governance, corruption, poverty, youth unemployment and environmental degradation. Local peace commissions established to mediate inter-communal tensions and build early warning systems, such as those in Adamawa, Kaduna and Plateau states, need to be duplicated in other high-risk regions.

Utilizing the Economic Community of West African States' Early Warning System, the government should increase police and military deployments to vulnerable areas while ensuring strict adherence to IHL and IHRL during operations. The government also needs to urgently reform the security sector, including by incorporating IHL and IHRL into all military and police training, and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

The government of Nigeria needs to investigate all attacks against civilians and hold perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable. The Chief Prosecutor of the ICC must immediately request authorization to open an investigation into alleged crimes committed by armed extremist groups and government security forces.