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IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Nigeria and Canada: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), including objectives, structure, activities, and relations with other Biafran independence groups; treatment by the authorities and state protection; the ability for the government to monitor IPOB organizations abroad, particularly in Canada (2020–May 2022) [ZZZ200991.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Sources describe IPOB as a "separatist" group (Ripples Nigeria 2 Apr. 2022; BBC 29 June 2021) or as a "pro-Biafra" movement (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021; UK Mar. 2022). Sources note that IPOB is designated as a "terrorist" organization by the Nigerian government (*The Guardian* 7 Dec. 2021; BBC 29 June 2021). IPOB was created in 2012 (Lawyer 5 Apr. 2022; *Vanguard* 26 Sept. 2021; Okwuosa, et al. 19 Apr. 2021) by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu (*Vanguard* 26 Sept. 2021).

Biafra refers to a region located in southeastern Nigeria (BBC 15 Jan. 2020; UNPO 3 Aug. 2020) and, according to an opinion article by Frederick Forsyth, a "former war correspondent," published in the UK's *Guardian*, Biafrans are "mostly" of Igbo ethnicity (Forsyth 21 Jan. 2020). Sources report that an attempt to achieve Biafra's secession from Nigeria led to a civil war from 1967 to January 1970, between the Nigerian government and the secessionist Biafran state (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022; Okwuosa, et al. 19 Apr. 2021; BBC 15 Jan. 2020).

Sources describe that, fifty years after the Biafran war, the feeling of marginalization experienced by Igbo people (BBC 15 Jan. 2020; journalist 8 Apr. 2022) or the "claim that they are systematically excluded" (Okwuosa, et al. 19 Apr. 2021, 1) remains present and has led to the emergence of new agitations for secession (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022; Okwuosa, et al. 19 Apr. 2021, 1; BBC 15 Jan. 2020). In an interview with the Research Directorate, a journalist, who is also the Deputy Head of Investigations at Premium Times, an online Nigerian newspaper, stated that the southeastern region of Nigeria is indeed "really marginalized" due to the Biafran war (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor and Director of the Archives and Documentation Centre at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria, who has conducted research on national integration in Nigeria, described the context in which Biafran groups, including IPOB, emerged:

After the end of the civil war and in the face of further marginalisation there has been pockets of revolts and attempted civil disturbances here and there. There was the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), led by Chief Ralph Uwazuruike ... After the collapse or rather the eventual clamp down of MASSOB by the government, IPOB surfaced. (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022).

In the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (*GJIA*), an academic publication of the Walsh School of Foreign Service (SFS) at Georgetown University (Georgetown n.d.), Samuel Fury Childs Daly, an assistant professor of African and African American studies at Duke University in the US, states that

this neo-Biafran movement draws its energy not only from eastern Nigeria, but also from the global Igbo diaspora. ... Since the return of civilian democracy in 1999, however, Biafran activism has become an important part of Nigeria's political landscape (Daly 7 Apr. 2021).

2. IPOB Objectives, Leadership, and Structure

2.1 Objectives

Sources state that the IPOB's two fundamental objectives are:

- Protecting Igbos; and

- Seeking political independence for Southeastern Nigeria (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022; Daly 7 Apr. 2021).

According to Daly, even though their goals "have changed over time" and "vary between factions," both MASSOB and IPOB "converge around [these] two central objectives" (Daly 7 Apr. 2021). The journalist stated that these objectives remain the same but the way to achieve them has changed since the movement became radicalized in the last three to four years and IPOB "is increasing violent now," no longer following the non-violent approach employed by MASSOB (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022).

The Associate Professor explained that "[b]asically, the objective of [IPOB] was to actualise the concept of the sovereign state of Biafra" (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a coordinator for the US West Coast branch of MASSOB speaking on behalf of the organization, also indicated that "IPOB's objectives remain the same as MASSOB's which is [s]elf [d]etermination for the people of Biafra" (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022).

2.2 Leadership and Structure

Sources name the following people as involved in the current or recent IPOB leadership:

- Nnamdi Kanu as Leader (BBC 29 June 2021; MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022; *Vanguard* 5 Apr. 2022);
- Uche Mefor as Deputy Leader (AllNews Nigeria 23 July 2020) or as the former Deputy Leader who resigned in 2020 (Naija News 28 Nov. 2020);
- China [Chika] Edoziem as Head of the Directorate of State (DOS) (AllNews Nigeria 23 July 2020; Naija News 28 Nov. 2020; *The News Digest* 21 Aug. 2019);
- Mazi Nzurumike as Deputy Head of the DOS (AllNews Nigeria 23 July 2020); and
- Emma Powerful as responsible for publicity (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022; Sahara Reporters 21 Dec. 2021; *The Guardian* 7 Mar. 2022).

BBC indicates that Kanu was arrested in June 2021 (BBC 29 June 2021). April 2022 media sources indicate that the IPOB leader is on trial for treason and terrorism (Premium Times 2 Apr. 2022; TheCable 1 Apr. 2022).

A July 2020 article from AllNews Nigeria, an online Nigerian news platform (AllNews Nigeria n.d.), quotes a Facebook post by Kanu as stating that the IPOB "'not only [has] a structure, but we also have superstructure, and it is worldwide"; Kanu's Facebook post further describes that below Nzurumike's role as Deputy Head of the DOS, there are Continental Representatives, Country Coordinators, State or Regional Coordinators, Senatorial [Members], Zonal [Coordinators], and then the units (AllNews Nigeria 23 July 2020). The MASSOB coordinator stated the following concerning the leadership and structure of IPOB:

While Nnamdi Kanu is the organizational leader of IPOB, the group is structured in such a way that leaders exist in districts. A district can be a village or a larger geographical area. These regional leaders maintain a level of autonomy while adhering to the main goals of the organization. This mode of operation allows IPOB to continue operating without depending on any one leader (in the case of arrest, detention and extrajudicial killing of a leader). (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022)

However, the journalist stated that IPOB is not a well-organized group, and Kanu and Emma Powerful are the only remaining leaders, since others have been kicked out, resigned, or created their own factions separate from IPOB (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). The Associate Professor indicated that "there exists a state of mistrust amongst the various factions and the chain of command" due to the arrest and trial of the leader" and "[t]here is power struggle and agitation for supremacy" (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022). Further and corroborating information on the departure of IPOB leaders could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2.1 Eastern Security Network

Sources describe the Eastern Security Network (ESN) as a regional security organization in southern Nigeria that belongs to IPOB (Sahara Reporters 22 Jan. 2021) or is backed by IPOB (*Vanguard* 24 Apr. 2021). According to Sahara Reporters, "an online community of international reporters and social advocates [providing] commentaries, features, news reports from a Nigerian-African perspective" (Sahara Reporters n.d.), ESN was created by Kanu in December 2020 to protect the people of the South-East and South-South region of Nigeria (Sahara Reporters 24 Mar. 2021). TheCable, an online Nigerian newspaper, cites a security operative, who indicated that the IPOB "'has recruited over 50,000 foot soldiers'" for ESN (TheCable 2 June 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Amnesty International reports that "[a]ccording to government officials, the ESN killed dozens of security operatives and attacked at least ten public buildings, including prisons and police stations," from January to June 2021 (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021). The same source states that "[i]n response, security forces comprising military, police, and Department of State Services (DSS) have killed dozens of gunmen, as well as civilians, where attacks have been committed" (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021). Premium Times, citing a statement from the Nigerian army, indicates that following attacks on a correctional facility and the police in Imo State by the ESN, a team comprising the army, police and DSS raided the ESN headquarters in Imo State in April 2021, killing seven ESN commanders, including their second in command, known as "Ikonson Commander" (Premium Times 24 Apr. 2021). Citing a press statement by IPOB's Emma Powerful, *Vanguard*, a Nigerian newspaper, states that IPOB condemned the killing of an ESN top commander, "identified as Ikonso," in a joint security forces operation in Imo state; Powerful's statement "'promise[d] ... hell for this cowardly act'" and told the Imo State governor to "get ready for a sting" (*Vanguard* 25 Apr. 2021).

3. IPOB Activities

3.1 Radio Biafra

Vanguard explains that Radio Biafra was created by Kanu in 2009 to "disseminate, enlighten, educate, inform and criticise the activities of the Nigerian government" (*Vanguard* 26 Sept. 2021). The UK Home Office, quoting an August 2020 BBC Monitoring report, notes that Radio Biafra called on its listeners to "'defend themselves against attacks by security forces'" after IPOB clashed with security forces in Enugu city in August 2020 (UK Mar. 2022, para. 8.4.9).

CNN states that Radio Biafra is operated by Kanu and broadcasts from a "suburban" area of Peckham, southeast London, England (CNN 25 Sept. 2021). However, the journalist stated that Radio Biafra stopped broadcasting since Nnamdi Kanu was arrested (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). Further and corroborating information on the status of Radio Biafra could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2 Sit-at-Home Order

Sources indicate that IPOB and other pro-Biafra groups, including MASSOB (*The Guardian* 31 May 2017), issued a "sit-at-home" order for 30 May 2017 (*Vanguard* 30 May 2017; *The Guardian* 31 May 2017). Sources indicate 30 May is the anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Biafra (AFP 31 May 2017; Al Jazeera 30 May 2017). According to an article by AFP, Kanu stated his aim was using "'civil disobedience' to force a referendum on self-determination" (AFP 31 May 2017). IPOB issued another "sit-at-home" order for 30 May 2018 (Premium Times 30 May 2018; *Vanguard* 30 May 2018).

In contrast, sources indicate that IPOB established the sit-at-home order to pressure the Nigerian government to release Kanu, who is on trial for "alleged" treason and terrorism (Premium Times 2 Apr. 2022; TheCable 1 Apr. 2022). An editorial by Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo, who "teaches post-colonial African history at the School of Visual Arts in New York City," and published by TheCable states that initially the idea of the sit-at-home order "was to show that most people in the south-east support their quest for an independent nation of Biafra" but recently "it has become a tool to draw attention" to Kanu's situation (Okonkwo 21 Jan. 2022).

Premium Times citing the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), established by the government of Nigeria (NAN n.d.), states that "[r]esidents were forced to shut down their businesses, social activities, and stay indoors every Monday because of the order" (Premium Times 2 Apr. 2022). According to the journalist, IPOB members continue to "attack" any school or business which is open on Monday in southeast Nigeria (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). In contrast, other sources note that the sit-at-home order has been suspended by IPOB leaders (The New Humanitarian 14 Sept. 2021; TheCable 1 Apr. 2022; *The Guardian* 7 Mar. 2022). TheCable indicates that the cancellation order was issued in September 2021; however, "there have been reports of forceful, sometimes violent, enforcement by suspected thugs in the region" (TheCable 1 Apr. 2022). The *Guardian*, a Nigerian newspaper, reports that while IPOB has cancelled the sit-at-home order, other individuals have continued to use it "to kill and attack residents found on the streets" or those doing business on Mondays (*The Guardian* 7 Mar. 2022). The Associate Professor noted that criminals have "hijacked" the sit-at-home exercises (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022). TheCable reports that Emma Powerful stated the following in an official IPOB statement on 1 April 2022:

We wish to reiterate once again that IPOB has cancelled [the] Monday sit-at-home order and anybody or group enforcing the relaxed order is neither from IPOB nor from IPOB volunteer group. Any governor in the region who deemed it fit to stop non-existent Monday sit-at-home order in the region is free to do so. (TheCable 1 Apr. 2022)

3.3 Protests, Boycotts, and Civil Disobedience

The MASSOB coordinator stated that IPOB activities consist of "[a]dvocacy regarding the self-determination for Biafra," "non-violent protests," "civil disobedience," and "civil rights activism" (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022). According to the Associate Professor, IPOB's activities were to "create civil

disturbance" and "get attention and recognition both at the regional and international level" (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022).

Sources report that in January 2022 the IPOB banned the consumption of Fulani cows in the South-East (Sahara Reporters 7 Jan. 2022; *Vanguard* 3 Jan. 2022). According to sources, in July 2021 IPOB requested a boycott of Kenya Airways and Kenyan products after Kanu's arrest in Kenya (*The Punch* 4 July 2021; Ripples Nigeria 4 July 2021; Sahara Reporters 1 July 2021). Naija Breaking News, a Nigerian news website, reports that in December 2021 members of IPOB protested in Jerusalem against the detention of Kanu (Naija Breaking News 27 Dec. 2021).

3.4 Violent Activities

The journalist stated that IPOB's recent activities have included attacks on government infrastructures and people who do not sympathize with or support their cause, which led them to be considered a terrorist organization by Nigerian authorities (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). The same source indicated that the group was non-violent "at the beginning," before they changed their approach and started to use violence (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). Similarly, *Vanguard* reports that Uche Okafor-Mefor [1], Secretary of Information and Communication of the Biafra De Facto Customary Government [2], indicated "that trouble started in the South region when IPOB adopted a violent approach by going into arm[ed] struggle contrary to the original non-violent ideology upon which the IPOB was formed" (*Vanguard* 31 Jan. 2022).

Sources indicate that police stated that an April 2021 attack by armed men on the Imo police headquarters in Owerri was carried out by ESN (The New Humanitarian 8 Apr. 2021) or by IPOB and ESN (Premium Times 5 Apr. 2021). Premium Times indicates that

[t]he attack on the police headquarters was carried out by the same armed group who also attacked a correctional facility in Owerri and freed over 1,800 inmates. The police have now said they believe the attack was carried out by members of the outlawed Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) and its security network, ESN. (Premium Times 5 Apr. 2021).

Sources report that police authorities accused IPOB members of attacking police stations and killing three officers in Rivers State in 2020 (Premium Times 26 Oct. 2020; *The Guardian* 22 Oct. 2020). According to Premium Times, police stated that four IPOB members were killed and eight arrested during one of the attacks, which targeted on the Mile One police station in the same state (Premium Times 26 Oct. 2020).

4. Relations with Other Biafran Independence Groups

Information on the relationships between IPOB and other pro-Biafra groups was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Daly, IPOB and MASSOB are "the two largest" "neo-Biafran" organizations (Daly 7 Apr. 2021). The MASSOB Coordinator explained the relationship between their organization and IPOB in the following terms:

MASSOB and IPOB are both campaigning for self-determination for Biafra. IPOB and MASSOB share operational intelligence. Members of both groups also participate in non-violent protests. Indeed, individuals can be concurrent members of MASSOB and IPOB. (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022)

According to the same source, "[b]oth groups engage in non-violent protests and civil disobedience" for the achievement of their common objectives (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022). In follow-up correspondence, the source clarified that an example of one of the joint activities organized between MASSOB and IPOB is the "'sit-at-home' Mondays exercise" (MASSOB 5 Apr. 2022). Daly similarly indicates that MASSOB and IPOB share the central goals of protecting Igbos and "securing political independence" (Daly 7 Apr. 2021).

The journalist noted that there are divisions and conflicts linked to the "battles of egos" among the leaders, and the main Biafran Independence groups "rarely agree on how to carry out their activities together or on how to run Biafra's state after the secession" (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). The same source noted that even though IPOB came from MASSOB, "the two groups are totally different now, since the first became radicalized and physically violent while the second always used the non-violent approach and has never been considered as a terrorist organization" (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022).

5. Treatment of IPOB Members and Their Relatives by Nigerian Authorities

Based on its investigation in the states of Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi and Abia, Amnesty International reports that it had "documented" that "at least" 115 people were "killed by security forces between March and June 2021," "[m]ore than 500 arrested after police and military raids," as well as "52 incidents of unlawful killings and 62 cases of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and torture" (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021). The same source also states that "Nigeria's government has responded with a heavy hand to killings and violence widely attributed to" ESN and that "[m]any relatives of

victims" interviewed by Amnesty International said "that they were not part of the militants that were attacking security agents" (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021). The source further notes that out of the "at least" 400 arrests announced in Imo State, "most" had no ties to the ESN (Amnesty International 5 Aug. 2021).

According to the MASSOB Coordinator, "relatives including minor children, of low level IPOB members are arrested and detained by the Nigerian police and the Nigerian military" (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022).

In contrast, the journalist stated that ordinary Nigerian citizens "have nothing to fear" even if they are members or sympathizers of IPOB and that only low-level IPOB members involved in violence and criminal activities would be of interest to the Nigerian police and face arrest (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022). According to the same source, the relatives of current IPOB members, as well as former members who left the movement before it became violent "do not represent a danger" for Nigerian authorities (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022).

6. Government Ability to Monitor IPOB Organizations Aboard

In response to the Research Directorate's question concerning the ability of Nigerian authorities to monitor and track IPOB organizations abroad, the MASSOB coordinator stated that Nigerian embassies are

able to and [do] monitor the activities of all Biafran agitators and IPOB members living abroad. It is a well-known fact that IPOB and MASSOB members and other Biafran agitators are confronted by DSS agent upon arrival on international flights with a list that includes their names. (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022)

The Associate Professor indicated the following:

It has been very easy for the Nigerian government to monitor the activities of IPOB members and also track the source of their funding. It is because of that ease in monitoring them that enabled the arrest of their leader Nnamdi Kanu after his departure from the United Kingdom. (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022)

In contrast, the journalist explained that the Nigerian government does not have sufficient means to track and monitor IPOB members who are no longer living in the country (Journalist 8 Apr. 2022).

6.1. Situation in Canada

Information on the ability for the Nigerian government to monitor IPOB organizations abroad, particularly in Canada could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6.2. Treatment of IPOB members who Return to Nigeria

The MASSOB Coordinator indicated that IPOB members who return to Nigeria face "[a]rrest, detention, torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings by the DSS" (MASSOB 1 Apr. 2022). In contrast, the Associate Professor stated that "[t]here is no known harassment" of current or former IPOB members who return to Nigeria (Associate Professor 28 Mar. 2022).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] According to sources, Uche Okafor-Mefor was previously the Deputy Leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) but no longer holds this position (All News 27 Nov. 2020; *Daily Post* 27 Sept. 2021).

[2] The *Punch*, a Nigerian newspaper, cites a press statement from the Biafra "de facto" government as indicating that Alhaji Mujahid Asari-Dokubo, a "former militant" from the Niger Delta region, declared himself as leader of a de facto customary government of Biafra in March 2021 and stated that his government would take care of the needs of the Igbo people (*The Punch* 15 Mar. 2021). The same source indicates that in response to this announcement, Emma Powerful stated that IPOB is "not against" anyone declaring self-determination (*The Punch* 15 Mar. 2021).

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ecoi.net summary:



Query response on Nigeria and Canada: Separatist group Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the ability of the Nigerian government to monitor IPOB organisations abroad, particularly in Canada (2020 - May 2022)

Countries:

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