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Beyond "Christian genocide": The real roots of criminal violence in Nigeria

"The only real way to reduce kidnapping in the long term is to improve economic conditions, reduce unemployment, and curb inflation."



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Immanuel Afolabi/TNH

Internally displaced families walk through a community in northern Nigeria after fleeing bandit violence.

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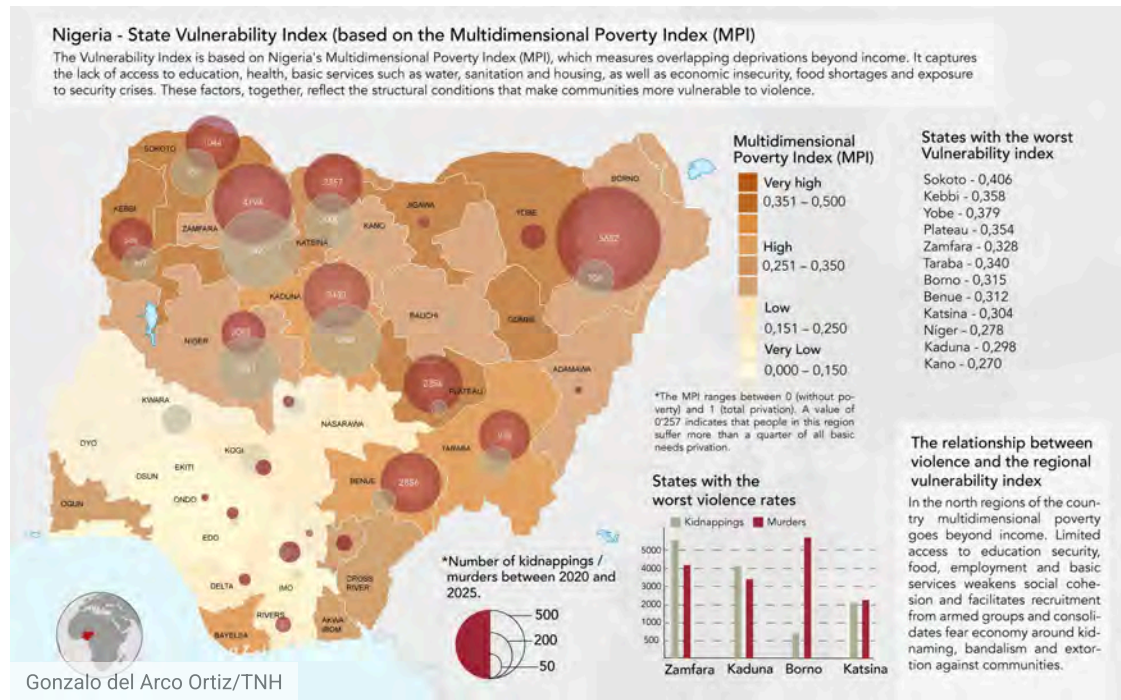
Nigeria is experiencing one of the worst waves of violence in its recent history. While it is often seen as a consequence of rising religious conflict, those working on the ground warn its roots lie in deep structural and social problems.

Livelihoods – especially in the rural north – have become increasingly fragile, yet federal and state authorities have failed to provide effective responses to the growing vulnerability. With formal governance systems in these areas weak, armed violence and criminality have found fertile ground in which to expand.

"The figures are alarming, and crime continues to rise, along with social insecurity and mortality rates," explained Usman Abba Zanna, a journalist with HumAngle,

one of Nigeria's foremost online publications.

For years, the focus of attention has been the northeast and the jihadist insurgencies of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). What has tended to be overlooked is the **even higher death toll** in the northwest due to the violence of criminal groups, known colloquially as "bandits".



Isolated and neglected

Bandit gangs – typically made up of young Fulani men – are entrenched in several rural districts of the northwest and north-centre. In these areas, a government presence is minimal – not only in terms of the police, but also public institutions and access to basic services. Entire communities have been left isolated and neglected.

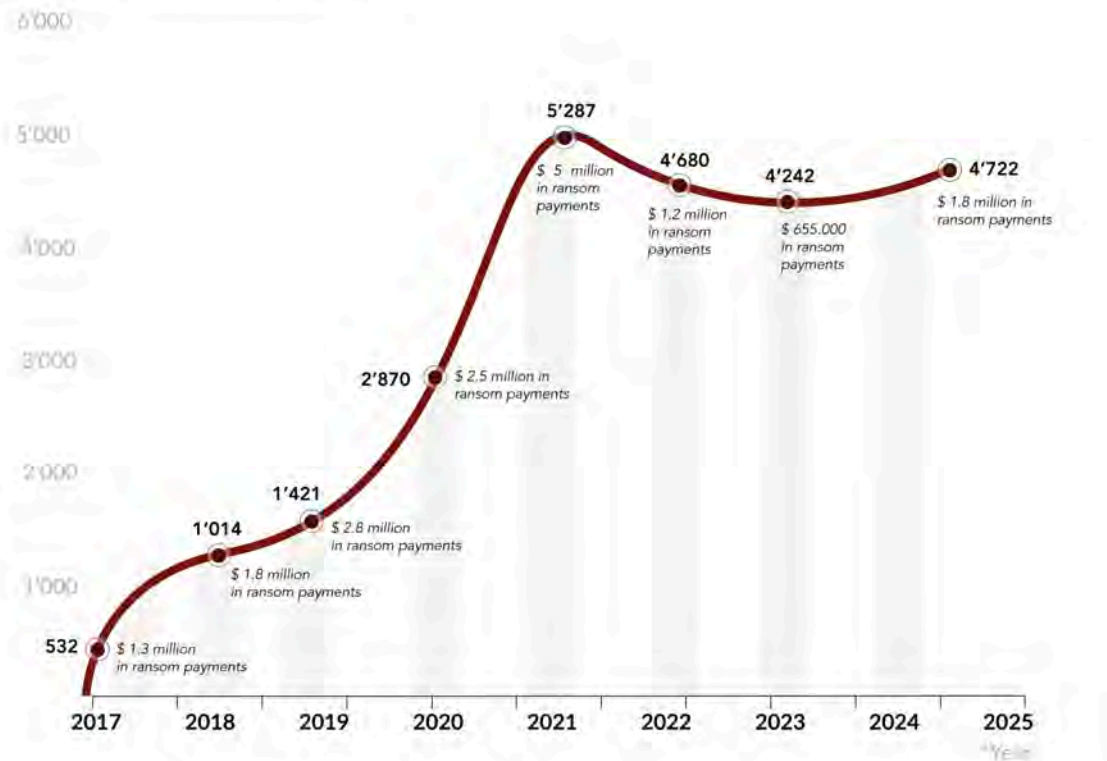
"When these kinds of vacuums are created, armed groups can move to control different aspects of daily life," said Siobhan O'Neil, head of the Managing Exits from Armed Conflicts project of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR).

The extent of the violence – including mass kidnappings and the extortion of entire communities – has been so extreme that the federal government has formally labelled bandit groups "terrorists".

Mass abductions in Nigeria (2017-2024)

Ransom payments linked to largescale kidnappings are estimated at around \$17 million (*).

*Number of people kidnapped per year



Data source from: SBM Intelligence reports ransom payments and mass kidnapping database; ICIR reporting on kidnapping trends (2013–2022); ACLED and Nigeria Security Tracker data documenting 4,243 kidnappings in 2023; and additional SBM Intelligence estimates of 4,722 victims between July 2024 and June 2025.

Gonzalo del Arco Ortiz/TNH

“Although the authorities have designated them as terrorists, they do not fully fit that definition,” Anietie Ewang, Nigeria researcher at Human Rights Watch, told The New Humanitarian. “Their violence is driven more by notoriety and economic gain than by ideology.”

Ibrahim Zikirullahi of the Centre for Human Rights and Civic Education describes these groups as structured criminal networks that are financed through ransom payments, the control of local resources, and the taxation of communities.

Bandit gangs initially emerged in Zamfara – one of Nigeria’s poorest states – in the 2010s. A patchwork of poorly policed forest reserves across the northwest provided them with safe spaces to hide, and a criminal network – providing weapons and the transport of stolen livestock – allowed them to expand.

The violence they perpetrate is brutal, including kidnappings, killings, armed robbery, and rape. “The groups usually attack at night or at dawn, in large numbers,” said BBC journalist Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu. Their targets range from villages and peri-urban areas to schools, highways, and places of worship.

Populist conspiracy narratives conflate banditry with jihadism. In much of southern Nigeria, Muslim Fulani men are often portrayed as the vanguard of an "Islamification" agenda – a **debunked allegation** nonetheless echoed by Christian nationalists in the United States. The reality is that banditry is about criminality rather than politics and, as a result, jihadist groups have generally avoided a formal association.

"In some states, there are criminal groups that are Fulani, but everyone else gets labelled as Fulani too," said Ewang. "That fuels hate crimes, hostility, and revenge against the entire [Fulani] community."

A politics of grievance

Rural violence is often painted as driven by identity-based land disputes between Fulani herders and Hausa farmers in the northwest, or between herders and farming communities in the Middlebelt states. But a **UNIDIR report** notes that those delineations are far less clear cut, obscuring a tradition of inter-mingling and cultural sharing.

Yet frictions exist, and have grown. Fulani groups, whose livelihoods depend on seasonal mobility and access to grazing land and water, have been affected by a land tenure system that favours sedentary farmers, and a drying climate that forces them to move further south where there is less of a history of contact.

Small-holder farmers are increasingly encroaching on cattle routes and grazing reserves, but their political clout – as a settled voting public – skews conflict resolution mechanisms in their favour.

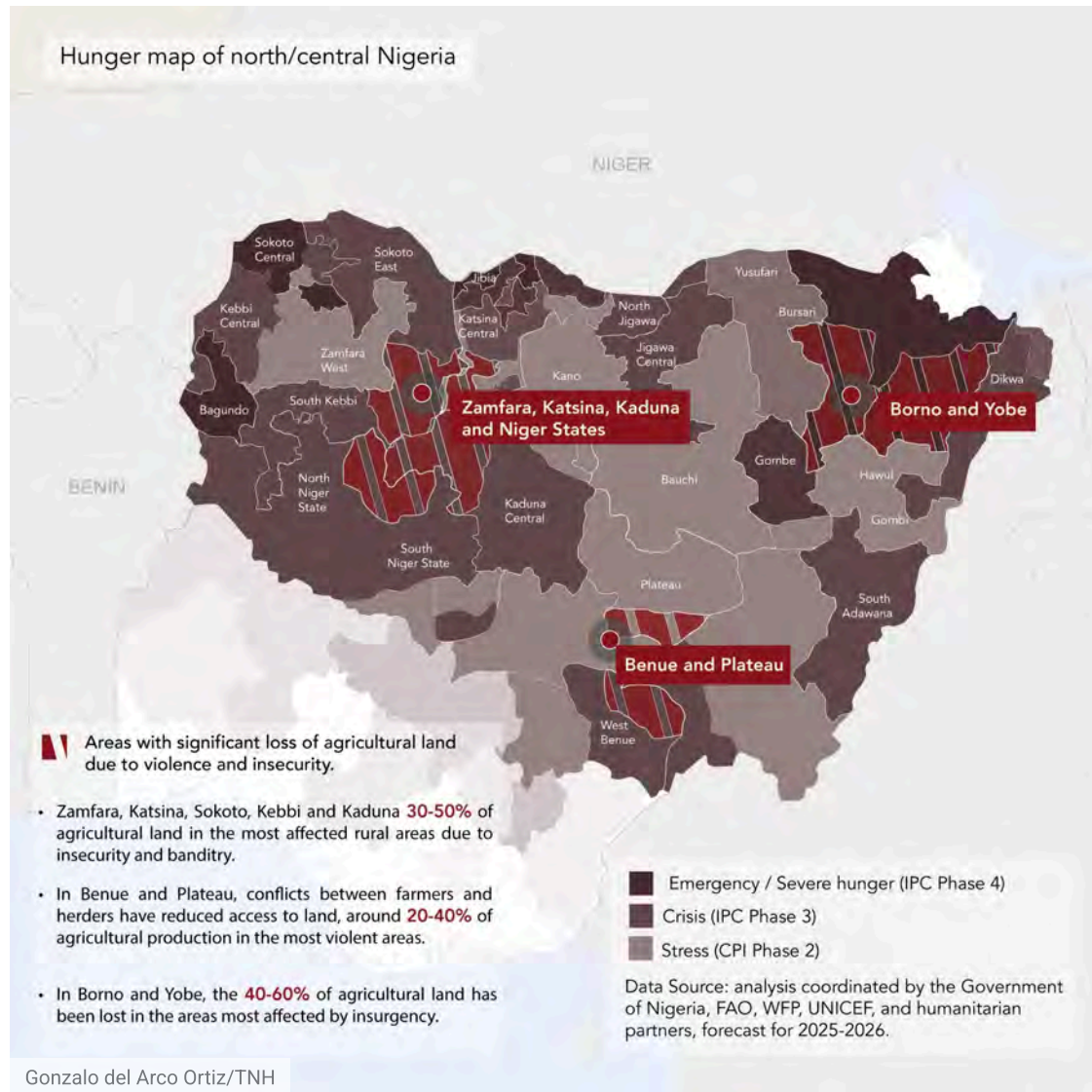
Herders – whether bandits or not – are often armed with automatic weapons, which gives them an advantage in most clashes. Their mobility means they also tend not to wait for judicial processes to take their course, souring community relations further, which can then affect other arriving Fulani groups.

A sense of grievance was an early driver of banditry in the northwest. Rural Fulani were the original victims of Fulani cattle-rustling gangs, but as the criminality expanded, all Fulani tended to be perceived as bandits by Hausa farmers, and became the targets of farmer vigilante groups out for revenge – and loot.

The scale of reprisal violence they faced – including **extrajudicial killings** and the effective banning from access to markets – resulted in many Fulani men joining self-defence groups, which have since morphed into the current criminal gangs.

Yet identity can be fluid. "Many Fulani have settled in urban centres and are not necessarily pastoralists," noted O'Neil. "Many have a mixed lineage and speak Hausa and, in predominantly Hausa areas, they may also identify as Hausa."

Violence affects all communities, whether Fulani, Christian, Muslim, or Hausa – “especially those who depend on farming and herding in rural areas far from urban centres where state presence is limited,” noted Ewang. “But it is important to recognise that the situation is worsening, and structural factors are fuelling the violence.”



Out-gunned security

It is currently estimated that around 30,000 “bandits” operate in northwestern/northcentral states such as Kaduna, Sokoto, Katsina, and Kebbi, in a network of groups ranging from small cells to motorbike-riding formations numbering in the hundreds or thousands.

Their mobility, the revenue they can generate – including from **gold and lithium** mining – and the lack of an effective presence of the security forces, keeps them in business.

Although the police should lead the response to criminality, they have suffered decades of underfunding, corruption, and resource shortages. With around 350,000-370,000 officers for a population of 240 million, the country falls well below the UN recommendation of one police officer per 400 people.

When attacks occur, the police typically lack vehicles, communication equipment, and are often outgunned by the criminals, allowing impunity to grow – further fuelling communal tensions.

Nigeria's over-stretched military frequently assumes responsibility for policing operations. But militarised responses have not guaranteed safety, and can lead to human rights violations, including airstrikes on **the wrong targets**.

The kidnapping industry

Kidnapping is another lucrative bandit enterprise. Since 2019, cases have increased by as much as 700% compared to the previous decade, and they now involve **a web of accomplices**, from informants to money launderers.

According to a **report by SBM**, a Lagos-based risk assessment group, around 15,000 kidnappings were recorded between 2019 and 2025, the majority in northern states. "Communities live in constant fear, with deep trauma and severe social fragmentation; those who can afford it pay tribute to survive," said Nwonwu, the journalist.

In this "economy of fear", insecurity reduces crop production and food supply, empties markets, disrupts local trade and transport routes, and drives up prices.

Kidnapping functions like a regressive tax on already impoverished communities. In this "economy of fear", insecurity reduces crop production and food supply, empties markets, disrupts local trade and transport routes, and drives up prices. It's estimated that ransom payments were worth around \$15 million between 2017-2025.

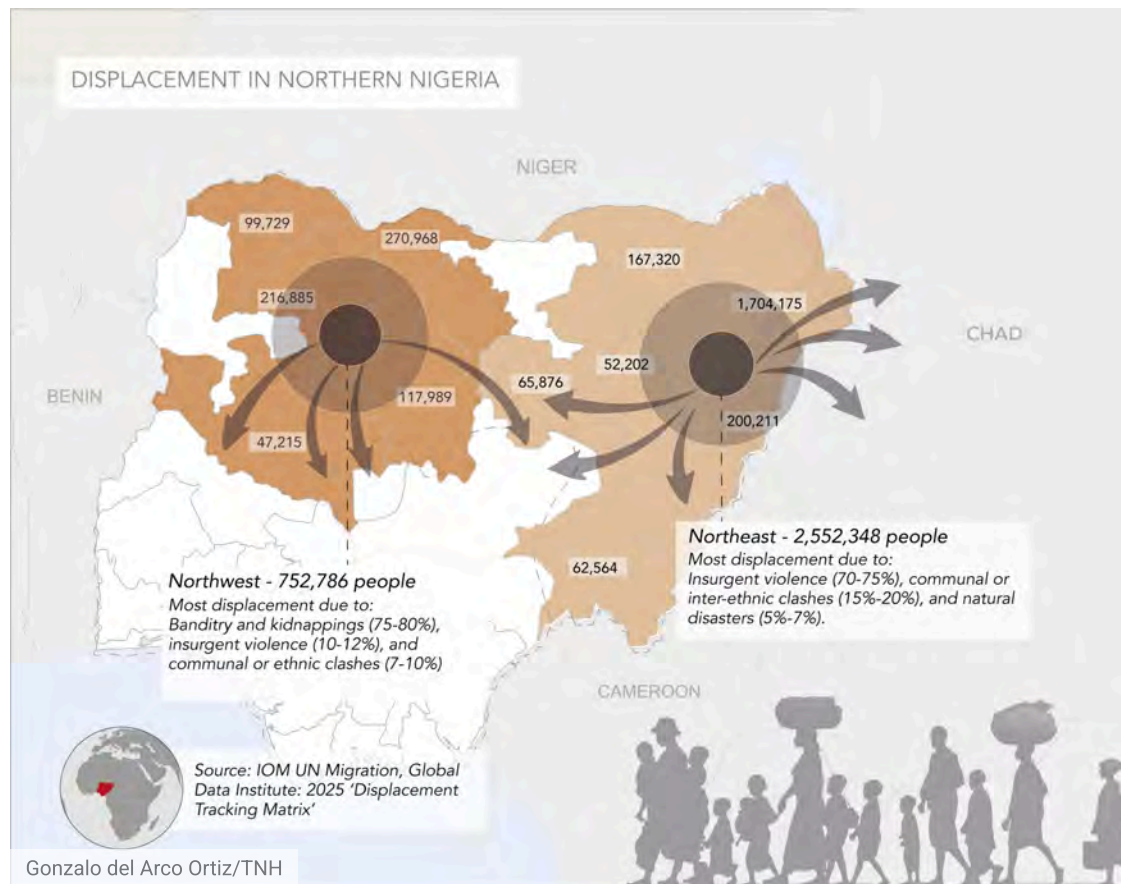
As a result, "we have seen indirect declines in GDP across entire regions," Confidence McHarry, an analyst at SBM, told The New Humanitarian. "The only real way to reduce kidnapping in the long term is to improve economic conditions, reduce unemployment, and curb inflation."

The social cost

According to UN agencies, more than half of Nigeria's population lives in extreme poverty. The highest rates are in **the northern states**, which also have the worst

social indicators – from education, to health, and nutrition.

Insecurity has driven huge population movements, which further impoverishes communities. In northwest Nigeria, more than 750,000 people have been driven from their homes; in the northeast, 16 years of jihadist violence has forced 2.5 million to flee.



"Most displaced people survive in informal camps – many now effectively permanent settlements – without guaranteed access to food, healthcare, or security," noted Abiodun Baiyewu, executive director of Global Rights Nigeria.

Violence and kidnappings have also undermined the education system. More than 2,200 children have been kidnapped from schools over the past decade, with more than 600 cases recorded in 2025 alone in northern and north-central states, according to the NGO Global Rights Nigeria.

Rural schools are easy targets. They are poorly protected, and mass abductions force state governments – under public pressure – to negotiate with the bandits, whose ransom demands are usually paid.

"Abducting students provides money, visibility, and power, and reinforces the perception of state failure and insecurity in politically sensitive regions," said Dengiyefa Angalapu, a researcher with the Abuja-based think-tank, the Centre for Democracy and Development.

The fragility of the education system, however, predates the kidnapping surge. In the northern states, only 20-30% of children attend secondary school. A depressing cycle is unfolding: "Access to education is in decline, yet education provides social networks and opportunities, and reduces alignment with armed groups," said Ewang.

In 2020, youth unemployment and underemployment exceeded 50%, again highlighting Nigeria's profound crisis of opportunity and lost livelihoods. In such circumstances, criminality can seem a viable option – especially when the chances of getting caught are not especially high.

"The result is an increasingly fragile social cohesion: communities that no longer trust one another," said Angalapu.

Unless Nigeria's crisis of governance is urgently addressed, the danger is that the country will remain trapped in a loop of violence that threatens to deepen state fragility, and squander the future of its youth.

Edited by Obi Anyadike.

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