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Nigeria

16 March 2026 | POPULATIONS AT RISK



RISK LEVEL: CURRENT CRISIS

Escalating attacks by armed bandit groups, as well as intensified violence by Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State in West Africa, leave civilians in Nigeria at risk of atrocity crimes.

BACKGROUND:

For over 15 years, civilians in Nigeria have faced multiple security threats due to attacks by various non-state armed groups, as well as inter-communal violence in various parts of the country.

Since 2011 recurrent violence between herding and farming communities 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 expanded. For years such groups have perpetrated murder, rape, kidnapping, organized cattle-rustling and plunder, possibly

amounting to crimes against humanity. Armed bandits sometimes occupy vast swaths of farmland, prompting farmers to abandon their land out of fear of attack. Populations in north-central Plateau and Benue states are also facing increased risks amid a sharp rise in inter-communal violence since 2025. Kwara State has also emerged as a new venue for inter-communal violence.

The armed extremist group Boko Haram launched an insurgency in northern Nigeria in 2009 to establish an Islamic state. Since then, tens of thousands of people have been killed and over two million displaced. Their tactics include suicide bombings, mass abductions, torture, rape, forced marriages, recruitment of child soldiers and attacks against government infrastructure, traditional and religious leaders, education and civilians.

In recent years Boko Haram has splintered, with some members joining groups like the so-called Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which has also perpetrated widespread abuses against civilians. In 2025 Boko Haram and ISWAP escalated their campaigns, launching daily attacks on civilians and security forces, particularly in their strongholds of Yobe and Borno states. In March 2025 ISWAP began a renewed offensive in Borno State, carrying out sophisticated assaults on military installations, towns and roadways and seizing control of strategic sites.

Since 2014 over 2,000 children have been abducted or kidnapped, largely in mass abductions targeting schools. Armed extremist groups, including Boko Haram and ISWAP, as well as local bandits, are implicated in many cases, often using kidnappings to generate ransom or to recruit children. In 2024 alone at least 580 civilians, primarily women and girls, were kidnapped across several states. The actual figures are likely much higher. Survivors continue to face trauma, stigma and inadequate support. In September 2025 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) found Nigeria responsible for grave and systematic violations of women and girls' rights amid ongoing mass abductions. CEDAW cited the government's repeated failure to prevent attacks on schools or protect victims.

Nigerian security forces have reportedly committed human rights violations during counterterrorism operations, including extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, use of excessive force and arbitrary detentions. Over the past several years the government has intensified military operations in affected areas, including through indiscriminate airstrikes, which have resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties.

In December 2020 the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) concluded a preliminary examination into Nigeria, finding reasonable grounds to believe Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

Mass abductions carried out by myriad groups and unidentified gunmen, sharply escalated across northern Nigeria in late 2025. In November at least 402 people, mostly schoolchildren, were kidnapped across four states in the north-central region, surpassing the 2014 kidnapping of the Chibok girls by Boko Haram. The surge in attacks and broader insurgent activity prompted intensified counteroperations. In December the United States (US) military launched **airstrikes** against alleged Islamic State-linked targets in northwestern Sokoto State, reportedly intended to curb abductions and other activities of such groups and criminal bandits.

Despite these strikes, attacks by armed groups continued to intensify across several northern states. In late January 2026 more than 160 worshippers were abducted, and on 3 February, an armed group attacked two neighboring Muslim-majority villages in Kwara State, killing over 160 people and abducting dozens. This attack is considered one of the deadliest recorded in Nigeria in recent months. Between 4 and 6 March suspected Islamic militants attacked the town of Ngoshe, northeastern Borno State, reportedly abducting more than 300 civilians, including women and children, and killing many others. The military responded to the attack with both airstrikes

and ground troops, reportedly killing many assailants, as well as civilians, including local elders and religious leaders, according to news reports.

ANALYSIS:

Nigeria's armed forces have been deployed in two-thirds of the states in the country and are overstretched as Boko Haram, ISWAP and bandit groups continue to expand their areas of operation and attack all populations. Authorities are struggling to contain the escalating inter-communal violence in Benue and Plateau states. Large-scale and persistent violence and abductions are gradually becoming normalized across northern Nigeria. Armed groups are increasingly using abductions to fund other crimes and control villages in the mineral-rich northwestern region.

The resurgence of suicide bombings in Borno State and attacks in Yobe State have raised significant concerns about the security situation. Smaller factions stemming from Boko Haram complicate the accurate identification of armed groups responsible for attacks, posing ongoing challenges to respond effectively to threats against civilians. The deteriorating security situation in Kwara State underscores Nigeria's deepening protection challenges and its geographic location as a bridge to south-western Nigeria increases the risk that insecurity will spread further south.

Nigeria's military has perpetrated deadly, erroneous airstrikes, raising concerns about the military's identification of legitimate targets and disregard for civilian casualties. While the authorities have issued apologies and acknowledged responsibility, minimal steps have been taken to seek justice or accountability or to ensure military operations minimize civilian harm.

Violence between herders and farmers has increased over the past two decades as population growth has led to an expansion of the area dedicated to farming, leaving less land available for open grazing by cattle. Climate change and desertification in the north have exacerbated these tensions as the loss of grazing land has driven many herders into traditional farming areas. In the Middle Belt, competition over land use is particularly contentious as the fault lines between these groups often overlap with ethnic and religious divisions with settled farming communities that are predominantly Christian and herding communities that are predominantly Fulani Muslim. 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. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast has further compounded these challenges by driving herders into the Middle Belt.

RISK ASSESSMENT:

- Patterns of violence against civilians, or members of an identifiable group based on their ethnicity or religion, as well as their property and livelihoods.
- Climate and weather extremes causing increased competition over and exploitation of scarce resources.
- Impunity for past and ongoing atrocities by all armed actors.
- Increasing kidnappings for ransom, especially in schools.
- Lack of capacity of government authorities to confront multiple security challenges.

NECESSARY ACTION:

The federal government and state authorities must develop a common strategy that addresses ongoing protection issues for vulnerable populations. The government should utilize the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) Early Warning System to

increase police and military deployments in vulnerable areas. The government must urgently reform the security sector, including by incorporating International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) into all military and police training, as well as fully implement the Safe Schools Declaration.

Social initiatives and political reforms remain crucial for confronting the root causes of conflict, including poor governance, corruption, poverty and youth unemployment – which have been exacerbated by the worst economic crisis in decades – environmental degradation and climate change. 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 replicated in other high-risk regions.

All attacks against civilians must be investigated and perpetrators of atrocities and human rights violations held accountable. The Chief Prosecutor of the ICC must request authorization to open a full investigation into alleged crimes committed by armed extremist groups and government security forces.

Regional and international actors should support Nigeria's response to the multifaceted crisis through capacity-building, intelligence-sharing and humanitarian assistance. ECOWAS and the African Union must play a stronger role in facilitating early warning and cross-border security coordination. Nigeria's international partners, including the US, should ensure that security cooperation programs adhere to IHL and IHRL and do not enable serious human rights violations.

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