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Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? Nigeria's North West is suffering deadly conflict involving many armed organisations, including herder-allied groups, vigilantes, criminal gangs and jihadists. The violence has killed over 8,000 people since 2011, and displaced over 200,000, some into neighbouring Niger. Despite several security operations and dialogue efforts, a durable peace remains elusive.

Why does it matter? Violence is rooted in competition over resources between predominantly Fulani herders and mostly Hausa farmers. It has escalated amid a boom in organised crime, including cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and village raids. Jihadist groups are now stepping in to take advantage of the security crisis.

What should be done? Nigeria's federal and state governments should facilitate settlements between farmers and herders – easing friction by reforming livestock production. They should cooperate with Niger to stem cross-border flows of weapons and jihadists, as well as to better police lawless forests and gold mining areas. International partners should help address humanitarian needs.

Executive Summary

Nigeria's arid North West is beset by violence between herders and farmers, which has been compounded by an explosion in criminal activity and infiltration by jihadist groups into the region. The last decade has seen thousands of people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, with many fleeing into Niger Republic next door. State-level peace efforts with several armed factions have had some success, but these will not prove durable unless more actors lay down their weapons. To roll back the mayhem, federal and state authorities should focus on reducing tensions between herders and farmers, including by expediting implementation of the national livestock plan. They should also support dialogue between the Hausa and Fulani, the region's two communities most closely tied to farming and herding, respectively. In addition, Abuja needs to improve security and law enforcement in the region in order to curb criminality and bolster its ability to protect citizens, as well as to step up efforts to address environmental and economic issues underlying the violence.

The causes of violence in the North West are complex and inter-related. At its root, the region's security crisis derives from long-running competition over land and water resources between predominantly Fulani herders and mainly Hausa farmers, both of whom have over time mobilised armed groups (referred to by the authorities as "bandits" and "vigilantes", respectively) for protection. Climate change-related environmental degradation and high population growth have intensified this struggle. Amid a boom in the trade of small arms and light weapons in the region, organised gangs operating from ungoverned forests have proliferated, engaging in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery, including of miners and traders in the largely unregulated gold mining sector, as well as pillage of communities. Having originated in Zamfara state, gang violence has since spread to five other nearby states, namely Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Niger, the last of which is in North Central Nigeria.

As security has deteriorated, the region has steadily come under the renewed influence of jihadist groups, which have sometimes attacked security forces. The spike in jihadist activity in the North West has raised fears that the region could soon become a land bridge connecting Islamic insurgencies in the central Sahel with the decade-old insurgency in the Lake Chad region of north-eastern Nigeria. Security sources point to a resurgence of the long-dormant Boko Haram splinter group, Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), better known as Ansaru, which was active in north-western Nigeria between 2011 and 2014. Elements of other Boko Haram offshoots, notably the Islamic State in West Africa Province, are arriving in the area. A poorly secured international boundary, meanwhile, enables the influx of arms and facilitates the movement of jihadists to and from the Sahel, where the Islamic State has been expanding its influence.

Violence has had a far-reaching humanitarian and economic impact on the region and created a domino effect of security problems. Over the last decade, more than 8,000 people have been killed – mainly in Zamfara state – with over 200,000 internally displaced and about 60,000 fleeing into Niger Republic. Livestock and crops have been decimated, further depressing human livelihood indices that were already

the country's lowest. The violence is aggravating other security challenges: it has forced more herders southward into the country's Middle Belt, thus increasing herder-farmer tension in that region and beyond.

Nigeria's federal and state governments initially responded to the violence primarily through military and police operations, and by prescribing harsher punishments for armed attacks, but results were disappointing. President Muhammadu Buhari repeatedly charged troops with eliminating armed elements destabilising the North West, deploying soldiers and police along with air assets to the region over the course of several consecutive operations. But the state security presence on the ground remains too thin and poorly resourced to subdue the armed groups or protect communities across the vast territory. At the same time, military operations against armed groups in the region have dispersed some of them to other regions, deepening insecurity countrywide.

Some state governments have more recently engaged in peace talks with herder-allied armed groups, partly because these groups are perceived as the major actors in the violence. They are offering amnesties to those willing to disarm, while pledging to address herders' grievances and needs. These concessions produced peace agreements that curbed the violence in late 2019, but with deadly incidents continuing and the region awash in arms, the sustainability of these deals is highly questionable.

Durably ending the violence in Nigeria's North West requires a multi-pronged approach, some of which must necessarily focus on the long term. The foremost priority is to encourage negotiated settlements between herders and farmers, as well as to disarm, rehabilitate and reintegrate members of their allied armed groups. In support of this effort, the federal and state governments should prioritise reforming livestock production systems in a manner that addresses the needs of both herders and farmers, and thereby minimises friction between them. Abuja should work with Niamey to improve border security to stem the flow of jihadists and weapons into the North West and strengthen its forestry departments to regulate the woods where armed groups make camp. It should also better regulate the region's potentially lucrative gold sector, while working with international partners to address dire humanitarian needs and doing what it can to mitigate the effects of climate change in the region.

This mix of short- and long-term measures is hardly guaranteed to succeed. But if vigorously pursued and well supported by international partners, it represents the best chance for staunching the spread of violence and achieving a measure of stability in a region that has already seen more than its fair share of conflict, crisis and humanitarian need.

Abuja/Brussels, 18 May 2020

Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem

I. Introduction

Nigeria's North West, one of the country's six geopolitical zones, comprises seven of the country's 36 states.¹ These are Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara.² It covers an area of 216,065 sq km or 25.75 per cent of the country's total land mass – close to the size of the UK. Its major ethnic groups are the Hausa and Fulani, who historically share strong cultural ties and are very much intermixed, with other smaller groups especially in Kaduna state.³ The region's estimated population of 33 million (based on figures from the contentious 2006 census) is predominantly Muslim (Sunni). Most of the population (about 80 per cent) are farmers, pastoralists, agro-pastoralists or small-scale entrepreneurs. The region has substantial solid mineral deposits, including gold exploited by artisanal miners in open pit mines.

Despite its economic potential, the North West has the highest poverty rate in Nigeria. As of 2019, all seven states in the zone had poverty levels above the national average of 40.1 per cent, led by Sokoto (87.7 per cent), Jigawa (87 per cent) and Zamfara (74 per cent).⁴ Millions lack access to basic health care and clean water, and immunisation coverage is far below national goals.⁵ While the region has a long and proud history of Islamic and Arabic scholarship, apathy toward, and inadequate investment in, formal education over the decades have contributed to a literacy rate of 29.7 per cent.⁶ The zone currently has the highest number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.⁷ On top of those who do not attend school at all, millions of children are in the poorly resourced and ill-supervised Quranic school system, or *almajiranci*,

¹ Nigeria's 36 states are grouped into six geopolitical zones on the basis of geographical proximity, ethnic ties and cultural affinity, as well as shared political and administrative history. The zones are North West, North Central, North East, South West, South East and South.

² According to the 2006 national census, the states' populations were: Kano (9,383,682), Kaduna (6,066,562), Katsina (5,792,578), Jigawa (4,348,649), Sokoto (3,696,999), Zamfara (3,259,846) and Kebbi (3,238,628). This report also covers developments in Niger state (population 3,954,722, according to the 2006 census). Niger state is part of the North Central zone, but for purposes of this report it is frequently analysed alongside north-western states given its close links to the violence there. Throughout this report, references to "Niger Republic" are to the Republic of Niger, the nation to Nigeria's immediate north, and references to "Niger" are to the Nigerian state of same name.

³ Other groups in the region include the Kanuri (in Jigawa state), Jaba and Gwari (in Kaduna state), Bajju (in Kano state), Nupe (in Niger state), Maguzawa (in Katsina state) and Zuru (in Kebbi state), as well as the Zabarmawa and Tuareg minorities in the border areas of Sokoto state.

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics, "2019 Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: Executive Summary", May 2020.

⁵ Only one child in ten receives all recommended vaccines, while six in ten receive none at all. The region also has some of the country's highest rates of maternal and child mortality.

⁶ National Bureau of Statistics, 2015.

⁷ In five of the zone's states – Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara and Kebbi – more than 30 per cent of school-age children are not in school. "39% of children in North-west, except Kaduna, are out of school – UNICEF", *Premium Times*, 27 August 2019.

which produces cohorts of unskilled youth.⁸ Much like the rest of the country, the region also suffers very poor local governance, characterised by the mismanagement of public funds.⁹

The region's geography and climatic conditions pose serious challenges for federal and state authorities. Much of the North West is savannah, but the region is also interspersed with vast forests, some of which are home to thousands of mostly Fulani herders (also known as pastoralists).¹⁰ Once under the watch of forestry authorities, these forests gradually became hideouts for criminals including cattle rustlers, highway robbers, kidnappers and cannabis growers. In Kaduna state, locals now refer to the Kamuku forest as "Sambisa", suggesting it has become as dangerous as the Borno state woodlands where Boko Haram established its stronghold.¹¹ The region also shares about two thirds of Nigeria's 1,497km international boundary with Niger Republic, which is weakly regulated. Historical and cultural ties between communities on both sides and regional protocols on freedom of movement have created opportunities for smugglers and criminals. Numerous illegal crossings, coupled with pervasive corruption among border officials, enable the traffic of illicit merchandise such as firearms.¹²

⁸ *Almajiranci* is a centuries-old system of Quranic schooling common in northern Nigeria and other parts of Muslim West Africa. Its students are called *almajiri* – derived from the Arabic word *almuhajirun*, which literally translates as "the emigrants" in English, but in this case means a person who has left his home in search of Quranic knowledge. Under this system, mostly poor rural parents send their young sons away from home to live with, and study the Quran under, a religious teacher also known as a *malam*. As these informal residential schools are very poorly resourced, the children are sent out into the streets during lesson breaks to beg for food. For more on *almajiranci*, see Akali Omeni, "The Almajiri in Northern Nigeria: Militancy, Perceptions, Challenges and State Policies", *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 128-142; and Hannah Hoechner, *Quranic Schools in Northern Nigeria: Everyday Experiences of Youth, Faith and Poverty* (Cambridge, 2018). In March 2020, Zamfara's budget director, Alhaji Hamza Salisu, said there were about two million *almajiri* children in the state. "Zamfara has 2m almajiris – official", *Daily Trust*, 11 March 2020. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, governors in the northern states have agreed to put an end to the *almajiri* system and to return the children to their parents; but many, particularly from conflict-affected areas, have no families to return to. For now, their agreement is more of an aspiration – no state has formally closed the schools or laid out alternative plans for the children and the clerics teaching them.

⁹ Section 162, paragraph 6 of the Nigerian constitution prohibits direct funding of local governments from the federal government's account; instead, it provides for the establishment of State and Local Government Joint Accounts, which has enabled state governments to expropriate and abuse funds meant for local governments.

¹⁰ The largest expanses are the Kuyanbana forest straddling Zamfara and Katsina states but also stretching into Kaduna and Niger states; Falgore forest, which stretches through three local government areas (LGAs) – Riding Wada, Sumaila and Doguwa – in Kano state; Kamuku forest, which covers an area of 1,121 sq km from Kaduna to Zamfara, Katsina, Niger and Kebbi states; Rumah/Kukar Jangarai Forest Reserve, which covers an area of about 800 sq km from the north west of Katsina state to Zamfara state; and Rugu forest, which stretches from the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna state into Katsina and Zamfara states.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior security official, Abuja, 22 November 2019.

¹² "Nigeria loses over N130bn to corruption at land borders", *Punch*, 8 March 2017. See also "Corruption, Insecurity and Border Control in Niger", Danish Institute for International Studies, 1 February 2016. In August 2019, Nigeria closed parts of its borders to curb smuggling of rice and other

Over the last four decades, Nigeria's North West has witnessed waves of violence including sectarian clashes, Islamist militancy and electoral violence. From 1980 to 2010, it saw numerous Christian-Muslim and intra-Muslim riots.¹³ Between 2011 and 2015, Kaduna and Kano states suffered many Boko Haram bombings and shootings, most notably the 20 January 2012 attacks in Kano city that killed about 185 people.¹⁴ In 2011, after the then opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the far northern Katsina state, lost the presidential election to the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta, protests in fourteen northern states – including all seven north-western states – escalated into ethnic and sectarian riots that left over 1,000 people dead and 74,000 displaced.¹⁵ In southern Kaduna state, a decades-long contest between the Hausa and Fulani, on one hand, and several smaller ethnic groups, on the other, over political offices, economic resources and the fruits of government spending has resulted in recurrent violence, often with significant fatalities.¹⁶

More recently, starting in 2011 and accelerating since 2014, the North West has also suffered a surge of violence between pastoralists and allied armed groups frequently called “bandits”, on one hand, and farmers supported by community and state-sponsored vigilantes, on the other. The situation has been further aggravated by the proliferation of deadly criminal gangs, thriving in a region awash with arms and which state security forces struggle to control. Largely occurring in rural areas, the violence has spread from its epicentre in Zamfara state to Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Sokoto states in the North West and into Niger state in North Central Nigeria. Accurate fatality records are unavailable, but several reports point to at least 8,000 people killed from 2011 to the present, predominantly in Zamfara state and mostly over the last five years.¹⁷ Jihadist groups are slowly but surely stepping up their presence in the region, taking advantage of the security crisis and surge in criminality.

goods. On 23 March 2020, it announced that all its land borders were closed due to COVID-19. See “Nigeria closes land borders to fight coronavirus spread”, Reuters, 23 March 2020.

¹³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010, pp. 12-13; and Shehu Sani, *The Killing Fields: Religious Violence in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan, 2007).

¹⁴ Crisis Group Africa Report N°216, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°81, *Lessons from Nigeria's 2011 Elections*, 15 September 2011, p. 7.

¹⁶ “‘They Do Not Own This Place’: Government Discrimination against ‘Non-Indigenes’ in Nigeria”, Human Rights Watch, 2006.

¹⁷ In 2019, Zamfara state's Governor Bello Muhammad Matawalle set up a committee for ending “banditry”, referring to armed violence committed by both herder-allied and roving criminal groups. This committee reported that between June 2011 and May 2019, at least 6,319 people were killed in Zamfara state alone. “Banditry: 6,319 killed, 3,672 kidnapped, 3,587 houses burnt in Zamfara – report”, *New Telegraph*, 12 October 2019. Earlier, in April 2019, the Zamfara state government had reported that 3,526 people were killed, 8,219 injured and nearly 500 villages destroyed over the five preceding years. Other sources estimate higher tolls: in May 2019, Kabiru Garba Marafa who represented Zamfara Central Constituency in the Senate from 2011 to 2019, reported 11,000 adult males killed in the state over the same period. An investigation by the Abuja-based newspaper, *Daily Trust*, reports that from January to September 2019, “bandits” accounted for 875 (or 47.5 per cent) of the 1,950 fatalities from armed violence in Nigeria, dwarfing Boko Haram which accounted for 370 (or 16.7 per cent). “Bandits kill more Nigerians than Boko Haram, robbers kidnappers, cultists, others”, *Daily Trust*, 22 September 2019. The non-governmental human rights organisation,

This report warns of the growing risks to Nigeria and its neighbours if Nigeria's federal and state governments, supported by international partners, do not step up efforts to end violence in the country's North West. The report analyses armed violence in this zone and details its humanitarian, socio-economic and security effects. It further appraises the responses by Nigeria's federal government and the region's state governments while highlighting emerging security risks. It also outlines strategies for ending the violence, preventing a new insurgency and building durable peace. The report is based largely on interviews with Nigerian government and security officials at the federal and state levels, community leaders and representatives of civil society organisations, former bandits and vigilantes, victims of violence and humanitarian workers. Interviews were conducted in Sokoto, Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina and Niger states, and the federal capital, Abuja, during the period from June 2019 to May 2020.

Global Rights, reports that of 3,188 Nigerians reported killed in violent attacks in 2019, banditry-related attacks accounted for 1,075 (or 34 per cent); over the same year, four north-western states – Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto – and adjoining Niger, accounted for 1,174 (or 37 per cent) of total fatalities occurring in the context of armed violence reported across the country's 36 states. "Mass Atrocities Casualty Tracking, 2019 Report", Global Rights, February 2020. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding reports 1,058 people killed in armed violence in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Niger states in 2019.

II. Community Conflicts, Criminal Gangs and Jihadists

The violence affecting Nigeria's North West is multi-faceted, but much of it can be divided among three major categories, which overlap in certain ways discussed below:

The first category includes violence pitting mainly ethnic Hausa sedentary farmers and vigilantes acting on their behalf against predominantly Fulani roving herders and associated militias. Nigerian authorities refer to the latter generically as “bandits”. These militias operate in a largely decentralised manner under local commanders’ autonomous control. They are motivated first and foremost by fighting on behalf of herders in their disputes with farmers, but many rogue elements have taken up criminal activities as well.

The second category involves violence committed by criminal gangs involved in large-scale cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, pillage, and attacks on gold miners and traders. The authorities sometimes also refer to these gangs as “bandits” although this report describes them as “criminal” groups, gangs or organisations. These groups comprise a mix of individuals from Fulani, Hausa and other ethnic origins, and seek to enrich themselves rather than to advance a political or ideological project.¹⁸ These groups do not operate like militias; they are neither cohesive nor under a centralised command. They also act autonomously, sometimes in rivalry with one another.

The third and most recent dimension of the violence involves confrontations between government security forces and jihadist groups that are increasingly active in the region.

While no reliable figures exist for just how many militia fighters, criminals and Islamist insurgents exist across north-western Nigeria, some authorities estimate that they could number in excess of ten thousand.¹⁹ Other sources consider these figures conservative.²⁰ In Zamfara state, at the epicentre of the violence in the North West, thirteen of the fourteen local government areas have been the site of armed group violence from 2014 to 2020.

Starting in late 2015, attacks by herder-allied armed groups, vigilantes and criminally motivated groups spread from Zamfara to other states (primarily Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Niger) with varying intensity. Violence in these states has been concentrated in areas near their borders with Zamfara, or close to the forests where all sorts of armed groups have made camp.²¹ In Katsina state, most attacks have tak-

¹⁸ For an earlier study that traces the evolution of herder-farmer conflict and resulting spread of criminality in northern Nigeria, see Mohammed J. Kuna and Jibrin Ibrahim (eds.), *Rural Banditry and Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (Abuja, 2015).

¹⁹ In April 2019, the government of Zamfara state estimated there to be more than 10,000 “bandits” in 40 camps across the state (eight prominent and 32 smaller ones), but it did not specify if these figures were for the herder-allied armed groups or for criminal groups as well. “Zamfara under pressure from bandits for more than 10 years – SSG”, *PM News*, 25 April 2019.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, journalist, civil society leader, security official, Abuja, Sokoto and Gusau, October 2019-January 2020.

²¹ Mapping of areas worst affected by violence is based on incident reports from Nigerian security agencies and media outlets. Crisis Group has highlighted major incidents in its monthly conflict

en place in ten of the 34 local government areas, particularly in Batsari, Danmusa, Faskari, Kankara and Safana. In Sokoto state, violence has broken out in nine of the 23 local government areas, but mostly in Gada, Sabon Birni, Goronyo and Isa to the north, along with Rabah and Tureta to the east. In Kaduna state, the attacks have occurred mostly in the Birnin-Gwari, Igabi, Giwa, Kajuru and Chikun local government areas. In Niger state, ten of the 25 local government areas have experienced attacks by roving armed groups – mostly in Shiroro, Mariga and Rafi.²²

While most attacks in Zamfara and Kaduna states are traceable to herder-farmer tensions, many incidents in these and other states seem to be the work of criminal groups that have mushroomed as the overall security situation has deteriorated amid a proliferation of small arms in the region.

Attacks by different armed actors (which continue to this day) have frequently included the burning of homes and barns, rustling of livestock and dispossession of other property, and acts of sexual violence. Women and girls are often abducted and raped by armed group members. In some cases, women and girls are gang-raped in the presence of family members; in other cases, attackers threaten to kill fathers and husbands if they do not bring their daughters and wives to their forest camps to be raped.²³

A. *Farmers and Vigilantes versus Herders and Bandits*

Conflicts between farmers and herders, sparked by disputes over land and water resources, have long been part of life in northern Nigeria, but have reached critical levels in recent years. Historically, these conflicts were small-scale disputes that were mediated and resolved by community-level authorities. In recent decades, they have been exacerbated by several factors.

First among these are changes in climatic and environmental conditions, amid rising demographic pressures.²⁴ Over recent decades, the far north has seen a substantial shortening in the length of the rainy season.²⁵ Diminishing water sources and an increase in desert or semi-desert conditions have shrunk both arable land and pasture.²⁶ The region's rapidly growing population has meanwhile increased demand

tracker. See Crisis Group, CrisisWatch Nigeria entries, 2015-2019. Recent information comes from Crisis Group interviews, security and civil society officials, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states, July 2019-May 2020.

²² The other local government areas affected are Munya, Tafa, Paikoro, Gurara, Mashegu, Lapai and Borgu.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and civil society actors, Sokoto, Gusau and Abuja, July-December 2019.

²⁴ For more on herder-farmer violence in Nigeria, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°252, *Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict*, 19 September 2017; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°262, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, 4 August 2018.

²⁵ In 2008, the director general of the National Meteorological Agency, Anthony Anuforom, reported that over the past few decades, the length of the annual rainy season in Nigeria had shrunk from an average of 150 to 120 days. "Nigeria: Rainy season is getting shorter – Nimet", *Daily Trust*, 10 March 2008.

²⁶ In the last six decades, over 350,000 sq km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions, a phenomenon progressing southward at the rate of 0.6km per year.

for available land.²⁷ In the absence of more efficient methods of both crop and livestock production, the desertification and the population growth have intensified competition for territory suitable for farming and grazing. Violence has accordingly accelerated in the last decade between largely Hausa farmers and predominantly Fulani pastoralists, two populations who live in close contact across north-western Nigeria.

Secondly, the herder-farmer conflict has been aggravated by controversial government policies allocating land to farmers (including the allocation of large expanses to elite farmers) at the expense of herders, particularly since 1999 when the country returned to democratic rule. In Zamfara state, the government decided to clear large forests and grazing reserves in the Kuyambana forest and in parts of the Maru and Zurmi local government areas. This action disrupted life in Fulani hamlets, some centuries old, limiting the availability of pasture for their livestock. The allocation of land to farmers also resulted in encroachment on, and blockage of, livestock grazing routes, and created conditions for increased trespass on farmlands by herders and more demands for compensation for damaged crops. While farmers complained of herders trespassing on their farms and damaging crops, herders protested the compensation they had to pay for damaged crops, and complained that farmers, district heads, police and courts were colluding against them in a corrupt process. The stage was set for more deadly confrontations.²⁸

Thirdly, as herder-farmer conflicts and criminally motivated attacks spread through the North West, young men in many predominantly Hausa communities increasingly mobilised themselves into vigilante groups, referred to as *yan sa kai* (volunteer guards), to protect their villages. In so doing, they became a source of insecurity themselves. Armed with locally made guns, machetes, clubs and other crude weapons, they meted out harsh sanctions to real or perceived perpetrators of robberies and raids. The vigilantes particularly targeted many town-dwelling Fulani who, because of their ethnic affiliation with the cattle-herding Fulani in the forests, were accused of complicity in criminal activity.²⁹ Sanctions included arbitrary arrests, torture, indiscriminate confiscation of cattle and extrajudicial killings, with suspects sometimes hacked to death in markets and other public places.³⁰ Sometimes vigilantes burnt down Fulani settlements, forcing the victims to flee into the forests. The vigilantes' activities

²⁷ In 2018, the National Population Commission's Demographic and Health Survey showed that of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, the North West had the highest total fertility rates – the number of children a woman is likely to have throughout her childbearing years. All seven states in the zone had rates significantly higher than the national average of 5.3 – Katsina state had the highest rate at 7.3, followed by Jigawa at 7.1, Sokoto at 7.0, Kano and Kebbi at 6.5, Zamfara at 6.4 and Kaduna at 5.9. National Population Commission and ICF, "2018 Nigeria DHS Key Findings", 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, researcher, Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto, July 2019; Zamfara-based civil society leader, Sokoto, October 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, researchers, former vigilantes, civil society activists, Sokoto and Gusau, September 2019 to January 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, several Fulani sources in Sokoto state and Abuja, June and July 2019. See also Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, "Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State: Excesses and Contradictions", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Inventions*, vol. 7, no. 6 (June 2018), p. 69.

and atrocities further aggravated relations between Fulani herders and the predominantly Hausa farmers.³¹

In parallel, Fulani formed militia groups, known as *yan-bindiga* (gun owners) to protect themselves and their cattle and to avenge vigilante atrocities. A former leader of one of the militia groups, Hassan Dantawaye, said: “We decided to kill at least 50 people whenever one of us was killed”.³² These groups raised funds for arms acquisition from a combination of community contributions and a range of other activities allegedly including kidnapping for ransom.³³ As violence escalated, they increasingly acquired more sophisticated firepower, much of it in the form of arms smuggled in from the Sahara and the Sahel via international routes.³⁴ They have also procured weapons from other armed groups in north-eastern Nigeria, including the Boko Haram offshoot, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), or from corrupt government security personnel, gun importers in southern Nigeria and local gunsmiths.³⁵

Herder-allied armed groups initially went after the predominantly Hausa vigilantes, whom they saw as their primary rivals.³⁶ Over time, however, their targets came to include the communities that sponsored vigilantes, other farming villages and even some Fulani settlements that they considered uncommitted to their cause.³⁷ Vigilantes, besides assailing town-dwelling Fulani, also carried out many attacks against the herder-allied groups, sometimes pursuing them deep into forests and razing their camps.³⁸ Both sides frequently abducted members of the rival group as well as individuals or even families associated with the groups.

As the violence has unfolded between the vigilantes and herder-allied groups, it has also increasingly drawn in people and communities that were not previously directly implicated. Some have taken sides voluntarily, lending support to fighters from their ethnic groups; others have been coerced into collaboration following threats

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Baba Othman Ngelzarma, national secretary, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), Abuja, June 2019; researchers, Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto, July and September 2019; civil society representatives, Abuja and Gusau, November–December 2019.

³² “We decided to kill 50 people for every slain herdsman – head of Zamfara bandits who renounced violence”, *Punch*, 17 August 2019.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Baba Othman Ngelzarma, national secretary, MACBAN, Abuja, June 2019. In some areas, herders prohibited farming activities unless residents met their demands; in others, they kidnapped the wealthier farmers and demanded ransom, often killing their victims if their demands were not met.

³⁴ In January 2020, a first systematic documentation of weapons used in Nigeria’s herder-farmer violence, and their supply routes, found that armed groups in Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states possessed significant numbers of factory-produced small arms manufactured in Europe, East Asia, the Middle East and North America. The study found a prevalence of Chinese Type 56-2 7.62 × 39 mm assault rifles. It also found that the three major international smuggling routes for weapons used in the conflict went through Libya, Turkey and Côte d’Ivoire. See “Nigeria’s Herder-Farmer Conflict: Domestic, Regional and Transcontinental Weapon Sources”, Conflict Armament Research, January 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Abuja, December 2019 and February 2020.

³⁶ In perhaps their most notable attack, in Yar Galadima town on 5 April 2014, they killed more than 200 people, mostly vigilantes who had gathered for a strategy meeting. “Zamfara massacre: death toll hits 200; 18 APC supporters, 7 others also killed”, *Vanguard*, 7 April 2014.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society activist, Sokoto, 14 January 2020.

³⁸ For instance, see “14 killed as ‘bandits’, vigilantes exchange gunfire in Katsina”, *The Cable*, 9 April 2019; “How we were tormented, killed, displaced”, *The Nation*, 2 November 2019.

of abduction or death.³⁹ Notwithstanding their denials, some local politicians, emirs and other community leaders in areas affected by the violence have, according to residents, encouraged extrajudicial killings by vigilantes, while others have assisted herder-allied armed groups with intelligence to carry out attacks or evade military operations.⁴⁰ In October 2019, a committee set up by the Zamfara state government to recommend solutions to the violence reported that five emirs and 33 district heads were complicit in the attacks from 2011 to 2019.

A further factor that has exacerbated violence in the North West is the state authorities' negligence in dealing with the crisis. Particularly in Zamfara, the administration of state Governor Abdulaziz Yari (2011-2019) showed little commitment to resolving the conflicts as the situation deteriorated. Yari, like some other Nigerian state governors, allegedly spent little time in his state, preferring to station himself in Abuja. As a result, weekly state security council meetings crucial for dealing with the rising violence allegedly did not take place as regularly as some desired.⁴¹ Even when he was around, many residents saw his efforts as feeble and suspected that he was politically indebted to herder-allied armed groups.⁴² Yari's tentative approach may have reflected a calculation that in areas where armed actors were strong they could determine the outcome of elections by coercing constituents into voting one way or the other, as they had amply demonstrated during the 2011 polls.⁴³ Whatever the considerations, the lack of state government leadership played a key role in enabling the escalation and spread of the violence.⁴⁴

B. Criminal Violence

Over the last ten years, the North West has seen an explosion in criminal activity, amid the proliferation of both guns and armed Hausa and Fulani who branch off into activities such as cattle raiding, kidnapping for ransom, pillage and robbery of gold miners. Criminal armed groups tend not to get involved directly in feuds between farmers and herders (and their armed proxies) but are primarily focused on their illicit enterprises.

³⁹ Some traditional rulers and community leaders were indeed kidnapped by bandits on suspicion of collaborating with government security forces engaged in anti-banditry operations. Crisis Group interviews, security official, Abuja; civil society actors, Sokoto, January 2020.

⁴⁰ Numerous residents told Crisis Group that many traditional rulers and district heads were complicit in the violence between herder-allied armed groups and vigilantes. One traditional ruler allegedly received 800,000 naira (about \$2,050) from an armed group, as his share of the ransom paid for the release of a senior state official's abducted wife and children. Crisis Group interview, retired military officer and security consultant, Sokoto, 4 July 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior police officer who formerly served in Zamfara state, Abuja, 6 July 2019; Gusau-based civil society leader, Sokoto, 27 September 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, journalists and civil society activists, Abuja and Gusau, October-December 2019.

⁴³ In the 2011 elections, local politicians recruited and armed individuals to snatch ballot boxes, intimidate voters and physically attack opponents, thereby rigging the outcomes in their favour. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Lessons from Nigeria's 2011 Elections*, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

⁴⁴ At a march protesting the state government's failure to arrest the conflict, a prominent journalist, Kadaria Ahmed, herself from Zamfara state, referred to Yari as "the most useless state governor in Nigeria". "Yari is the most useless governor in Nigeria's history, says Kadaria Ahmed", Sahara Reporters, 7 April 2019.

Cattle rustling, historically occurring on a low scale in many parts of northern Nigeria, has now become more organised and intensive in the North West since 2013. Much of the rustling is carried out by large and well-armed criminal groups based in the Kamuku forest in Kaduna, Falgore forest in Kano, Dansadau forest in Zamfara and Davin Rugu forest stretching through Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara states. Often operating with automatic rifles, the rustlers have both stolen many herds and killed many herders in the process. To defend themselves, many herders have in turn acquired further stocks of weapons, which they also use in their struggle against farmers.⁴⁵

Criminal gangs have also generated revenue by engaging in kidnapping for ransom and raiding communities for loot across the North West. Gangs target both individuals (particularly rich farmers and local businessmen) and entire communities. In Zamfara, a government-constituted committee reported that over 3,600 people were kidnapped in the state between 2011 and 2019.⁴⁶ Though some were seized as part of fighting between herder-allied armed groups and vigilantes, many were abducted by ransom-seeking gangs. Apart from abducting individuals in rural communities, these groups often also ambush travellers on highways, killing those who resist or whose families fail to meet their demands.⁴⁷ They also raid and pillage villages, razing houses, burning down barns, and abducting and raping women.⁴⁸ In some cases, they write letters to village heads demanding that residents pool money and pay them to be spared deadly attacks or impose tolls on farmers as a condition for gaining access to their fields.⁴⁹

Over the years, criminal gangs have also increasingly taken to attacking and robbing gold miners, particularly in Zamfara, which has seen an explosion in artisanal gold production at deposits scattered around the state.⁵⁰ Following a rise in the world

⁴⁵ See "Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Conflict", Conflict Armament Research, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Presentation by Sani Abdullahi Shinkafi, member of Zamfara state government's committee to find solutions to rural insecurity and violence, at workshop organised by Pastoral Resolve, Abuja, 26 February 2020.

⁴⁷ Numerous reports by Nigerian media and security agencies, 2017 to date. See, for example: "As kidnappers return: Travellers dread Abuja-Kaduna expressway", *Daily Trust*, 29 July 2018; "Abuja-Kaduna highway most dangerous in Africa, says Senate", *The Nation*, 8 May 2019; and "Kidnapping, banditry, killings: 133 highways of terror", *Vanguard*, 23 June 2019.

⁴⁸ "Bandits kill 10, rape 30 in Zamfara", *Blueprint*, 8 June 2016; "Sad, gory tales of Zamfara killings", *Daily Trust*, 18 February 2018; "Our wives and daughters are being raped" – Katsina cleric laments bandit attacks, *The Cable*, 2 September 2019; "10 bandits gang-rape woman, slaughter man in Niger village", *Daily Trust*, 12 September 2019; "Bandits kill 11, kidnap scores, rape women in Niger communities", *This Day*, 26 January 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society activist, Sokoto, 14 January 2020. See also "Bandits tax us before allowing us access to our farms – North-West farmers", *Punch*, 10 May 2019; "We pay ransoms to bandits daily, Zamfara LG chief tells minister", *Punch*, 14 May 2019.

⁵⁰ Gold mining started in Nigeria in 1913. Like other minerals, gold is statutorily a federal government asset, according to Nigerian law, but there is a booming business of illegal mining and export in some states. Gold is one of the most smuggled commodities in Nigeria and much of it is traded on the international market with hardly any contribution to the country's gross domestic product or to federally collected revenues. In April 2019, Abubakar Bawa Bwari, then minister of mines and steel development, reported that over the three years from 2016 to 2018, Nigeria lost 353 billion naira (over \$900 million) from the operations of illegal miners and smuggling syndicates; "Nigeria loses N353 billion to illegal gold mining in three years, IYC, Bayelsa kick", *Punch*, 17 April 2019.

market price of gold around 2009, legions of young men have been drawn into gold mining activity that has cropped up across the central, western and north-western parts of the state, particularly around Maru, Anka, Malale, Gurmana, Bin Yauri and Okolom Dogondaji.⁵¹ Artisanal mining provided jobs and livelihoods for many rural people in these areas, attracting other miners from as far away as Mali, Burkina Faso, China and India, but it also spawned an underground economy of smugglers, drug dealers and commercial sex workers.⁵² The gold sector's weak regulation and the cash-based nature of transactions in gold mining regions soon also attracted armed gangs' interest. These gangs killed over 150 people in north-western Zamfara from mid-2016 to mid-2019 in the course of raiding mining sites and robbing miners of gold and cash.⁵³

As gangs continue to draw important revenues from targeting gold mining, the security implications for Zamfara and the North West are significant. Security sources say there are frequent battles between rival armed groups over mining territory.⁵⁴ Violence is also orchestrated by attackers with the purpose of scaring residents and state security agents away from the mining areas in order to take control, leading to further displacement of populations and dilution of state presence on the ground.⁵⁵ Criminal groups use proceeds from such raids to acquire more weapons and fuel yet more criminal activity.⁵⁶ A security expert told Crisis Group: "Kidnapping, violent robberies and killings linked to gold mining activities turned the state into a fiefdom of deadly gangs".⁵⁷

C. Jihadist Violence

A third layer of violence in Nigeria's North West involves Islamist militant groups. Since early 2019, state governors in the region have warned of an uptick in the infiltration of jihadists linked to the original Boko Haram insurgency that erupted in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009.⁵⁸ In June 2019, the theatre commander of the mili-

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Federal Ministry of Mines and Steel Development official, Abuja, 11 June 2019.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Hamzat Lawal, founder and executive director, Connected Development, Abuja, June 2019.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior security official who previously served in Zamfara state, Abuja, 9 October 2019. In one notable incident on 7 November 2016, gunmen on motorcycles killed at least 40 miners at a site in Bindin village, Maru local government area, Zamfara state, stealing all the mined gold and a large amount of cash.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, former Department of State Security Service official, Abuja, 14 December 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Federal Ministry of Mines and Steel Development official, Abuja, 11 June 2019. For a press account describing relations between miners and armed gangs in Zamfara, see "Zamfara: Miners in bed with bandits amid swelling attacks", *HumAngle*, 11 March 2020.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative official, Abuja, 5 October 2019.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kaduna-based retired military officer and security expert, Abuja, 12 December 2019.

⁵⁸ In April 2019, Zamfara state Governor Yari said the crises in the North West included "infiltration from Libya and Boko Haram". "Bandits kill 3,526 people in Zamfara – Yari", *PM News*, 9 April 2019. On 22 September 2019, the Zamfara state government said it had obtained "credible intelligence reports" indicating that politicians in the state were collaborating with "dispersed elements of

tary's Operation Hadarin Daji, Major General Jide Ogunlade, said: "Jihadists and terrorists have now infiltrated the ranks of bandits that are operating in the bushes of Zamfara" and "banditry is now heading toward terrorism".⁵⁹

Many Nigerian security and other independent local sources interviewed by Crisis Group corroborate that amid the breakdown of stability in Zamfara and elsewhere, two Boko Haram offshoots are making inroads into the region, where they are forging tighter relationships with aggrieved communities, herder-affiliated armed groups and criminal gangs.⁶⁰ The first is Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (or the Group of Partisans for Muslims in Black Africa), better known as Ansaru, an al-Qaeda-linked group that declared itself independent from Boko Haram in 2012 and was operating in north-western Nigeria until it was largely dismantled by security forces by 2016. Now it seems to be making a comeback.⁶¹ Secondly, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) – another splinter of Boko Haram in Nigeria's North East zone – has forged links to communities in the north-western region on the border with Niger, which is separately in the throes of fighting its own local Islamic State insurgency.

Ansaru, which has a long history of operating in the North West (where it engaged in the high-profile kidnapping of expatriate engineers between 2012 and 2013), is forging new relationships with other smaller radical groups in Zamfara state, particularly in the areas around Munhaye, Tsafe, Zurmi, Shinkafi and Kaura Namoda.⁶² The group has also deployed clerics to discredit democratic rule and the state government's peace efforts, a "hearts and minds" campaign aimed at winning support from rural communities. It is also wooing some of the armed groups to its ranks, including by offering or selling them AK-47 rifles supplied by its allies in the al-Qaeda-linked Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), at lower than the prevailing market price.⁶³ Security officials say it has been recruiting members, and that it previously sent some recruits to Libya for combat training.⁶⁴

Boko Haram to launch a series of attacks" in seven local government areas and on the state capital, Gusau. On 4 October 2019, Kaduna state Governor Nasir el-Rufai said the state government had been "receiving intelligence for three months" that bandits and kidnappers in the North West were working with Boko Haram members to attack schools. "Kidnappers collude with Boko Haram to attack schools, says El-Rufai", *The Guardian*, 5 October 2019.

⁵⁹ Ogunlade made the disclosure at a press briefing at the command headquarters in the Zamfara state capital, Gusau, 25 June 2019. He added that jihadists were "identifiable through their headgear, which carries a 'jihad' inscription". "Terrorists, jihadists have infiltrated bandits in Zamfara, says commander", *This Day*, 26 June 2019.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, conflict researcher in Zamfara state, researcher at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto; police officer who previously served in Zamfara state, Abuja, December 2019–January 2020.

⁶¹ See Jacob Zenn, "The Return of Al-Qaeda's Faction in Nigeria: What's Going on in Zamfara?", *Terrorism Monitor* (Jamestown Foundation), 25 March 2019.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, researcher, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto; civil society leader, Gusau; journalist, Sokoto, October 2019–January 2020.

⁶³ The price in Zamfara state currently ranges between 700,000 and 800,000 naira (roughly \$1,800 to \$2,000).

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, security officials, Sokoto and Abuja, January and May 2020. In May 2020, Nigerian police arrested three men who said they had been recruited by Ansaru in 2015 and subse-

ISWAP, which has been developing cells in much of northern Nigeria, is now also building the capacity of several smaller radical groups in the North West, particularly by offering livelihood support, including monthly stipends, to some of their members.⁶⁵ As a local civil society representative told Crisis Group: “ISWAP is now the model for these smaller groups”.⁶⁶ Some of these smaller groups are based in Magaba on the border with Niger Republic, and others around Dankwo and Derin-Deji, in the Zuru area of Kebbi state.⁶⁷ In keeping with the methods used in the North East prior to Boko Haram’s emergence a decade ago, ISWAP is also encouraging clerics who are particularly critical of corruption and democracy, a message that resonates strongly in impoverished communities.

Some military and government sources in Abuja point to evidence of transactional relationships between ISWAP and other armed groups in Nigeria’s North West. In 2019, a senior government source in Abuja told Crisis Group that security forces had intercepted communications showing delivery of ammunition from Boko Haram or ISWAP to a “bandit” group. Military sources also say some of the rifles captured in encounters with some herder-allied armed groups either bore inscriptions from, or were the same models used by, Cameroon’s Rapid Intervention Battalion. That suggests the rifles may have been confiscated from Cameroonian soldiers by jihadist groups operating in the Lake Chad area, where Nigerian and Cameroonian forces cooperate with one another to combat the offshoots of Boko Haram.⁶⁸

Government officials and residents also point to a number of attacks in the North West since 2019 in which perpetrators used religious slogans that jihadists in northern Nigeria have embraced previously. Security sources report that some of the arms captured from bandits were inscribed with the phrase *Allahu akbar* (“God is Great” in Arabic). People who suffered attacks by the Halilu Mairakumi-led armed group also report the assailants sometimes bore Arabic inscriptions on their arm and headbands.⁶⁹ During an attack in Kawaye village in the Anka area of Zamfara state, the ringleader paused to issue a prayer call.⁷⁰ In a January 2020 attack in Zamfara state, the gunmen told residents that they were on “jihad”.⁷¹ In an 8 February 2020 attack on three communities – Gurmana, Old Gurmana and Ashirika – in Shiroro local government area of Niger state, the attackers, dressed in black, were shouting “*Allahu*

quently sent to Libya for training. “We’re lured into Ansaru terror group with trip to Libya, better life – suspects”, *Punch*, 9 May 2020.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, researcher, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto; civil society leader, Gusau; journalist, Sokoto, October 2019-January 2020.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society leader, Sokoto, 16 January 2020. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Zamfara-based civil society actor, Sokoto, 16 January 2020; security analyst, Abuja, 24 January 2020.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior government and military officials, Abuja, January 2020.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security official who previously served in Zamfara state, Sokoto, 15 January 2020; Zamfara-based civil society leader, Sokoto, 16 January 2020.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ “Bandits kill 14 in renewed Zamfara attack”, *Daily Trust*, 16 January 2020. Previous examples include gunmen clad in black and shouting “*Allahu akbar*”, raiding three villages on 7 July 2019, in Kankara local government area of Katsina state, killing six people.

akbar". Though many of these symbols and behaviours could just be marks of religiosity, the fact that these militants have adopted them has locals worried about jihadist penetration of the area.

Moreover, since late 2019, ISWAP and Ansaru have themselves started taking credit for attacks in the region. In October, ISWAP claimed responsibility for an attack on Nigerian troops in Sokoto state.⁷² On 14 January 2020, when gunmen attacked the motorcade of the emir of Potiskum, Alhaji Umaru Bubaram, on the Kaduna-Zaria highway, killing at least six people and abducting several others, Ansaru claimed responsibility, making this ambush its first claimed operation since 2013.⁷³ Further confirmation of Ansaru's return to the region came on 5 February 2020, when the Nigerian police reported that its special units had stormed a camp that was being used by Ansaru and "bandits" in Kuduru forest, in the Birnin Gwari area of Kaduna state, and killed "over 250 members" of jihadist and "bandit" groups.⁷⁴ Ansaru also reported the event but claimed that it killed or wounded 34 policemen in the encounter.⁷⁵ It is unclear whether either side's claims are credible. Nigerian security officials express concern that the group could be planning more attacks in the region – and possibly elsewhere in the country.⁷⁶

⁷² See the article in the ISIS weekly newsletter *al-Naba*, 24 October 2019, p. 4.

⁷³ Kaduna state police spokesperson Sabo Abubakar said six people were killed and an unspecified number kidnapped. But the Abuja-based online platform, *Premium Times*, citing a top security source, reported that the death toll was feared to be at least 30. "30 killed, 100 kidnapped as gunmen attack Emir of Potiskum", *Premium Times*, 15 January 2020. On 17 January 2020, al-Qaeda's Thabat News Agency, together with Al Hijrah Media, which publishes statements by various groups in al-Qaeda's global network, circulated Ansaru's account of this incident. Ansaru claimed that it had attacked and "completely destroyed" a military convoy, "killing and wounding more than 22 Nigerian army personnel", while "the rest of them escaped".

⁷⁴ "Police kill 250 suspected terrorists in Kaduna", *Premium Times*, 5 February 2020.

⁷⁵ "Ansaru allegedly counters Nigerian military offensive in Kaduna, downs warplane", SITE Intelligence Group, 6 February 2020.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired senior Nigerian army officer, Abuja, 15 February 2020.

III. Effects of Violence

A. Humanitarian and Social Impact

Violence in north-western Nigeria has claimed thousands of lives over the last decade. Reliable figures for fatalities across the entire region are hard to come by, given that much of the violence has occurred in remote rural communities and therefore has never been reported by either the mass media or security agencies. As earlier indicated, however, from 2011 to 2019, at least 8,000 people were killed, mostly in Zamfara state, with the bulk of the casualties occurring over the last five years. Hundreds remain missing or unaccounted for.

The crisis has also triggered a humanitarian challenge. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. In September 2019, a joint assessment mission by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, citing local government authorities' estimates, reported 210,354 persons displaced from 171 towns and villages in the North West.⁷⁷ Of these, 144,996 were in Zamfara state, 35,941 in Sokoto and 29,417 in Katsina. About 60,000 of the displaced have also fled over the border to Niger Republic where the same insecurity along border areas has resulted in 19,000 Nigeriens internally displaced.⁷⁸ On 22 February 2020, the government of the Nigerian state of Niger (which shares borders with Zamfara, Kebbi and Kaduna states), reported that violence had displaced 10,000 people from communities in ten of the state's 25 local government areas.⁷⁹ More recently, in March, the National Emergency Management Agency reported 105,463 people displaced in Sokoto state.⁸⁰

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) living conditions are appalling, characterised by irregular and inadequate food distribution, crude shelters, and poor health and sanitation services. As there is no officially recognised IDP camp in Zamfara and Katsina states, many internally displaced are in makeshift camps or scattered in towns and villages away from home, which obscures the scale of displacement. The IDPs' plight is compounded by the near absence of humanitarian actors from affected areas, largely due to significant underestimation of the violence's scale and impact, but also because insecurity limits access for needs assessment in certain places. In 2019, three organisations – Pastoral Resolve, Search for Common Ground and Terre des Hommes – supported by the French embassy in Abuja, conducted a multi-sectoral needs assessment for Zamfara state, but there has been no comprehensive assessment for the entire region.⁸¹ With many humanitarian organisations already overstretched by the demands in Nigeria's North East, the overall humanitarian response in the North West remains patchy and grossly inadequate.⁸²

⁷⁷ UN High Commissioner for Refugees/National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and IDPs, "Joint Protection Assessment Mission to Northwest Nigeria, 25 July-4 August 2019".

⁷⁸ "Nigeria violence sees 23,000 flee into Niger in last month alone", UNHCR, 12 May 2020.

⁷⁹ "Insecurity: Niger govt takes case to God, as 10,000 are sacked from ancestral homes", *Vanguard*, 24 February 2020.

⁸⁰ "105,463 displaced by bandits in Sokoto", *Daily Trust*, 16 March 2020.

⁸¹ S.B. Momale, S. Nawaj and A.S. Duperas (eds.), "Zamfara Conflict-Analysis and Multisectoral Need Assessment", Pastoral Resolve, Search for Common Ground and Terre des Hommes, October 2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, state emergency management official, Sokoto, 17 January 2020.

The crisis has had gender-differentiated effects on the area's population. Thousands of men and boys have been kidnapped or killed, as well as robbed of their cattle or possessions, leaving thousands of women as both widows and sole remaining breadwinners.⁸³ But women and girls have also been targeted for attacks, which frequently involve gender-based violence. Many have been kidnapped and raped, sexually assaulted during raids or forced into "marriage", especially to members of the herder-allied armed groups whose attacks on farming villages are partly motivated by communal vendettas.⁸⁴ Some of the women raped in captivity suffer doubly: even if they survive and are released or escape, they are often rejected by their husbands. If women are impregnated by their abductors, the babies they deliver are similarly shunned by their communities.⁸⁵

The violence has also exacted a severe toll on children. In Zamfara state, the government reports that over 16,000 children have been orphaned as a result of violence in the last decade.⁸⁶ Other estimates by some political leaders in the state point higher, with one putting the number as high as 44,000.⁸⁷ As the violence has disrupted schooling in many areas, it has also swelled the already high number of out-of-school children in the region and thus the number of child street beggars in many towns and cities.⁸⁸

The provision of social services and public amenities by federal and state governments has been adversely affected. State government funds that would have been committed to providing social services have instead been diverted to responding to the security challenge.⁸⁹ Even where governments have built hospitals and schools, many remain unused or under-used as the local population has been displaced or residents avoid using them for fear of attacks. In April 2019, the Zamfara state government reported that most of the "over 2,000 kilometres of roads, thousands of classrooms and 716 health centres" constructed between 2012 and 2019 could not be used "due to insecurity".⁹⁰

B. *Economic Impact*

In many parts of north-western Nigeria, the violence has deeply unsettled the economy. Agriculture, on which about 80 per cent of the population depends for livelihoods, has been particularly hard hit. For several years, farmers in the affected areas

⁸³ As of April 2019, the Zamfara state government reported that 8,000 women had been widowed; Kabiru Garba Marafa, who represented Zamfara Central in the Senate from 2011 to 2019, has estimated that the figure may be as high as 22,000. See "Bandits killed 11,000 men, orphaned 44,000 in Zamfara – Marafa", *Punch*, 6 May 2019.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Abuja, Gusau and Sokoto, June–September 2019.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian NGO leader, Sokoto, 8 July 2019.

⁸⁶ "Zamfara under pressure from bandits for more than 10 years – SSG", *PM News*, 25 April 2019.

⁸⁷ Senator Marafa offered this estimate in May 2019. See "Bandits killed 11,000 men, orphaned 44,000 in Zamfara – Marafa", *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, National Emergency Management Agency official, Abuja, 1 December 2019; Zamfara-based youth leader, Sokoto, 17 January 2020.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara state government official, Abuja, 9 June 2019.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

have been abandoning their fields for fear of attack or kidnapping.⁹¹ In Zamfara state, over 13,000 hectares of farmland have been either destroyed or rendered inaccessible as a result of attacks by herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs.⁹² In Sokoto state, the State Emergency Management Agency reports that as of October 2019, some 21,316 hectares of farmland across five local government areas remained uncultivated, as 80,000 intimidated farmers stayed away.⁹³ Huge numbers of live-stock have similarly been lost: from 2011 to 2019, about 141,360 cattle and 215,241 sheep were rustled in Zamfara state, for example.⁹⁴ These disruptions have impoverished farmers and herders alike, created food shortages in some communities, and aggravated malnutrition particularly among children. In April 2020, Niger state Governor Abubakar Sani Bello warned: "We are heading toward famine and starvation".⁹⁵

Commerce has been similarly disrupted. Thousands of shops and other businesses in north-western Nigeria are in ruins or have shut down due to direct attacks and kidnappings of businessmen, which have fed rising fears of insecurity. Significant private property has been lost: as of April 2019, Zamfara state reported "more than 10,000 houses, shops and silos" destroyed.⁹⁶ With road travel hazardous, local traders are afraid to transport farm produce to markets. Investor confidence has also plunged. In May 2019, the National Trade Fair hosted by the state of Niger's government recorded a very poor turnout, a situation that the president of the state's Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture, Abdulkadir Hassan, attributed to would-be participants' fears of bandit attacks and kidnapping.⁹⁷ The disposable income of relatively wealthy families in the area has also declined: in Zamfara, the number of people who can afford to go on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina plummeted from an average of about 4,500 in previous years to 1,500 in 2019.⁹⁸

C. Impact on Overall National Security

Violence has had knock-on effects for security elsewhere in the country. Herders fleeing violence in the three most affected states (Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina) are migrating south, straining resources in the country's Middle Belt and southern regions. While the more southerly regions have been experiencing the migration of Fulani cattle herders for decades, the uptick appears to be exacerbating tensions in the south east, south west and Niger Delta. These regions are reporting increasing herder-farmer friction, often degenerating into deadly violence. Some criminal gangs fleeing security operations in the North West have also moved to the middle and southern

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, All Farmers Association of Nigeria official, Sokoto, 18 January 2020.

⁹² "Bandits kill 3,526 people in Zamfara – Yari", *PM News*, 9 April 2019.

⁹³ "Bandits kill 200, displace 45,175 in 15 months in Sokoto", *Daily Trust*, 9 October 2019.

⁹⁴ Figure provided in presentation by Sani Abdullahi Shinkafi, member of Zamfara state government's committee to find solutions to rural insecurity and violence, at workshop organised by Pastoral Resolve, Abuja, 26 February 2020.

⁹⁵ "Niger Gov consults 5 states on bandits' attacks", *Leadership*, 29 April 2020.

⁹⁶ "Zamfara under pressure from bandits for more than 10 years – SSG", *PM News*, 25 April 2019.

⁹⁷ "Fear of kidnappers scaring investors – Niger chamber of commerce", *Punch*, 17 May 2019.

⁹⁸ "Banditry: Zamfara records low intending pilgrims", *PM News*, 18 July 2019.

states, posing additional security problems for affected communities and the governing authorities.⁹⁹

The violence in the North West is further stretching already over-burdened security forces. The military's long-running counter-insurgency operations against jihadists in the North East have dragged on, partly due to inadequate personnel and resources.¹⁰⁰ Continued military engagement in countering bandit and other violence in the North West will further drain resources needed to the east.

An additional emerging risk is the tendency of state governments affected by the spillover from the North West to create local vigilante or paramilitary groups. In the South West geopolitical zone, following widespread protests over deadly incidents between Fulani herders and local farmers, along with kidnappings increasingly involving criminals from the North West, governors of all six states – Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Oyo, Ogun and Osun – established the Western Nigeria Security Network, also referred to as Operation Amotekun, on 9 January 2020, to protect their communities. This development could set a precedent for the emergence of ethno-regional security arrangements elsewhere in the country, which, while boosting security locally, could also erode national cohesion if it becomes a trend.

⁹⁹ In September 2016, Umaru Tanko Al-Makura, then governor of Nasarawa state, said bandits dispersed by security operations in Zamfara state had relocated to his state. "Displaced Zamfara criminals now in Nasarawa", *Daily Trust*, 23 September 2016. In October 2019, Kebbi state governor Abubakar Atiku Bagudu expressed similar worries over the influx of bandits from Zamfara state, which he said was posing a security threat to the state. "Influx of bandits from Zamfara worries Kebbi gov", *Leadership*, 12 October 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Nigerian soldiers and officers fighting Boko Haram and ISWAP in the North East zone have repeatedly complained of inadequate personnel and resources. In February 2020, the governor of embattled Borno state, Babagana Zulum, said the Nigerian military would require an additional 100,000 troops to effectively prosecute its counter-insurgency campaigns. "FG needs additional 100,000 soldiers to defeat insurgents – Zulum", *Daily Trust*, 20 February 2020. In March 2020, a leaked video that subsequently went viral showed the commander of the military's counter-insurgency operation in the North East, Major General Olusegun Adeniyi, complaining that his forces were outgunned by Islamist fighters. "In rare video, military commander says Nigerian troops outgunned by Boko Haram", *Premium Times*, 30 March 2020.

IV. ISWAP, the North West and Regional Security

Some Nigerian security officials fear that as jihadist groups embed themselves deeper into the North West, the region could become a land bridge linking militants in the North East around Lake Chad to those operating in western Niger. Officials express concern that if ISWAP establishes itself in north-western Nigeria, it could forge operational connections all the way through Niger Republic's already troubled Dosso and Tillabery regions, and on to Mali and Burkina Faso, which are also battling both al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates.¹⁰¹

Islamic State has already branded a group operating in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as ISWAP.¹⁰² The formal unification of ISWAP in Lake Chad with Islamic State factions in the Sahel under a single banner has at least symbolically linked jihadist insurgencies across West Africa, and militants from both regions may seek to deepen their operational links as well.¹⁰³

While the evidence noted above suggests that Nigerian jihadist groups, including ISWAP and Ansaru, may have already begun targeting the North West as a new frontier, security officials and analysts are also documenting contacts between jihadists in the Sahel and north-western Nigeria at a time when Islamic State has designated the entire West Africa and Sahel region as a single "province", even if the extent to which these areas are functionally integrated is unclear. Since 2018, Nigerian security sources say, Islamic State fighters operating in the Sahel have been trying to open a corridor from northern Mali through Dogondoutchi town in Niger (Republic) to north-western Nigeria and, further west, northern Benin.¹⁰⁴ Security sources also say Sahel-based jihadist groups are known to be seeking a foothold in Sokoto and Zamfara states.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, retired Nigeria military general, June 2019; interior ministry source, July 2019.

¹⁰² ISWAP's Sahelian subgroup is sometimes called the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS), but the faction seems not to have adopted that name itself. It is unclear where the name ISGS originated or how it gained currency.

¹⁰³ For example, see the article catching up on several weeks of Sahelian operations in the 6 February 2020 issue of the weekly ISIS newsletter *al-Naba*.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, retired army officer, security sector analyst, Abuja, October 2019-January 2020.

V. Responses to the Violence

The Nigerian federal government and the governments of the North West states have been responding in various ways to the region's violence. These responses have ranged from security and enforcement measures against all "bandit" groups, including herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs, to offers of amnesty to some herder-allied groups. Thus far, the measures have achieved limited results.

A. Federal Government Responses

The federal government's attempts to contain armed groups in the North West have largely depended on the security forces. Since 2016, the federal police has launched several "anti-banditry" operations, focusing on herder-allied armed groups and roving criminal gangs.¹⁰⁵ Starting in 2016, the army has also expanded troop presence in the region, converting the Falgore forest in Kano state into a permanent training ground, establishing three new forward operating bases in that forest and in the Kafanchan and Kachia local government areas of Kaduna state, and launching five operations under "anti-banditry" mandates.¹⁰⁶ The air force, which has become increasingly involved since 2017, has also deployed new units (including special forces personnel) and, since 2018, conducted numerous aerial operations targeting forest encampments of herder-allied armed groups and criminal groups.¹⁰⁷

The government has sought closer security cooperation with Niger Republic. In September 2018, the two neighbours set up a joint military border patrol team. During the same month, Nigerian air force aircraft targeted armed groups in Niger's Maradi region, in a bid to rescue Nigerian hostages held in the Dumbroun area. In May 2019, a joint security team from the Nigerian army's 8th Division, based in Sokoto, met with their Nigerian counterparts and discussed cross-border security strategies.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Notable are Operation Maximum Safety, launched on 5 August 2016; Operation Absolute Sanity, launched on 25 July 2017; and the multi-agency Operation Puff Adder, launched on 5 April 2019, and covering five states in the North West and North Central zones.

¹⁰⁶ These are: Operation Harbin Kunama (Hausa for "Scorpion Sting"), launched by President Muhammadu Buhari himself in August 2016 to stop attacks by roving armed groups and criminal gangs in parts of Kaduna and Zamfara states; Operation Harbin Kunama II, a special military exercise launched in April 2017 to curb farmer-herder clashes and ethno-religious conflicts in southern Kaduna and parts of adjoining Plateau state; Operation Sharan Daji (Hausa for "Forest Sweep"), launched in 2018 to stop cattle rustling and attacks by roving armed groups in forests around Zamfara state; Exercise Egwu Eke III launched in Birnin Kebbi, Kebbi state, on 8 January 2019; Exercise Harbin Kunama III, covering the forests of Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states, and running from 2 April to 27 June 2019; and, lastly, Operation Hadarin Daji.

¹⁰⁷ In 2017, the air force established a new unit, the 207 Quick Response Group in Gusau, Zamfara state. In 2018, it launched Operation Diran Mikiya to support the army's anti-banditry operations in the North West. On 19 January 2019, it deployed a fighter aircraft, along with support equipment, and a detachment of Special Forces personnel to target bandits along the border between Sokoto and Zamfara states. In April 2019, it launched Operation Tsaftar Daji, which involved Alpha, MI 35, Augusta, Bel 412 and surveillance aircraft, to fight bandits and kidnappers in the Dajin Rugu forest. On 4 May 2019, it established a new facility, the 271 Nigerian Air Force Detachment, at Birnin Gwari in Kaduna state, to serve as support base and blocking force for troops engaged in Operations Diran Mikiya and Sharan Daji.

¹⁰⁸ "Nigeria, Niger security teams meet on border crimes", Nigeria Television Authority, 17 May 2019.

Military operations arguably have had an impact. The army and police have arrested hundreds of men suspected of being part of herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs, killed hundreds of others, destroyed some of their forest camps, recovered arms and ammunition, and rescued hundreds of kidnapped persons. More recently, the police conducted operations in which it reported killing hundreds of roving armed group elements and Ansaru members.¹⁰⁹

Despite these gains, however, the security forces have been unable to subdue the vast array of armed groups. Even with the stepped-up efforts, the available manpower, logistics and equipment are insufficient to respond promptly to armed groups' attacks. Troops lack the motorcycles they need to travel on roads that are impassable for cars and trucks. The army also lacks sufficient helicopters to deploy troops rapidly to remote locations.¹¹⁰ Locals said that although military operations (Operations Harbin Kunama I and II) expelled many criminal groups from their forest camps in 2016 and early 2017, the army failed to consolidate those gains and hold territory, enabling the groups to soon reorganise and return.¹¹¹ Many vulnerable rural communities are far from any military post, resulting in late responses to their distress calls, with soldiers sometimes reaching them many hours after attacks.¹¹² Others under attack are sometimes unable to reach security agencies due to poor telephone services.¹¹³

The government's April 2019 attempt to prohibit all forms of gold mining in Zamfara state, citing possible links between miners and criminals, has also had limited impact. Authorities have struggled to enforce the ban because of the remote location of many mining sites, limited resources for monitoring compliance and resistance by some powerful individuals behind the industry. Moreover, to the extent that enforcement exists, its immediate impact has been to deprive thousands of artisanal miners and their dependents of livelihoods, creating a new set of problems. Some miners from the North West have relocated to Osun state in south-western Nigeria, over 700km away, where they are again engaged in mining; others have not.¹¹⁴ In the absence of other livelihoods, the ban could render many unemployed youths more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and criminals.

B. Initial State Government Responses

Starting around 2015, state governments responded to increasing violence in the North West mostly by supporting federal security agencies with funds and logistics to fight the armed groups, diminishing their ability to address other pressing socio-economic problems. In Zamfara state, former Governor Yari reported that from 2015 to 2019, the government spent 35 billion naira (about \$95.8 million) on logistics support to federal security agencies, special allowances for security personnel deployed

¹⁰⁹ "Police kill 250 suspected terrorists in Kaduna", *Premium Times*, 5 February 2020.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, army officer deployed to Operation Sharan Daji in Zamfara state, Sokoto, 9 July 2019.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, community leader, Kaduna, March 2019.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders in Sokoto and Zamfara states, July 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Shehu Musa, resident, Goronyo, Sokoto state, 16 January 2020.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Ministry of Mines and Steel Development official, Abuja, 6 January 2020.

to the state and relief for victims of attacks.¹¹⁵ In Katsina state, the government has reported similar but lower expenditures.¹¹⁶

As noted above, state governments also sought to counter attacks by herder-allied groups and criminal gangs by forming and empowering vigilantes to protect communities, a practice that proved to be largely counterproductive. In 2013, the Zamfara state government recruited about 12,500 vigilantes, paid them a monthly allowance of about 2,250 naira and provided them logistical support until the end of 2014.¹¹⁷ Additionally, in November 2018, as violence continued to escalate, the state government, frustrated by what it called the Nigerian army's "lackadaisical attitude" toward confronting the armed actors, formed a Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), recruiting a first batch of 8,500 young men, and subsequently increasing the number.¹¹⁸

This initiative proved to be of very limited effect, for two main reasons. First, the army, viewing the CJTF as potentially a parallel force, was unwilling to work with it.¹¹⁹ Secondly, the poorly armed vigilantes were often no match for the groups they were meant to confront. Hundreds of vigilantes were killed in the course of the many confrontations in Zamfara and Katsina.¹²⁰

From 2016 to 2018, the Zamfara and Katsina state governments shifted gears, and sought to curb the violence by negotiating peace agreements with herder-allied armed groups and criminal gangs. The states offered amnesty, arms-for-cash programs and promises of spending for local communities, in return for disarmament. In Zamfara state, a government-initiated peace dialogue with armed groups led to an arms-for-development agreement in October 2016, and in April 2017, police reported about 1,000 herder-allied armed fighters and criminals had renounced banditry and surrendered arms in exchange for promises of cash.¹²¹ In Katsina state, the program saw the recovery of about 107 AK-47 rifles, 361 Dane guns and 28,000 rustled cattle, also in exchange for cash. In Kaduna state, an initiative by the police commissioner, Austin Iwar, persuaded about 1,150 armed group members to voluntarily hand

¹¹⁵ "Insecurity: Zamfara spends N35 bn on logistics, assistance to victims", *Premium Times*, 16 April 2019. "Yari condemns security response as armed bandits return to Zamfara", *Daily Trust*, 26 September 2017.

¹¹⁶ For instance, in March 2019, the Katsina state government distributed ten Toyota Hilux pickup trucks, purchased for a total of 181 million naira, to ten local government areas bordering the Rugu forest, for surveillance and rapid response to incidents of banditry and kidnapping. "Banditry: Katsina procures N181m operational vehicles", *Daily Trust*, 27 March 2019.

¹¹⁷ Rufa'i, "Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State", op. cit.

¹¹⁸ "Zamfara govt. to engage 8,500 youths as JTF members to fight crime", *Vanguard*, 3 November 2018.

¹¹⁹ At a town hall meeting on 9 April 2019, the chairman of Zurmi local government council, Dr Auwal Bawa Moriki, said the army wrote the state government, rejecting the CJTF's establishment and activities. He said the common assessment by local governments in the state was that: "Either the security operatives are not willing to bring the menace to an end or they don't want the members of the CJTF to report their activities on the field". "As police boss visits Zamfara ... No security presence in rural areas – emir", *Daily Trust*, 10 April 2019.

¹²⁰ For instance, in the first half of April 2019, herder-allied armed groups killed over 60 vigilantes in Dandume, Sabuwa and Kankara local government areas of Katsina state. "Katsina: death toll rises as vigilantes, bandits clash escalates", *Daily Trust*, 10 April 2019.

¹²¹ "Govt, rustlers reach truce", *Daily Trust*, 4 November 2016; "Police recover 20 rifles, 2,734 cows from rustlers", *Daily Trust*, 22 April 2017.

over guns and other weapons. The men swore on the Quran and the Bible to quit bandit and criminal activities in exchange for amnesty.¹²²

While these deals brought some peace for a limited amount of time, after about a year, the programs collapsed, and the mostly herder-allied armed groups stepped up attacks. There are several explanations as to why.

First, in Zamfara state, for example, the state government blamed the failure of the deals on the ostensible bad faith of armed group leaders, although several officials conceded that the state had failed to live up to its own promises. Some officials argued that Tsoho Buhari, then the pre-eminent herder-allied armed group leader, popularly known as Buharin Daji, along with some of his lieutenants, had breached the deal's conditions and unilaterally returned to violence.¹²³ This violence was compounded by the return to Zamfara of other herder-allied armed groups and criminals who had earlier fled to other states under military pressure, and so were not party to the amnesty when it took place.¹²⁴

By contrast, other officials and civil society leaders said the program had been compromised by the government's failure to fulfil its promises to different armed groups, including offering rehabilitation and reintegration programs to those who had signed up and "repented". Others pointed to the arrest of one of Buharin Daji's close associates as a reason why the deals collapsed.¹²⁵

Secondly, competition among armed groups worsened over time, feeding yet more violence. On 7 March 2018, Buharin Daji was killed (along with seven of his lieutenants), allegedly by his second-in-command, Dogo Gide. According to some local sources, Buharin Daji's murder followed a dispute linked to a clash over rustled cattle; others say it was linked to his refusal to lay down arms, a policy by then opposed by Gide.¹²⁶ Thereafter, the many herder-allied armed groups loyal to Buharin Daji (and some others) resumed violent activities at full throttle in Zamfara, and also extended these to Katsina and Sokoto states. Partly as a result of such competition, many groups held on to their weapons stores despite their commitment to disarmament. Thirdly, the state governments' focus on dealing with armed groups was not accom-

¹²² The commissioner had been engaging different community leaders to persuade armed actors in their areas to abandon crime and embrace government's amnesty program. "1,150 bandits swear by Quran, Bible to drop act in Kaduna", *Nigerian Tribune*, 2 April 2018.

¹²³ Explaining the failure of the amnesty program, then Governor Yari said: "We learnt that there was a disagreement between Buharin Daji and his boys after he initially agreed to all the peace deals with the state government", "Yari condemns security response as armed bandits return to Zamfara", *Daily Trust*, 26 September 2017. Elsewhere, he added: "When we said we will dialogue and offer them amnesty if they surrender their arms, they refused. ... We have not received up to 90 AK-47 rifles. So, it is deceit". "Zamfara governor visits Buhari, raises alarm over stockpiling of arms by bandits", *Premium Times*, 19 March 2019.

¹²⁴ "Why peace deal with armed bandits in Zamfara collapsed", *Daily Trust*, 3 December 2017.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Abuja, Sokoto, Gusau, November 2019-January 2020.

¹²⁶ Several local sources say Buharin Daji was killed by Gide, following Daji's refusal to lay down arms in accordance with their peace agreement with the Zamfara state government. Others said he was killed because he refused to return about 700 cattle his gang had rustled from Dogo Gide's in-law, despite the latter's entreaties. Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, Gusau, July 2019 and January 2020.

panied by wider Hausa-Fulani reconciliation dialogues, thereby failing to resolve a key driver of violence.

C. Recent State Government Initiatives

Over the last twelve months the North West zone's state governments have initiated new efforts to negotiate peace with mainly herder-allied armed groups, but also vigilantes and criminals; this strategy has delivered some gains although not enough to end the violence.¹²⁷ The new policy direction followed growing public frustration with federal security agencies' apparent inability to subdue the armed groups through the use of military force, despite President Buhari's repeated vows to do so.¹²⁸ Nor have tighter laws relating to the control of armed groups and violent crime had substantial effect, given the states' lack of enforcement capacity.¹²⁹

Consequently, the Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto and Niger state governments have engaged in dialogues with predominantly herder-allied armed group leaders, with some governors going out to meet them in their forest camps or inviting them to talks in the state capital. The governors offered the armed groups amnesties and other incentives to end attacks.¹³⁰

These talks produced several agreements. In July 2019, the Zamfara state government said it had persuaded some herder-allied armed groups to end violence; Katsina, Niger and Sokoto states followed with similar announcements.¹³¹ The governments agreed to release all former armed elements who had been part of herder-allied groups, and who were now in custody, in exchange for all persons the herders were holding in their forest camps. The governors also pledged to disarm and disband vigilante groups (a strong demand of herder-allied armed groups), rehabilitate and re-

¹²⁷ See "Resurgence of banditry in Katsina", *Punch*, 17 January 2020; "Tougher times for Zamfara as killings, kidnappings escalate", *HumAngle*, 17 March 2020; "Rising wave of banditry in Niger state", *Leadership*, 15 February 2020; "Masari bemoans relentless killings in Katsina by bandits", *This Day*, 7 May 2020.

¹²⁸ See "President Buhari tells military to be ruthless in fighting bandits", *Voice of Nigeria*, 25 August 2018; "Buhari orders military to end killings in Zamfara", *The Sun*, 25 December 2018; "Buhari orders ruthless action on bandits, kidnappers", *New Telegraph*, 12 April 2019; "Buhari goes tough on bandits, orders soldiers not to spare them", *Business Day*, 17 August 2019; "Buhari to military: Don't spare bandits, identify and eliminate them to restore peace", *ICIR*, 17 August 2019; "Buhari orders troops to flush out bandits", *Daily Trust*, 4 April 2020; "Katsina massacre: Buhari condemns attack, vows to crush bandits", *PM News*, 19 April 2020.

¹²⁹ For instance, in May 2019, the Katsina state government amended its penal code, prescribing death for cattle rustling and kidnapping; and a mandatory life sentence, plus a fine and victim compensation, for rape. These stiffer penalties have not deterred attacks and violations. In Zamfara state, the government sacked thirteen traditional rulers on charges that they were collaborating with roving armed groups in their emirates and districts. Not one, however, has been prosecuted or convicted. The former governor, Yari, sacked eleven traditional rulers for allegedly collaborating with bandits. In June 2019, his successor Matawalle suspended the emir of Maru, Abubakar Cika Ibrahim, and the district head of Kanoma, Ahmed Lawal, on similar charges. "Banditry: Zamfara govt suspends traditional ruler", *Premium Times*, 6 June 2019.

¹³⁰ In Sokoto state, the government set up a Sokoto State Committee on Negotiations, chaired by the deputy governor, Mannir Dan'Iya.

¹³¹ In Sokoto, the government said it negotiated with about seventeen bandit groups. "No area under bandits' control in Sokoto", *Daily Trust*, 18 November 2019.

integrate herder-allied and other armed groups willing to lay down their arms, establish rural grazing areas including settlements with social amenities – schools, hospitals, roads, electricity and water – for Fulani pastoralists, and rehabilitate houses destroyed by violence between herder-allied groups and farmers.

The agreements have been at least partly honoured. The Zamfara and Katsina state governments have since released detained herder-allied armed actors.¹³² They also banned vigilantes' activities and ordered them to disarm, an order that has achieved substantial albeit not total compliance.¹³³ Vigilantes surrendered significant numbers of weapons, partly because they wanted to encourage their better-armed herder-allied rivals to lay down their weapons, too, but also because, as sedentary farmers, they would be more vulnerable to government security operations than itinerant herders.¹³⁴

For their part, some herder-allied armed groups have also put down their weapons, helping cool tensions and reduce attacks through the last quarter of 2019. About 500 persons who had been held captive, mostly by herder-allied armed groups and criminal groups but also by vigilantes, were subsequently released.¹³⁵ Many displaced people, including the Fulani who had fled into forests for fear of vigilante attacks, have gone home. In Zamfara, the State Emergency Management Agency reported that as of 30 August 2019, about 25,000 displaced persons had returned to their towns and villages – and more have since followed. In September 2019, the police chief in Zamfara state, Usman Nagogo, claimed that attacks by herder-allied and other armed groups had declined by 98 per cent, though he provided no substantiating data.¹³⁶

Still, these efforts face multiple challenges. First, as the herder-allied and criminal gangs lack central command and a common goal, it has been difficult to bring them all to a common conference table, and agreements made with one group are not binding on others.¹³⁷ Secondly, these dialogues have largely focused on herder-allied armed groups, with the criminally motivated bandit groups and jihadists showing no interest in engaging with authorities. Thirdly, these dialogues appear not to have taken adequate account of the views of local communities that have borne the brunt of violence and expect the state to deliver forms of compensation, justice and protection as a condition for durable peace.¹³⁸ In addition, three states in the North West

¹³² In Katsina state, the government released more than 50 members of herder-allied armed groups detained by security operatives, while the groups released over 105 captives in their own custody. In Niger state, the government reported it reached a peace deal with the criminal gangs, the first phase of which saw the thirteen bandits released and 35 others voluntarily laying down their arms.

¹³³ The vigilantes have handed in several hundred more guns to government and security authorities. Crisis Group interviews, vigilante leaders, Gusau, Zamfara state and Katsina, Katsina state, December 2019-January 2020.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group leaders, Gusau, Zamfara state, July-October 2019.

¹³⁵ As of 7 October 2019, the Zamfara state government reported that bandits had released 477 persons. "Two months after, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina count gains of amnesty for bandits", *This Day*, 8 October 2019.

¹³⁶ "Banditry down by over 90 per cent in Zamfara – CP", *Premium Times*, 8 July 2019.

¹³⁷ One of the most prominent leaders, Dogo Gide, sent representatives to the peace talks but stayed away himself: state officials later said he had "renounced cattle rustling and kidnapping" but then "migrated to Niger state with herds of cattle" for reasons unknown. "Despite peace deals, bandits hit soldiers, Zamfara, Sokoto villages", *Daily Trust*, 12 October 2019.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society leader, Sokoto, 26 September 2019.

region – Kaduna, Kano and Kebbi – have not yet engaged in similar peace processes, which could motivate herder-allied and criminal groups in those states to step up their attacks to force those governments to the table. In Kaduna state, where the government has vowed never to negotiate with any armed group, attacks continue to take a significant toll.¹³⁹

While even modest or temporary progress is better than none, failure to achieve a comprehensive settlement to the violence comes at a cost. So long as some armed groups remain outside the peace agreements, many disarming groups fear they will be attacked by longstanding rivals, or the federal security forces, who are under orders to defeat armed groups and criminals on the battlefield.¹⁴⁰ The number of weapons submitted in disarmament processes is therefore low: in Zamfara state, less than 1,000 as of January 2020.¹⁴¹ In spite of their commitments to disarm, many herder-allied and other armed groups bear arms openly, intimidating residents, sometimes extorting cash, cattle and food, and engaging in sexual violence.¹⁴² Many communities are especially apprehensive that the herder-allied groups are acquiring lopsided power now that some state governments banned and imposed disarmament on vigilante groups. In Zamfara and Katsina states, some vulnerable communities are demanding restoration of the disbanded vigilante groups, a situation that could again cause an escalation of violence.¹⁴³

In order to address the concerns behind these demands, some state governments are trying to motivate herder-allied armed groups to buy into disarmament initiatives through the provision of grazing land as well as livelihood schemes. In Zamfara state, the government is building three rural grazing areas – one in each of the three senatorial zones – to settle Fulani pastoralists, at a cost of 8.6 billion naira (about \$23.6 million).¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, because the allocation of farmland over the years had encroached on grazing reserves and cattle routes, causing major friction with pastoralists, the government has revoked all titles and allocations of farmland made since 1999, promising a review.¹⁴⁵

To help provide alternative livelihoods for herder-allied groups, vigilantes and other armed actors who are willing to disarm, the Zamfara government has also launched a social intervention scheme, the Zamfara State Social Intervention Programme. Under this program, which aims to recruit 18,000 youths, beneficiaries are to be trained in various skills that would equip them for paid employment or to be-

¹³⁹ In one incident on 1 March 2020, bandits attacked four villages in Igabi local government area, Kaduna state, killing at least 51 people. “Bandits kill 51 in Kaduna”, *Daily Trust*, 2 March 2020.

¹⁴⁰ “Repentant bandits give conditions to surrender arms”, *Vanguard*, 29 September 2019.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara state government official, Abuja, 10 February 2020.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Zamfara state residents, January 2020.

¹⁴³ “Zamfara communities restive over government’s ban on vigilante groups”, *HumAngle*, 26 March 2020; “Banditry: Group urges Katsina Gov to lift ban on vigilante”, *Daily Trust*, 18 March 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Each settlement comprises 210 residential houses, Western and Islamic schools, earth dams, grazing land and mosques. Other facilities to be provided include police stations, 130 shops and mini-markets, livestock markets, dairy collection and social centres, roads and drainage systems. In Niger state, the government plans to develop twelve grazing reserves for herders; the first, the 40,000-hectare Bobi Grazing Reserve in Mariga local government area, is scheduled to be opened in February 2020.

¹⁴⁵ “Zamfara farmers endorse revocation of farmland titles”, *Daily Trust*, 8 December 2019.

come self-reliant entrepreneurs. The first phase, involving an initial 8,600 recruits, started in November 2019.

Other states are taking significant steps to reduce farmer-herder conflicts in the region, particularly by establishing, reactivating and demarcating grazing reserves. In January 2020, the Kaduna state government partnered with a Danish company, Arla Foods International, to launch a dairy farm project in the Kubau local government area; this initiative is designed to help nomadic herders settle, boost Nigeria's milk production and curb farmer-herder clashes.¹⁴⁶ In Sokoto state, the government has started demarcating the state's nineteen grazing reserves in order to secure them properly and prevent encroachment.¹⁴⁷ In February 2020, the government of Kano state inaugurated a \$95 million agro-pastoral development project that aims, among other things, to develop pastoral communities, enhance farm productivity and address security and other challenges caused by herder migration.¹⁴⁸ In Niger state, the government has earmarked 44,000 hectares of land for 23 grazing reserves.¹⁴⁹

Implementing these initiatives will be challenging. Zamfara's establishment of rural grazing areas and settlements is viewed dimly by both herders and community vigilantes, albeit for different reasons. Some herders are apprehensive that moving into settlements may concentrate them in single locations where, in the event of a return to violence, they would be softer targets for vigilantes. Others dislike the idea of settling, seeing it as anathema to their migratory lifestyle, and fearing that the settlements in which they find themselves may have insufficient pasture for their herds during the long dry season.¹⁵⁰ Some farming communities, by contrast, view these settlements as "a one-sided response to a two-sided problem", favouring herders while little is done to rebuild farming and other communities destroyed by herder-

¹⁴⁶ When fully operational, the project is expected to create 50,000 jobs, which the government expects will "provide a template that can be replicated across our other fifteen grazing reserves and indeed across Nigeria". Signing the Memorandum of Understanding between the state government and Arla Foods International in September 2019, Kaduna state Governor Nasir el-Rufai said the project is designed to demonstrate to "itinerant nomadic herdsmen that it is possible to engage in modern livestock production without having to go up and down the country". See "Kaduna, Denmark company sign MOU to start milk production", *Vanguard*, 9 September 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Sokoto state Ministry of Animal Health and Fisheries, Sokoto, 17 January 2020. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Sokoto state government, Sokoto, 25 September 2019. In addition, the government has similarly announced a rehabilitation program for repentant bandits, offering to train 1,700 of them in furniture making, to be followed by other vocational training programs.

¹⁴⁸ This project, which is expected to be implemented over a five-year period, is being financed by the Islamic Development Bank (as the bank's biggest investment in Nigeria), the Life and Livelihoods Fund and other organisations, with \$5 million (1.8 billion naira) counterpart funding from the state government. The government particularly expects the project will "curb farmer-herder clashes and security risks". See also "Ganduje unveils \$95m agro-pastoral project", *Punch*, 21 February 2020.

¹⁴⁹ With support from the Central Bank of Nigeria, the Niger state government has started to renovate existing facilities and developing new infrastructure and social amenities – schools, roads, hospitals, veterinary clinics, security services and milk collection centres – at the 30,000-hectare Bobi grazing reserve in Mariga local government area. This reserve is designed as a pilot scheme for 22 other reserves across the state, which aim to improve livestock production and mitigate herder-farmer conflicts.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society leader, Abuja, 18 January 2020.

backed armed groups.¹⁵¹ Some former vigilantes have vowed to destroy the settlements if the government proceeds to complete them without providing for the reconstruction of communities that were razed by herder-allied armed groups.

Against this backdrop, with many armed groups not having disarmed, peace deals have collapsed in some states and are at risk of unravelling in others. In Niger state, where the government initially engaged in peace talks with armed groups, continued attacks by these groups have forced the government to terminate negotiations.¹⁵² In Katsina state, where armed groups have ramped up attacks on communities, the state House of Assembly (parliament) faulted the government's peace deal with the armed groups, asking the governor to review the agreement and to seek alternative strategies for ending the violence.¹⁵³ The lawmaker representing the Batsari local government area, which has recently suffered a spate of killings, said the peace deal had in fact collapsed.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Zamfara-based civil society leader, Sokoto, 12 January 2020.

¹⁵² "Niger rules out further dialogue with bandits", *Blueprint*, 27 March 2020.

¹⁵³ "Katsina Assembly faults peace deal with bandits", *Daily Trust*, 5 May 2020.

¹⁵⁴ "Katsina peace accord has collapsed, says lawmaker", *This Day*, 10 May 2020.

VI. Rolling Back the Mayhem

Security operations against armed groups are important to curbing violence in Nigeria's North West, but they will not secure the region durably. The same is true of dialogues with them: while valuable, many of the gains produced by earlier amnesty programs and cash rewards have proven short-lived. Sustainable peace requires a more comprehensive response by Nigerian authorities, at both the state and federal levels, that addresses drivers of violence in the region.

A. Take Further Steps to Defuse Herder-farmer Contestation

The federal government and governments of the North West states should continue to seek resolution of conflicts between herders and farmers that have been the engine of instability in the region, including through negotiated settlements that build upon previous state-level disarmament efforts.

The steps that Zamfara and some other state governments have taken, including the establishment of rural grazing areas where herders are guaranteed access to land, are by themselves unlikely to be enough. Consistent with the fears of some herders, noted above, the rural grazing areas planned to date may not be large enough to accommodate the vast numbers of herders and their cattle, and provide the full range of services, infrastructure and markets that they require.

The federal government may be able to help address some of these concerns by expediting implementation of its National Livestock Transformation Plan, which was approved in Abuja in January 2019. The Plan lays out strategies for transforming the livestock sector into a catalyst for boosting the country's prosperity and for promoting peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders, with support from the federal and state governments, private investors and foreign donors. At its core is a plan to establish ranches within public grazing reserves and improve services around them including by securing water resources, boosting pasture and fodder production, and encouraging investment in associated activities. Furthermore, the Plan aims to support nomadic pastoralists with tools to manage their own transition to more sedentary production, while also helping small-scale farmers to become key suppliers to livestock producers, producing the feed and other supplements needed in ranching.¹⁵⁵

As part of the Plan, the federal government is to fund 80 per cent of the cost of any livestock transformation plan submitted by any state government (such as a plan for the development of large-scale ranches of the type envisaged). As state-level plans come together, the federal authorities should work closely with state governments to explore ways in which national-level infrastructure could bolster the project to be funded thereunder. Authorities at both the state and federal levels could also seek support from foreign donors and other partners that have expertise in livestock industry development – as the Niger state government is already doing with the European Union and the Brazilian government.¹⁵⁶

Additionally, in order to reduce incentives for herders to arm themselves to protect their cattle from being stolen, the ministries of agriculture in the region's state

¹⁵⁵ "National Livestock Transformation Plan 2019 – 2028: Strategy Document", January 2019.

¹⁵⁶ "Niger partners Brazil on livestock farming", *Leadership*, 28 February 2020.

governments should oversee the creation of tracing systems for lost cattle. Such systems could involve cattle branding, certifying cattle traders, monitoring cattle markets and regulating slaughterhouses. They could also help herders acquire solar-powered devices that would track rustlers to recover stolen cattle. Some state governments, such as Zamfara, Niger and Kaduna, are taking some of these measures but they should be implemented uniformly in the entire country.

As concerns the farmers, both the federal and state governments should tread lightly before making any further changes to land allocations, making sure first to engage in extensive public consultation so as not to spark fresh conflict. In Zamfara state, some of the farmers who have been displaced in favour of herders by the recent reversal of land allocations have threatened legal action, claiming that they are being unjustly dispossessed of land they acquired legitimately and have invested in for years. The Zamfara state government has promised to review the allocations in question; it should do so transparently and with sensitivity to the friction that further abrupt decisions could create between herders and farmers. Federal authorities and state governments should also work out compensation for farmers who face displacement as a result of reallocations and possibly allocate them farmlands in areas that do not encroach upon grazing reserves or block livestock routes.

B. *Sustain and Broaden Peace Processes and Threat Management*

Considering the depth of grievances created by herder-farmer violence over the years, state governments in the North West should commit to longer-term reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts that bring herder- and farmer-allied armed groups and communities to the table. While sustaining current dialogues and other peace efforts between pastoralists and farmers, the governments and other mediators should also encourage wider exchanges between senior Fulani and Hausa leaders who could have an important role to play in fostering reconciliation at local levels. (It could also help counter the perception in many devastated communities that governments have placed the armed groups' demands over their victims' needs, which could undermine any peace effort.)

It might also help build a greater sense of community if state authorities could organise forums that allow various constituencies – farmers, pastoralists, community vigilantes, ethnic and religious leaders, community leaders and state security agencies – to come to collective decisions about how to manage potential mutual threats. They should welcome the involvement of non-governmental organisations, such as Pastoral Resolve and Global Peace Foundation, that are working to forge peace between communities.¹⁵⁷

C. *Improve Humanitarian Response and Livelihood Recovery Support*

Although violence has recently ebbed in parts of the North West, including many areas of Zamfara state, the humanitarian crisis it created persists and requires continued government attention. Many IDPs have yet to return home, having lost their property and livelihoods.

¹⁵⁷ In the southern parts of Kaduna state, Global Peace Foundation is working with the state-government's Peace Commission to restore peace between Fulani and other ethnic groups.

On 23 January 2020, the Zamfara state house of assembly resolved that the state government should set up a disaster and relief committee that would liaise with the federal government and donor agencies to mobilise resources and develop programs for victims of violence across the state.¹⁵⁸ One way the federal government can help would be to release the 10 billion naira (about \$27.5 million) that it appropriated for humanitarian response and livelihood recovery support in the 2019 federal budget. Beyond prevailing on Abuja to do so, the governments of the North West region should work closely with federal authorities to help them assess needs for the impoverished region, which should now include analysis of how much assistance will likely be required to battle COVID-19 in the region. Nigeria's authorities should also reach out to international humanitarian partners to seek assistance with filling budgetary gaps and technical and logistical help delivering humanitarian support.

International humanitarian organisations, understandably focused largely on the North East over much of the past decade, should simultaneously turn attention and resources to the North West. They should help provide relief for IDPs in camps and communities and livelihood recovery support – including farm tools – to those returning to their devastated settlements and businesses. Additionally, over the longer term, international development organisations, such as the World Bank, various UN agencies, African Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and European Commission, should offer or sustain support for development programs, particularly in promoting youth education, climate change mitigation, environmental restoration and agricultural sector reform.

D. Improve Protection for Communities, Tighten Border Security

The crisis in Nigeria's North West partly stems from the fact that the federal and state governments have not addressed herder-farmer and other security problems in a systematic and cohesive way. The rise of both armed group "banditry" and vigilantism can, to a great extent, be attributed to local communities taking law and order into their own hands, with disastrous consequences. Ending violence requires improved effort by the authorities to protect all groups and communities, as well as their assets and property. Federal authorities are understandably stymied by resource limitations and falling revenues due to low global oil prices, but they should recalibrate their priorities to make available funds required to meet these needs.

Part of the challenge for Abuja is better understanding the terrain. As information is key to preventing and suppressing violence, security agencies should engage more effectively with community leaders and cultivate more local sources. The police, who are stepping up efforts at developing community policing arrangements across the country, should devote special attention to this region and expedite recruitment of local constables. The Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps should also deploy its Agro-Rangers units (armed security units whose mandate includes mediating local herder-farmer disputes) in greater numbers in the North West. To curb impunity, the federal and state governments would need to ensure adequate funding for the police and courts in affected states to support faster prosecution of the many people arrested for cattle rustling, kidnapping and other crimes over the past few years.

¹⁵⁸ "Zamfara sets up relief committee for banditry victims", *Punch*, 24 January 2020.

Border security also demands greater priority, notably regarding the border with the Niger Republic, in line with the country's new National Security Strategy.¹⁵⁹ Given already high concerns over the activities of Sahel-based jihadist groups, the Department of State Services should intensify intelligence gathering around border communities and target networks trafficking firearms into the region. The Nigerian Immigration Service and Nigeria Customs Services should also step up efforts to check cross-border movements and curb the influx of illicit firearms. As these agencies' operations are continually compromised by allegedly corrupt border officials, the Ministry of Interior should work with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, to investigate and sanction any such illicit activity.¹⁶⁰

E. *Reform Forestry and Mining Sectors*

Restoring peace to the region requires improving security in forested areas where many armed groups and other criminals make camp. Federal and state governments should provide more resources to their forestry services departments, which have been neglected for decades but which would be an essential tool in regulating the use of forests and gathering intelligence on the presence of armed groups. They should empower these departments to enhance surveillance of the forests, so as to ensure early detection of any facilities being used by armed groups, criminals or jihadist organisations.

As for the mining sector, rather than seeking to enforce bans that could leave young men without livelihoods and therefore more prone to be drawn into criminality, federal and state authorities should focus on keeping industry proceeds from falling into the hands of illicit actors. The authorities should allow artisanal gold mining in areas where security conditions permit the state to monitor operations but restrict these activities to licensed cooperatives. They should further strive to channel the resulting production into state or accredited private-sector hands, rather than leaving it for unregulated local traders who might be collaborating with criminal gangs. The authorities might encourage miners to comply by ensuring prompt payment at market rates for whatever gold licensed cooperatives deliver to state-authorised purchasers and providing them leased equipment and other services that they lack, such as sanitation facilities and access to credit.¹⁶¹

The federal government is already taking some steps in this regard. The Ministry of Mines and Steel Development is encouraging artisanal and small-scale miners

¹⁵⁹ Launched by President Buhari in December 2019, the strategy promises that government will "ensure the state monopoly of force in border and frontier communities by establishing more military units to support border security operations by other statutory agencies". "FG plans more border military units", *Punch*, 12 December 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Though the federal government closed the country's borders in August 2019, illegal goods including arms are still being smuggled in through several routes in Jibia local government area, Katsina state, Shinkafi and Zurmi local government areas, Zamfara state; and Illela, Tangaza, Isa, Gudu and Sabon local government areas, Sokoto state, with customs officers allegedly taking bribes and letting the smugglers through. Crisis Group interviews, commercial drivers, Sokoto, 14 and 15 January 2020.

¹⁶¹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°282, *Getting a Grip on Central Sahel's Gold Rush*, 13 November 2019.

to establish cooperatives, obtain licences for their operations and comply with technical, environmental, economic, social and labour requirements. In addition, the ministry has kicked off the Presidential Artisanal Gold Mining Development Initiative, a support program for artisanal miners which gives the Central Bank of Nigeria the first option to buy their gold.¹⁶² In the meantime, the government has also licenced new gold refineries that may also buy from artisanal miners.¹⁶³ One of the pilot states for the presidential initiative is Kebbi, where security conditions are relatively more stable than in Zamfara. The authorities should, however, consider implementing the program on a case-by-case basis in parts of Zamfara where security conditions permit and pivoting away from the blanket ban that still applies there.

F. Strengthen Regional and International Security Cooperation

The security situation in Nigeria's North West demands increased bilateral and regional security cooperation. In September 2019, the governors of Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina states met with the governor of Niger Republic's Maradi region, Zakari Oumoru, and jointly signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cross-border security. The North West state governments should seek similar arrangements with the two other Nigerien regions – Dosso and Tahoua – that share their international boundary. The federal government, which controls the nation's security agencies, should support the states in ensuring that these MoUs are adhered to on the Nigerian side.

The federal government also needs to increase security cooperation with other countries in the Sahel, particularly in the areas of intelligence gathering and sharing. It should tighten cooperation with Niger as a first step toward wider and more integrated regional security cooperation. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should forge closer security coordination among countries of the Sahel and the Lake Chad region. ECOWAS could also encourage greater communication between the Multi-National Joint Task Force in the Lake Chad region and the G5 Group in the Sahel to enable joint assessments of jihadist activities across their two theatres of operations, which may have implications for the situation in north-western Nigeria.

G. Intensify Efforts to Mitigate Climate Change and Restore Environment

With its eye on the long term, the federal government should intensify efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change in the country's far north.

In November 2011, the government adopted a National Adaptation Strategy and Plan of Action on Climate Change that aims to reduce the effects of climate change on all Nigerians.¹⁶⁴ Yet the necessary planning sessions convening the federal, state

¹⁶² See "FG flags off presidential artisanal gold mining development initiative", *Business Day*, 25 February 2020.

¹⁶³ See "Nigeria's government licenses two gold refineries – mines minister", Reuters, 27 February 2020.

¹⁶⁴ "National Adaptation Strategy and Plan of Action on Climate Change for Nigeria", prepared for the Federal Ministry of Environment Special Climate Change Unit, by the Building Nigeria's Response to Climate Change Project, November 2011.

and local governments have not been taking place regularly enough in some states – and not at all in others. As such, President Buhari should instruct state governors in the North West to prioritise the development of local climate adaptation projects, with state governments tasked with consulting local communities fully before taking final decisions on what projects should be implemented and how they should be rolled out. In the North West, for example, the effects of desertification could be mitigated if various rural communities were given alternatives to chopping down trees in protected forests to obtain firewood, or if farmers were able to plant crops that made more efficient use of available water resources. International partners should support the federal and state governments with both the funds and technical support needed to carry out major adaptation projects.

Federal and state governments should also consider intensifying implementation of the Great Green Wall Initiative for the Sahara and the Sahel. Plans for the project, initially aimed at planting a 15km-wide belt of trees, running 7,775km across nine African countries from Senegal to Djibouti, have since been broadened to include building water retention ponds and other basic infrastructure, establishing agricultural production systems, and promoting a wide range of income-generating activities.¹⁶⁵ Nigeria's National Agency for the Great Green Wall hopes to rehabilitate 22,500 sq km of degraded land by 2020. Thus far, however, the agency's impact is scarcely felt in the North West: there is no evidence of thicker tree cover, significant new infrastructure or environmental restoration.¹⁶⁶

Additionally, this plan, as attractive as it seems, must be implemented with caution. While seeking to transform part of the region's land by re-greening it could have environmental benefits, it could also exacerbate land disputes. To minimise these risks, plans to implement the Great Green Wall must take into account the interests of all the communities present in the areas it might cover, including herders whose grazing lands could be lost to the initiative, and should take into account whether implementation would exacerbate the risk of conflict between different communities using the land.¹⁶⁷ In general, as a risk mitigation measure, both government and civil society should pay special attention to ensuring an equitable distribution of costs and benefits across communities.

¹⁶⁵ The Great Green Wall was originally conceived by then Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. In 2007, the African Union Commission adopted it as the Great Green Wall for the Sahara and Sahel Initiative. It involves over 30 partners, including African countries, the European Union, the French government, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the Global Environment Facility, the UN Commission to Combat Desertification and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, former National Agency for the Great Green Wall staffer, Abuja, February 2017. At the UN Climate Change Conference in December 2015, donor countries and multilateral agencies pledged \$4 billion over five years to support the Wall. It is unclear how much of this amount has arrived.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group communication, researcher, independent think-tank on climate based in Berlin, April 2020.

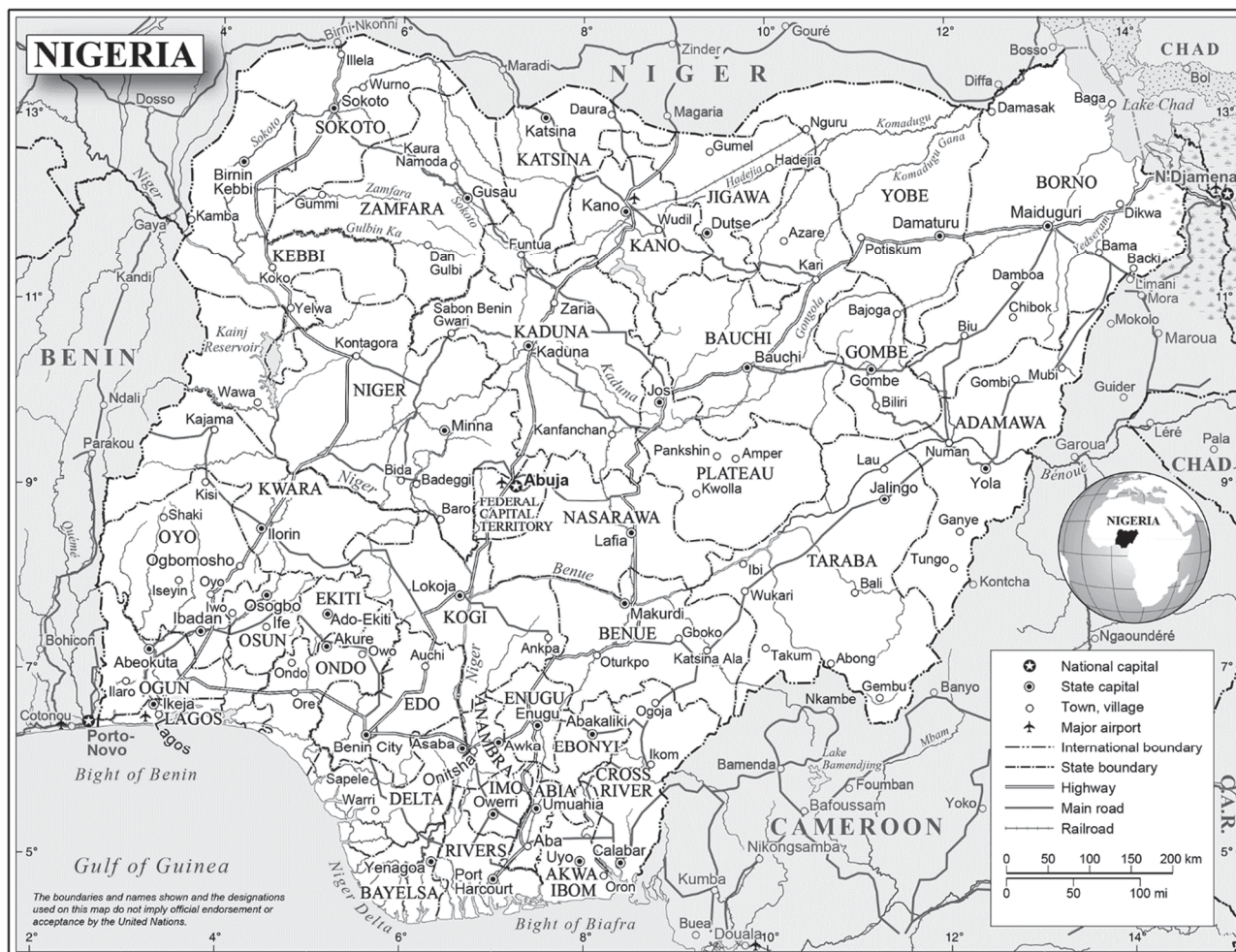
VII. Conclusion

Conflicts between herders and farmers, fights among their allies, armed group attacks on communities and criminal violence have collectively taken a severe toll on north-western Nigeria. They have also helped make it a new conflict zone where jihadist groups can take root and possibly act as a link between fellow militants in Nigeria's north-eastern Lake Chad region and those in the Sahel countries of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. The spread of violence in the region will also surely exacerbate its humanitarian crisis, further depress its economy and have destabilising effects elsewhere in Nigeria.

To build a more durable peace, Nigeria's federal authorities and state governments in the North West should work more closely, not only to heal longstanding rifts within communities and curb violence, but also to address the structural causes of insecurity in the region. International partners should lend their support and expertise as well. While there is no single cure for what ails Nigeria's North West, a broad-gauged effort to address both immediate and longer-term challenges could help bring an end to the mayhem that has too long afflicted the people of this struggling region and keep it from spreading elsewhere.

Abuja/Brussels, 18 May 2020

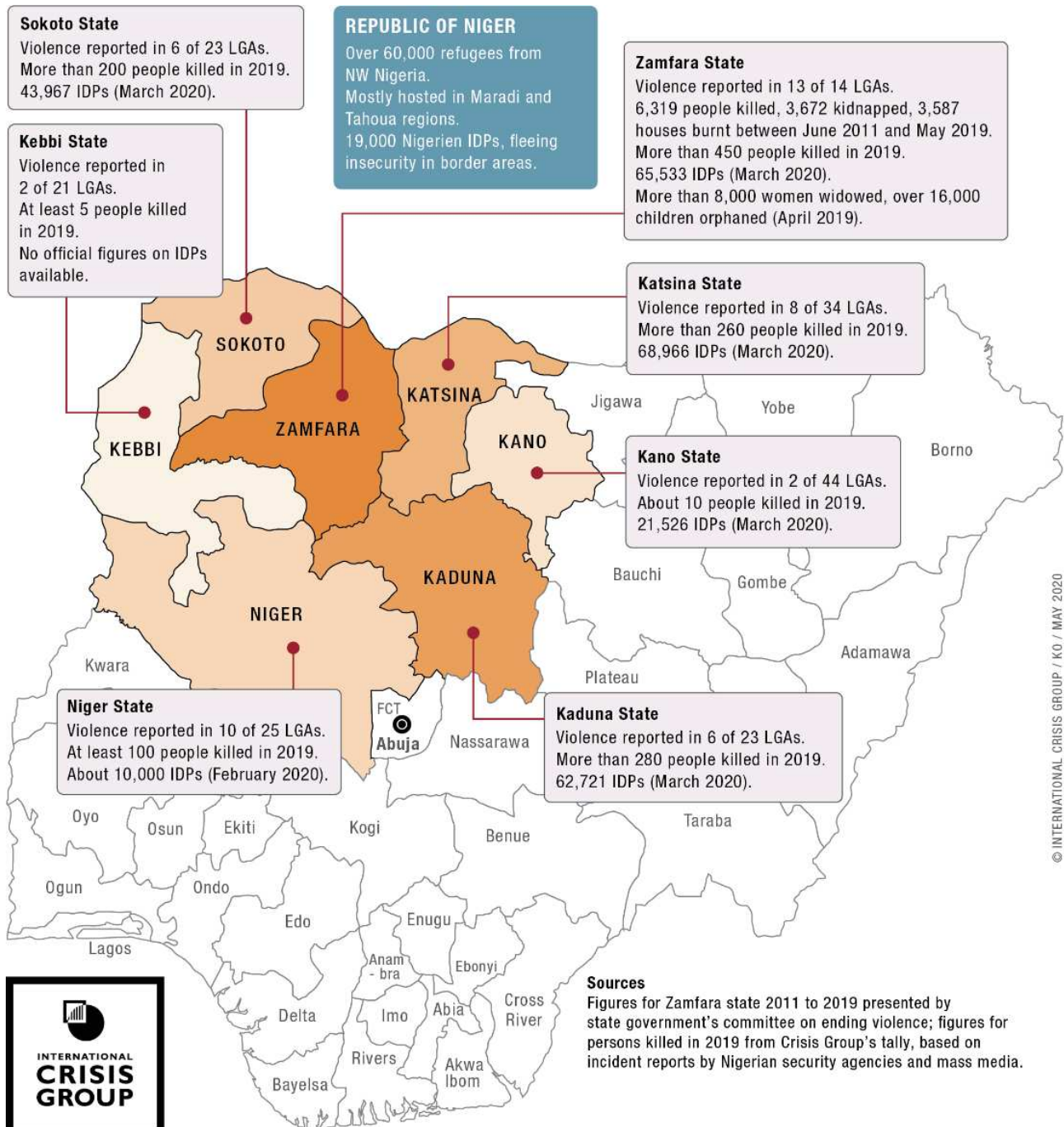
Appendix A: Map of Nigeria



Map No. 4228 Rev. 1 UNITED NATIONS
August 2014

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Appendix B: Fatalities from Armed Violence in 2019 and Humanitarian Situation



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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May 2020

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