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Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? Nigeria has seen a proliferation of vigilante organisations to fight crime and protect the public. These range from small bands of volunteers in villages and city neighbourhoods to large structures established by state governments. Some have mandates to safeguard particular regions or ethno-religious groups.

Why did it happen? New organisations are emerging largely because the federal government and police force are increasingly unable to curb insecurity across the country. Many ethnic groups and communities feel a sense of siege, prompting them to resort to self-defence.

Why does it matter? In many parts of the country, vigilante groups are filling security gaps. With poor training and supervision, however, their members are prone to human rights abuses and vulnerable to capture by politicians and other elites. In some cases, their activities could aggravate intercommunal tensions, heightening risks of conflict.

What should be done? To provide better security and counter impunity, the federal government should pursue police reform and bolster judicial capacity. Some devolution of policing powers to state and local levels is needed. Federal and state authorities should develop regulations to better manage vigilante groups and risks associated with their operations.

Executive Summary

The spread of vigilante organisations across Nigeria, encompassing volunteers as well as state-sponsored groups, is both helping authorities fight crime and insurgency, and exacerbating those problems. In many parts of the country, vigilantes essentially fill in for the Nigeria Police Force, which is under federal rather than local control. They have become so important to providing security that for now the country has little choice but to rely on them. Yet there are dangers. Reliance on vigilantes raises constitutional questions. Poorly trained and equipped, some commit grave human rights violations. The emergence of ethnically exclusive groups threatens to stir up communal tensions. Over the long term, Nigerian authorities need to rebuild trust in their capacity to protect the public without vigilante assistance through comprehensive police reform. They should listen to those leaders pressing to devolve certain policing functions to the state and community levels, likely a necessity. Meanwhile, federal and state governments should develop a framework for regulating vigilantism, emphasising oversight and accountability.

The surge of new vigilante groups, particularly since the mid-2010s, owes to several factors. These include the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East geopolitical zone; long-running ethno-religious conflict in the North Central zone, coupled with the escalation of herder-farmer violence in that zone and in several southern states; and the rise of violent crime, especially in the North West, as well as in cities and on highways. These challenges have overwhelmed the police force, which is underfunded, understaffed and under-equipped. As they must often await orders from their federal headquarters, the police seem increasingly unable to respond swiftly to distress calls in many places. Many Nigerians have lost faith in the federal government's commitment to protecting all citizens in all parts of the country equally. These trends are driving citizens and ethnic groups to devise alternative arrangements for protecting themselves.

Perceptions of the vigilante groups are varied. Many offer important services, leading citizens and state officials to view them favourably. But vigilante actions have also created controversies. Opponents, including some federal officials, say the mandates of some groups contravene the 1999 constitution, which vests law enforcement powers primarily responsible for serious abuses that have deepened a culture of impunity in areas hard hit by violence. In the countdown to the 2023 general elections – and beyond – vigilante groups could wind up captured by politicians looking for muscle with which to intimidate voters or perpetrate fraud. Lastly, ethnically exclusive groups have emerged of late, straining communal relations and risking damage to national cohesion.

To reduce reliance on vigilantism, the federal government can take several steps to dissuade communities and regions from mobilising vigilantes to defend themselves. The first is to improve the federal government's own capacity to provide security and mete out justice. It is urgent that the government commence long overdue police reform, while boosting the force's funding and manpower. It should also boost the judiciary's capacity to deter crime and restore trust in the justice system. To better meet community needs, political leaders who have been pressing for some devolution of

police powers to the state and community levels should continue to do so, until a more effective system of multi-level policing can be put in place.

But these are huge and long-term undertakings, the fruits of which may not ripen for quite some time. In the meantime, to enhance management of vigilante organisations and contain the above-referenced risks, the federal government should work with state governments to formulate a national legal framework for regulating the groups. The key features of this framework should include, at a minimum, provisions compelling all vigilante groups to register with local, state or federal governments (depending on the scope of their operations); oversight mechanisms; basic training standards for new recruits; a code of conduct for group members together with disciplinary mechanisms; and protocols for relations between vigilantes and police, as well as modalities for funding and equipment. At the same time, the patrons and sponsors of vigilante groups, from state governments to community associations, should improve recruitment procedures and training programs, ensure that groups have adequate resources and strengthen oversight mechanisms.

The resort to vigilantism in Nigeria is understandable as a desperate response to a dire security situation. But given the risks, the federal government should be taking steps that aim to make this response a temporary one. It should move quickly to rebuild confidence in its commitment to keeping all citizens safe, regardless of who they are or where they live. It should also work to ensure that so long as vigilante groups remain part of the security landscape, their efforts are appropriately channelled and the risks they present appropriately managed.

Abuja/Dakar/Nairobi/Brussels, 21 April 2022

Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity

I. Introduction

Vigilantism is an age-old phenomenon in many parts of Nigeria.¹ In pre-colonial times, various ethnic groups had organisations charged with warding off invaders, preventing crime, maintaining order, enforcing compliance with communal tradition and promoting ethical conduct. Among the Hausa in the north, for instance, such groups as *yan banga* (community protectors), *yan baka* (hunters) and *dogarai* (palace guards) kept people safe from harm.² Among the Yoruba in the south west, hunter guards and cultural societies such as *ogboni* and *oro*, along with *egungun* masquerade groups, watched out for danger and encouraged public morality.³ In the ethnic Igbo south east, groups known as *ndi nche* (village or community guards), supported by “age grade groups” and “masquerade societies”, maintained law and order.⁴

Following the British conquest of the numerous groups — later fused into present-day Nigeria — the colonial state, which claimed a monopoly on the use of force, established a Nigeria Police Force in 1930, supported by Native Authority police in some areas. Colonial authorities generally discountenanced the indigenous policing arrangements, suppressing organisations that they considered dangerous. Even so, locals continued to perform community policing functions in many places, including in cities where rapid population growth and bustling commerce led crime rates to rise.

After independence in 1960, the federal and then regional (later state) governments retained the colonial police structure and largely ignored parallel or complementary arrangements.⁵ In the mid-1980s, however, following a surge of crime (including armed robbery in cities) the military governors of some states, notably Colonel Adetunji Olurin of Oyo state and Colonel David Mark of Niger state, began encouraging residents to

¹ Vigilantism is a contested concept without a consensus definition. This report uses the term broadly to encompass all arrangements whereby subnational or informal groups are mandated to maintain law and order, curb crime and enforce norms, ranging from those formed by citizen volunteers to others established by governments.

² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, history lecturer, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 4 February 2022; Idris Mohammed, conflict researcher and mass communications lecturer, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 28 February 2022.

³ Among the Yoruba, the term *egungun* generally refers to any masked, costumed figure. In the traditional religion, these figures are regarded as visible manifestations of the spirits of ancestors who periodically visit their descendants during festivals known as *odun egungun*. Through the masquerade at the festivals, the ancestors are believed to cleanse people spiritually and encourage them to behave nobly.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, lecturer in criminology, University of Abuja, Abuja, 2 August 2021; lecturer in history, University of Nigeria, Enugu, 30 August 2021.

⁵ Prior to 1967, Nigeria was administratively composed of four regional governments. These regions were later split up into states — twelve states in 1967, nineteen in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996.

band together to help the police fight crime.⁶ In April 1987, Colonel Olurin issued an edict launching the Oyo State Vigilante Group.⁷ Since then, and particularly since the transition from military to civilian rule in 1999, state governments have given their blessing to various organisations (ranging from joint military-police task forces to neighbourhood watches) that operate without a legal framework or proper oversight to support the police in patrolling the streets. But the apparent proliferation of these groups and the variety of functions they perform present new risks. Of particular concern is the rise of ethnic vigilantes, which could harm intercommunal relations and thus national security.

This report analyses the landscape of vigilantism in Nigeria. It explains the factors driving the recent emergence of more groups and the implications of their proliferation for public safety and national security. It describes how authorities can wean themselves from reliance on vigilantism over the long term and offers recommendations for how the state can manage risks that vigilantes pose in the meantime.

The report is based largely on fieldwork throughout Nigeria, involving interviews with a wide range of sources, most of them between July 2021 and February 2022. Some interviews were conducted in the federal capital, Abuja, where federal security and paramilitary agencies are based, along with non-governmental organisations working on the security and rule of law sectors. Many more interviews, however, took place in five of the country's six geopolitical zones, namely the South East, South West, South South, North Central and North West, with people including vigilantes, community leaders, researchers and civil society representatives (working on human rights, gender and youth issues), as well as politicians. Findings from the interviews are supported by desk research, drawing upon the output of local organisations and institutions, government documents and mass media reports.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, retired senior Nigeria Police Force officer, Abuja, 7 August 2021.

⁷ The Oyo state government's edict was titled Mobilization of Community Development Committee Edict No. 7 of 1987. It encouraged the formation of community development associations, whose mandates would include supporting the police in curbing crime and protecting the public.

II. The Surge of Vigilantism

A. Why Vigilante Groups Are Proliferating

The surge of vigilantism in Nigeria owes to several factors. The foremost of these are rising insecurity, the failures of the Nigeria Police Force and other official security agencies to curb crime, the justice system's deficiencies and the diminution of citizen trust in the federal government to protect all ethnic groups equally and impartially. Last but not least is high youth unemployment.

Nigeria has experienced an unprecedented rise in violence over the past decade. The Boko Haram insurgency in the North East has killed about 350,000 people (directly or indirectly) and displaced over three million; herder-farmer clashes, sometimes aggravated by long-running ethno-religious grievances, have become more frequent in the North Central zone and some southern states.⁸ In the North West, criminal gangs wreak havoc in rural towns and menace major highways, while Biafra secessionists roil the South East.⁹ Further south in the Niger Delta, piracy and cult violence are commonplace.¹⁰ Some types of violent crime have spread nationwide. Kidnapping for ransom, once limited to the Niger Delta, has spiralled throughout the country, with a 169 per cent increase from 2019 to 2020.¹¹ Illicit firearms are readily available, with at least six million guns in the hands of various non-state actors.¹² The total death toll of insurgency, herder-farmer conflict, ethno-religious violence and violent crime, tracked by several organisations, has climbed from 3,188 in 2019 to at least 4,556 in 2020 and 5,067 in 2021.¹³

⁸ "Boko Haram: 350,000 dead in Nigeria – UN", *Premium Times*, 28 June 2021. For more on the herder-farmer crisis, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s252, *Herders against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict*, 19 September 2017; 262, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, 26 July 2018; and 302, *Ending Nigeria's Herder-Farmer Crisis: The Livestock Reform Plan*, 4 May 2021. See also "Farmer-Herder Conflict in Northern Nigeria: Trends, Dynamics and Gender Perspectives", Centre for Democracy and Development (Abuja), 13 April 2021.

⁹ For more on violence in the North West, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020; and "Halting the Deepening Turmoil in Nigeria's North West", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 May 2021. See also "Terrorism and Banditry in Nigeria: The Nexus – Kaduna, Katsina, Niger and Zamfara States", Goodluck Jonathan Foundation (Abuja), 10 September 2021.

¹⁰ In Nigeria, the term "cult" has various meanings. In everyday usage, the term refers to various types of cultural and traditional societies that keep their mission or modus operandi secret. More recently, the term has been used to refer to fraternities of young people (predominantly male) that originated on university campuses but have since evolved into organised crime rings. The groups use rituals and/or traditional religious practices (*juju*) to bond members together at secret meetings and frequently engage in deadly fights with rivals, vigilantes and police. Especially in the Niger Delta, but also in many southern states, they have become a major source of insecurity.

¹¹ Yagana Bukar, Chris Kwaja and Aly Verjee, "Six Alternative Ways to Measure Peace in Nigeria", U.S. Institute of Peace, 8 September 2021. On highway insecurity, see "Special Report: Dangerous Highways in Nigeria", Nextier SPD, 21 December 2021.

¹² "13,241 Nigerians unlawfully killed by security forces in 10 years", *The Guardian*, 30 November 2021; "Security agencies killed 13,241 Nigerians in 10 years – CDD", *The Punch*, 30 November 2021.

¹³ "4,556 persons killed in violent attacks, kidnappings, clashes in 2020 – report", *Premium Times*, 22 February 2021; "Insecurity: 14 Nigerians killed every day in 2021 – Zamfara, Kaduna top list of deaths", *The Cable*, 14 January 2022.

In parallel to rising crime rates, the capacity and effectiveness of the Nigeria Police Force, the federal institution constitutionally mandated to protect citizens country-wide, is in woeful decline.¹⁴ The deterioration dates back to the years of military rule but has become increasingly pronounced in the last decade, in the view of serving and retired police officers who spoke to Crisis Group (as well as many other local observers). It is the product of several factors.

First, the country's policing framework, in which the federal government in Abuja calls all the main shots, is flawed. State governors, who are publicly presumed to be the chief security officers in their respective territories (based on their constitutional designation as state chief executives), have no legal power to order police units to respond to major security incidents. State police chiefs also often have to obtain approval from the federal inspector general of police before deploying personnel. This centralised structure often inhibits the police from intervening promptly when the public is in peril.¹⁵

Secondly, the police are grossly underfunded and undermanned. Annual appropriations fall far short of the force's projected needs, leaving units critically lacking in all respects, including kitting of personnel, transport, logistics and communication assets.¹⁶ These deficits severely undercut their effectiveness in protecting citizens.¹⁷

The force's strength of roughly 300,000 personnel for a population of over 200 million amounts to about one police officer to 667 citizens, a poor ratio by regional standards.¹⁸ About half of this force are bodyguards for senior government officials

¹⁴ Section 214(1) of Nigeria's 1999 constitution stipulates: "There shall be a police force for Nigeria, which shall be known as the Nigeria Police Force, and subject to the provisions of this section no other police force shall be established for the Federation or any part thereof".

¹⁵ In his address at the 2021 annual conference of the Nigerian Bar Association, Bauchi state governor, Bala Mohammed, said: "The unitary command structure ... undermines prompt response to emergencies that demand immediate and decisive action. Nothing can be more frustrating than a state governor watching helplessly as innocent lives are being lost because the directive for effective response was delayed. ... The negative effect of this arrangement gets more pronounced where the federal and state governments are controlled by different [political] parties. ... Ultimately, not only is the authority of state governors eroded, their resultant incapacitation explains the frightening level of insecurity". "Recipe for effective security and development", *Leadership*, 19 June 2021.

¹⁶ The Nigeria Police Force's 2020 budget of 403 billion naira (about \$980 million) was the highest the organisation had been allocated in the five preceding years, but it is unclear if the entire amount was released by the end of the year. Furthermore, of this amount, recurrent expenditures on personnel, formations and commands took up 96.4 percent, leaving only 3.6 percent for capital expenses, including equipment and facilities. "Factsheet: Analysis of 2020 appropriation for the Nigeria Police Force", Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (Abuja), February 2020.

¹⁷ Due to low funding, said a retired senior police officer, the force has suffered an "exponential decline in terms of mobility since the 1990s". Crisis Group interview, Lagos, 21 December 2021. In 2021, when the police command estimated it would need 24.8 billion naira to fuel vehicles, the state allocated about 4 billion naira, amounting to about 17 per cent of the requirement. "2021 budget: Police request N24.8 billion to fuel vehicles, warn against underfunding of force", *The Whistler*, 11 November 2020; "Police get over N4bn to fuel vehicles", *Premium Times*, 11 August 2021.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, retired senior Nigeria Police Force officer, Abuja, 7 August 2021. In April 2021, a former police inspector general, Mike Okiro, said the force's strength was 350,000. "The police I met, served and led – Okiro (2)", *Daily Sun*, 9 April 2021. In May 2021, Olayinka Balogun, a former police commissioner, said the strength was "roughly 300,000". "You can't expect good service from frustrated police – Ret CP Balogun", *Sunday Vanguard*, 30 May 2021. In 2017, a joint report

and other elites in cities, compounding the deficit.¹⁹ Furthermore, with many training institutions ill-equipped (if not dilapidated) and unable to provide meaningful training, most personnel are poorly prepared for their work, resulting in a low level of professionalism.²⁰ Remuneration, accommodations and overall conditions of service are miserable, sapping morale.²¹ Lamenting the impact of these conditions on police performance, a former police commissioner, Olayinka Balogun, said: “It is futile, unproductive and wishful thinking to expect good service from a neglected, technologically and numerically handicapped and frustrated police force”.²²

Largely due to the deficits highlighted above, reports of corruption and human rights abuses by police are widespread.²³ In October 2020, for instance, reports that police killed a young man in Delta state triggered large protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, seen as the most repressive unit.²⁴ Yet abuses continue even after the government disbanded the squad to address protesters’ concerns.²⁵ The combination of years of ineffectiveness, with alleged corruption and human rights abuses, has eroded public confidence in the police and helped drive many to resort to self-help.²⁶

from the International Police Science Association and the non-profit Institute for Economics and Peace observed that Nigeria’s police-to-population ratio was lower than “the sub-Saharan Africa region average of 268”. “Nigeria police ‘worst in the world’ – report”, *Premium Times*, 11 November 2017.

¹⁹ In 2018, a report citing the Police Service Commission said more than 150,000 police personnel were attached to VIPs and other unauthorised persons across the country. “150,000 policemen attached to VIP’s, unauthorised persons”, *The Guardian*, 11 February 2018. At about the same time, Assistant Inspector-General of Police Rasheed Akintunde said over 80 per cent of police personnel were attached to private businessmen, multinational companies, corporate organisations, government officials and other elites, leaving only 20 per cent to protect other citizens. “80 percent of our policemen are deployed to protect politicians and VIPs, says Nigeria police chief”, *Sahara Reporters*, 8 February 2018. Balogun said “almost half” of the serving officers were guarding “political office holders”. “You can’t expect good service from frustrated police – Ret CP Balogun”, op. cit.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, retired senior Nigeria Police Force officers, Abuja, 2 October 2021.

²¹ A constable receives a monthly salary of 41,000 naira (about \$100), barely more than the national minimum wage of 30,000 naira (about \$73) per month. A commissioner, who could be posted to head the police in an entire state, earns about 302,000 naira (about \$734) per month. “If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys”, *This Day*, 15 November 2020.

²² “You can’t expect good service from frustrated police – Ret. CP Balogun”, op. cit.

²³ In March 2019, a survey conducted by a Lagos-based non-governmental organisation, the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, reported that, of the five major public institutions it had studied, the police emerged as the most corrupt. “Police most corrupt institution in Nigeria – Survey”, *Premium Times*, 26 March 2019.

²⁴ In December 2018, a NGO based in the South East, the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, reported that in the three years prior, the police took 100 billion naira (about \$243 million) in roadside bribes and extortion fees from travellers in the zone. The police did not comment on the report. “Nigeria security forces extort N100 billion in Southeast in three years – report”, *Premium Times*, 24 December 2018. In December 2021, another report by the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development said police and other security personnel unlawfully killed more than 13,000 citizens in the 2011-2021 period. “Nigeria Human Rights Record: An Assessment of the Last Two Decades”, Centre for Democracy and Development (Abuja), 6 December 2021.

²⁵ “Despite #EndSARS, unrepentant policemen continue life of extortion, harassment, intimidation”, *The Punch*, 8 September 2021. For more on the protests, see Crisis Group Statement, “Nigeria’s #EndSARS Protest: De-escalate Tensions, Start Deep Police Reform”, 26 October 2020.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, leader of NGO advocating police reform, Abuja, 6 October 2021.

Many regional authorities echo the sense that federal agencies are not doing enough to protect citizens. In Niger state, which is plagued by heavily armed bandits, the secretary of the state government, Ibrahim Matane, said at a press briefing: “If you see Nigeria today, every state is on its own. You must pursue your agenda to survive. If support comes, fine; if it doesn’t, you are on your own”.²⁷ In some states, like Katsina and Zamfara, governors have publicly encouraged citizens to rely on themselves rather than on the police.²⁸ Two governors – Darius Ishaku of Taraba state and Samuel Ortom of Benue state – went even further, saying all citizens should be allowed to buy firearms.²⁹ These calls underscore the loss of faith in federal capacity to ensure public safety.

The policing deficit is compounded by the justice system’s failures.³⁰ In the face of so much violent crime, the justice system is often unable to sanction perpetrators and give victims redress. There are too few courts and judges. For instance, in December 2021 the chief judge of the Federal High Court, John Tsoho, said the court, with 75 judges, had over 128,000 cases in dockets across its divisions nationwide, meaning that on average each judge had over 1,700 cases to handle.³¹

Judicial proceedings are slow and expensive, and legal help is largely unavailable to the poor. On one hand, many accused persons suffer lengthy pre-trial detention in congested prisons, with some held without bail for decades due to insufficient legal representation at the time of arrest and poor recordkeeping by courts and prisons. More than two thirds of detainees are awaiting trial – nearly twice the African average and three times the rate in Europe.³² On the other hand, some people who committed crimes are poorly prosecuted and eventually let go, causing great distress among victims. For these reasons, many citizens distrust the courts and are inclined to place their trust in vigilantes not only to protect them, but also to apprehend criminals and administer prompt penalties.³³

²⁷ “Every state in Nigeria on its own today, says Niger SSG Matane”, *New Telegraph*, 28 November 2021.

²⁸ The Zamfara state governor, Bello Matawalle, urged people “not to wait for security personnel to come to your rescue”. “Banditry: Defend yourselves, don’t wait for police to rescue you – Gov Matawalle”, *Daily Post*, 11 June 2021. In Katsina state, Governor Aminu Masari exhorted residents to protect themselves by any means. He also called for recruiting about 3,000 vigilantes in the North West. “Masari to Katsina residents: It’s time to defend yourselves”, *Blueprint*, 27 June 2021.

²⁹ Ishaku said: “If we cannot provide security for our citizens, then allow all the citizens to buy an AK-47, because if everybody is licenced with an AK-47, nobody will have the guts to invade any home”. “Insecurity: FG advised to allow Nigerians carry licensed guns”, *Daily Post*, 3 February 2021.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders and civil society representatives, Abuja, Enugu and Port Harcourt, August 2021.

³¹ “Federal High Court with 75 judges has 128,000 pending cases – chief judge”, *Premium Times*, 17 December 2021. Justice Tsoho indicated that six more judicial appointments had reached an advanced stage. But the new jurists would increase the total number only to 81 and reduce the average number of cases each judge has to handle to 1,580.

³² “Improving Pretrial Justice: The Roles of Lawyers and Paralegals”, Open Society Foundations, 2012, p. 30.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, Enugu, Enugu state, August 2021, and Ibadan, Oyo state, October 2021. Earlier, in September 2015, Olusegun Mimiko, then governor of Ondo state, said the Yoruba (the dominant ethnic group in south-western Nigeria) felt better protected by vigilantes.

Another factor in some parts of the country is that residents doubt the federal government's commitment to protect all ethnic and religious groups even-handedly. Since he was first elected in 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari has appointed security chiefs mostly from the majority-Muslim states in the north, leading some southerners to charge that the government is unrepresentative of, and therefore insensitive to, their interests.³⁴ For their part, farmers in the North Central zone (Middle Belt), who are of diverse ethnicities, are upset with the government's lethargic initial response to the deadly assaults they have suffered from herder-allied armed groups that are predominantly Fulani.³⁵ In both instances, the perception is that the president, himself a Muslim from Katsina state, is partial to his Fulani kin and co-religionists from the north.

Such distrust of the government is deepened by misgivings among some groups about the neutrality of federal security forces. Some leaders in the North Central zone and southern states go so far as to allege that troops are complicit in communal violence. Notably, in 2018 Theophilus Danjuma, a former army chief (1976-1979) and defence minister (1999-2003), said "the armed forces are not neutral" in the conflict between Fulani herders and farmers; he called on other ethnic groups to organise in self-defence.³⁶

Even in Buhari's home zone (the North West), there is growing disillusionment with security forces that are seen as inadequately responsive to security challenges. In March 2022, Kaduna state governor, Nasir El-Rufai, charged that security agencies "have enough intelligence" to move against the armed groups wreaking havoc in his state, but that "the problem is for the agencies to take action".³⁷ The inadequate response may owe more to under-resourcing and overstretch than to partiality or deliberate inaction. But in any case, trust in the federal security forces continues to erode.³⁸

tes from the O'odua Peoples' Congress than by the federal police. "Yorubaland is better protected with OPC than conventional police – Mimiko", *Daily Post*, 27 September 2015.

³⁴ "Buhari deliberately sidelined south east in security appointments – Abaribe", *Premium Times*, 23 October 2021.

³⁵ "Insecurity: Ortom accuses Buhari of working for Fulani to take over Nigeria", *The Punch*, 27 April 2021.

³⁶ "Military, police complicit in killings across Nigeria – T.Y. Danjuma", *Premium Times*, 24 March 2018. He said: "The armed forces are not neutral. They collude with the armed bandits to kill people, kill Nigerians. They facilitate their movement. They cover them. If you are depending on the armed forces to stop the killings, you will die one by one. I ask every one of you to be at alert and defend your country, defend your territory, defend your state". "Military colluding with armed bandits – TY Danjuma", *Daily Trust*, 25 March 2018. In a somewhat different vein, the prominent Islamic cleric Ahmad Gumi (who is also a retired army captain) said security personnel were helping Fulani armed groups bring automatic rifles into the country. He said: "So many people are involved. ... How can these big weapons get across our borders and get into the forest without the cooperation of so many bad elements in our security system? It is not possible". "Insecurity: Sheikh Gumi fingers military, police in bandits' operations", *Leadership*, 24 June 2021.

³⁷ "Again, terrorists strike in Zaria as El-Rufai insists there's enough intelligence to prevent attacks", *This Day*, 31 March 2022. The governor subsequently threatened to bring in foreign mercenaries to fight the armed groups ransacking villages in the state, if the federal government and its security forces kept failing to tackle the groups themselves. "We'll bring in foreign mercenaries if FG fails to end terrorism – El-Rufai", *Daily Trust*, 2 April 2022.

³⁸ In the South West, Senator Femi Okurounmu, a prominent Yoruba politician who chaired the Presidential Advisory Committee in the National Conference in 2014, said: "The federal govern-

Against this backdrop, various groups feel under significant and even existential threat, and turn to vigilantes for protection. In parts of the north, pastoralists feel embattled by shrinking grazing land, disappearing water, growing cattle rustling and deepening hostility among farmers and their patrons in government. Anti-grazing laws enacted by Benue state (North Central) and most southern states sharpen this perception. Across the North Central zone and southern states, farmers are alarmed by the increasing southward migration of herders and job-seeking youth from the far north, the related rises in herder-farmer violence and banditry, and Fulani involvement in crime, especially kidnapping for ransom.³⁹ Farmers view these trends as part of a long-term plan to overrun agrarian regions. The sense of siege among pastoralists and farmers alike has prompted both to organise for communal defence.

A further driving factor in the growth of vigilantism is the high level of youth unemployment across the country. Among Nigerians aged 15-34, the joblessness rate, which had stayed below 10 per cent each year in the early 2010s, rose to 12.48 percent in 2016 and ballooned thereafter, reaching 42.5 percent in the last quarter of 2020.⁴⁰ In many states, governments admit they established vigilante groups not only to boost security, but also to create jobs. Youths who join the state-sponsored vigilantes that are better funded can earn monthly stipends. Some hope that the paramilitary skills they acquire may qualify them for permanent positions with the police or the military. For many, vigilantism is also an avenue through which to gain recognition and respect among their kin and peers.⁴¹

B. *Who Runs Vigilante Groups and How*

There is no comprehensive database of vigilante organisations in Nigeria and thus no reliable way to offer a precise figure for their numbers countrywide. But credible anecdotal evidence suggests that thousands of groups exist at the state, local government area, community and neighbourhood levels.⁴² These organisations, some dating

ment has shown that it is not impartial in securing our [Yoruba] people. ... Our people have lost faith in the federal government. ... That is the reason we insisted on having our own security outfit". "Okurounmu: We don't trust FG to protect us", *New Telegraph*, 23 March 2021.

³⁹ The situation has been aggravated by statements from the pastoralists' organisation, Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, and something calling itself the Fulani Nationality Movement (FUNAM), claiming that all Nigeria is Fulani territory and threatening attacks on any state or locality that bars open grazing of cattle by Fulani pastoralists. Fulani leaders and organisations, including the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders' Association of Nigeria, do not endorse the territorial claims. Some assert that FUNAM does not exist. Checks by civil society organisations, including the Centre for Democracy and Development and the Centre for Information Technology and Development, concluded that a lone wolf, rather than an organised group, issued the threats and urged that they be disregarded. "CDD Fact-Check Report: How FUNAM is Propagating Disinformation and Fuelling Ethnic and Religious Hate", Centre for Democracy and Development (Abuja), 2018. Yet the statements continue to fuel fears across the Middle Belt and south.

⁴⁰ "Nigeria Youth Unemployment Rate, 1991-2022", World Bank; and "Labour Force Statistics, Unemployment and Under Employment – Q4 2020", National Bureau of Statistics, 15 March 2021.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group members in Lekki area, Lagos state, December 2021 and January 2022.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, community and civil society leaders in Benue, Enugu, Oyo, Rivers and Zamfara states, August-October 2021.

back decades but recently reinvigorated, and many more formed since 1999, are diverse.⁴³ They differ significantly from one another in terms of membership, organisational structure, means of recruitment, training and oversight, as well as in their relations to federal security agencies and local authorities. The sheer variety of groups poses a major challenge for regulating and managing the vigilantism phenomenon across the country.

Membership in the groups ranges from dozens to hundreds of thousands. Some, like neighbourhood watches and community defence groups, may have tens or hundreds of members living in one area or spread out across thousands of towns, with no central hierarchy; others, like the O’dua People’s Congress, representing Yoruba in the South West, have an estimated 100,000 members under local leaders, who report to a high command.⁴⁴ Organisations established by state governments typically have a few thousand members.

Most vigilantes are men, but some groups also include women. In the Kogi Vigilante Service, for instance, three of every ten personnel are female.⁴⁵ In Kaduna, about 30 per cent of the state-founded vigilante group’s members are women.⁴⁶ The *yan sakai* groups in the North West generally have few women; but, in some instances, women have reportedly aided men in fending off bandits.⁴⁷ In general, a group’s gender composition correlates to its mandate – groups that are battling heavily armed insurgents or criminal gangs tend to be more male-dominated than those providing community policing services. The fact that most groups are made up of men may correlate to a seeming tolerance by vigilantes of gender-based crimes including domestic violence.

Some groups, particularly those sponsored by state governments, have well-defined administrative structures at the state, zonal, local government area and community levels, as well as clear operational procedures.⁴⁸ But numerous others, especially smaller groups in rural areas, work with no particular guidelines.

Recruitment practices vary widely. Some of the better structured groups enrol only long-time residents of the operating area who are older than eighteen and have

⁴³ One study identified four broad categories: neighbourhood or community watch groups operating across the country; ethnically based groups (such as the O’dua People’s Congress in the ethnic Yoruba south-western states); state-sponsored groups (now in over 25 states); and faith-based groups, notably the *hisbah* organisations enforcing compliance with Sharia (Islamic law) in the predominantly Muslim states of the north. See Etanibi Alemika and Innocent C. Chukwuma, “The Poor and Informal Policing in Nigeria”, Centre for Law Enforcement Education in Nigeria (Lagos), 2003. The subsequent proliferation of vigilante groups has created a more complex landscape since then, however, demanding a wider typology.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, state vigilante organisation leaders, Ibadan, Oyo state, September 2021. In 2017, the Kogi State Vigilante Service said it was recruiting 3,000 personnel. As of mid-2021, the Ebonyi state government said it had 1,400 recruits in its sponsored vigilante organisation (200 in each local government area and 100 at the state capital, Abakaliki) and would keep enlisting new members until it had 4,000. Crisis Group interview, senior Ebonyi state government official, Enugu, Enugu state, 15 August 2021.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Abubakar, local commander, Kogi Vigilante Service, Lokoja, 9 October 2021.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, state vigilante organisation official, Kaduna, Kaduna state, 11 October 2021.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, community leader, Gusau, Zamfara state, 11 September 2021.

⁴⁸ The Kogi State Vigilante Service has local government, divisional and state command structures. In Benue state, the livestock guards have an organogram similar to any paramilitary outfit.

no criminal record. Many recruits are nominated by ward or village heads, senior government officials, local politicians, religious leaders or veteran members.⁴⁹ Vetting sometimes includes screening by the police or State Security Service. In the great majority of groups, however, recruitment procedures are ill-defined or inconsistent, leading them to sign up individuals who have been involved in violence or other criminal activities.⁵⁰

Training is also spotty. Some groups, especially those established by state governments, have fairly elaborate programs involving instructors from the police, State Security Service and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps. Such groups are better funded and often led by retired military and police officers. In Osun state, for instance, recruits for the South West states' regional security network, Amotekun, go through an intensive 23-day course.⁵¹ In contrast, most organisations offer no formal training. In the North West, *yan sakai* members learn to handle guns on their own, from old hunters or former soldiers or policemen.⁵² Few groups offer standardised training in such issues as crime prevention, compliance with the rule of law, respect for human rights, conflict management or sensitivity in dealing with the differentiated needs of women and children.

Mechanisms for oversight, discipline and accountability are uneven but mostly lacking. State-established groups generally have better arrangements, often spelled out in the laws creating them; some, like the Amotekun, operate under governing boards, as well as monitoring by federal authorities. Elsewhere, such regulations tend to be feeble, sometimes existing only on paper. Many community groups rely on trust, requiring members to take oaths of fairness and impartiality in their duties.⁵³ But most groups operate with weak external oversight and little internal accountability.⁵⁴ Accountability also diminishes with distance from administrative centres because residents cannot travel to reach the proper authorities to report abuses. In the absence of standard disciplinary procedures, the sanction of abusive members often occurs at the discretion of group leaders or state government officials. Few choose to do so. Furthermore, many groups have no clear systems for registering complaints or other feedback. These deficiencies mean that vigilante groups often operate with a sense of impunity.

⁴⁹ Some groups, like the Amotekun in the South West states, advertise vacancies and receive applications online, an arrangement that critics say disadvantages some would-be applicants, such as hunters who may be most knowledgeable about the local terrain but illiterate.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, community and civil society leaders, Gusau, Zamfara state and Enugu, Enugu state, August and September 2021.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Amotekun official, Abeokuta, Ogun state, 9 September 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, vigilante group leader, Gusau, Zamfara state, 11 September 2021.

⁵³ In Oyo state, for instance, the Amotekun commandant, Olayinka Olayanju, said: "Immediately after we concluded the recruitment of personnel, we applied the traditional oath to every one of them, including the female ones. And they know the implication of going against the oath. As a result of this, they are being very careful with the way they go about their duties". "How other security agencies are frustrating our efforts – Olayanju, Oyo Amotekun commandant", *Sunday Tribune*, 28 February 2021.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior police officer and rule of law NGO representative, Abuja, 20 August 2021.

Most vigilante groups are strapped for cash. Many rely on donations from well-off patrons or ordinary residents or fund themselves. Members are often poorly remunerated and lack proper equipment and office space.⁵⁵ These constraints make the groups less effective and sometimes lead members to shake down persons they have arrested for criminal acts.

Relations between the groups and the police, military and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps range from cordial and collaborative to suspicious and hostile.⁵⁶ In some areas, vigilantes work closely with the police (asking officers to organise training courses, sharing intelligence, reporting crime and handing over detainees) and the police solicit partnerships with vigilantes (for example, to accompany them on patrols in unfamiliar rural terrain).⁵⁷ Elsewhere, the relationship may be uneasy or worse. The police and other federal agencies sometimes view vigilantes as competitors and inhibit their work. They particularly object when vigilantes assume the full role of police, using firearms or other lethal force. For their part, vigilantes distrust the police, whom they tend to see as lazy in investigating crime, prone to taking bribes and liable to let criminals go free. The mutual distrust undermines prospects for the vigilante-police cooperation necessary to fight crime and other insecurity more effectively.⁵⁸

Many of the shortcomings in oversight, accountability, recruitment, training and vigilante-police relations stem from the absence of a basic framework for regulating vigilantism across the country. While some state governments have enacted rules to guide the organisations they established, there is not yet a comprehensive law that would set minimum standards nationwide.

C. *How Vigilantes Help Provide Security*

Vigilante organisations undoubtedly offer important services: supporting the military's counter-insurgency efforts in the North East, fending off bandits in the North West and North Central zones and helping police fight crime countrywide. In the North East, particularly in Borno state, the Civilian Joint Task Force has won praise for helping the army battle jihadist insurgents, notably from former President Goodluck Jonathan and Borno state governor Babagana Zulum.⁵⁹ In Adamawa state, hunters played a major part in blocking Boko Haram's advance in 2013 and taking back the cities of Gombi and Mubi that had fallen to the militants. In the North West, many

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group leaders, Ibadan, Oyo state; Port Harcourt, Rivers state; Makurdi, Benue state; and Gusau, Zamfara state, August-October 2021.

⁵⁶ Olayanju in Oyo state has complained about police hampering his group's work. "How other security agencies are frustrating our efforts – Olayanju, Oyo Amotekun commandant", op. cit.

⁵⁷ "Edo vigilante operatives to train at police academy", *PM News*, 10 May 2021; "Police partner hunters, vigilante to patrol 'difficult terrain' in Nasarawa state", *Vanguard*, 13 October 2017; "Police woo vigilantes, hunters to secure railway lines in Delta", *The Punch*, 4 April 2022.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group leaders and retired police officers, Ibadan, Oyo state; Gusau, Zamfara state; Makurdi, Benue state; Lagos and Abuja, September-November 2021.

⁵⁹ In 2013, Jonathan hailed these vigilantes as "new national heroes". "North-east youths hunt insurgents", *Vanguard*, 17 June 2013. Some years later, Zulum said "local vigilantes ... have taken over the policing of the state to the extent that they have driven the insurgents far away from the state to Sambisa forest". "Local vigilante helping us to address insecurity – Governor Zulum", *Vanguard*, 1 May 2021.

yan sakai have helped curb the atrocities of deadly criminal gangs.⁶⁰ In the South West, governors and citizens have hailed the two-year-old Amotekun as having reduced crime, especially kidnapping for ransom by gangs based in the vast forests.⁶¹

Citizens and state governments generally say the groups have been of immense assistance to federal security agencies, often due to their knowledge of the terrain. Vigilantes have been particularly useful in areas without federal police. Even where police are present, they gather intelligence, alert residents to security risks, arrest criminal suspects, help regulate traffic and settle disputes. Working to protect their neighbours and kin, they are sometimes more proactive or responsive than the overstretched and ill-equipped police. In some places, vigilante groups are appreciated because they can deliver immediate results where the police are inefficient, the courts are slow and impunity reigns. Furthermore, since the vigilantes are usually locals, residents often view them more favourably than the police, whom they often see as an alien force, and are therefore more willing to cooperate with them.

⁶⁰ “Vigilantes defying the odds to protect lives in northwest Nigeria”, *HumAngle*, 3 November 2021. See also “National Security Summit Report: Full Report of the Special Summit on National Security”, House of Representatives, Nigeria, June 2021, p. 40.

⁶¹ In June 2021, Oyo state governor Seyi Makinde said the Amotekun “have been able to fill the gap of local policing successfully” despite the obstacles. “Insecurity: Makinde inaugurates Oyo Security Network board, Amotekun corps”, *Premium Times*, 21 June 2021.

III. Vigilantism's Risks

Their popularity suggests that vigilante groups may continue to play an important role in Nigeria at least for the near future. Nonetheless, the proliferation and entrenchment of these groups across the country raises several questions and concerns.

The first concern centres on whether the state-sponsored vigilante organisations are constitutional. Many officials, including the federal attorney general and justice minister, Abubakar Malami, have said they are not. In January 2020, when the South West governors introduced Amotekun, Malami said the initiative was “unconstitutional and illegal”, noting that the national charter makes no provision for states to establish organisations parallel to the Nigeria Police Force.⁶² The governors countered by invoking the constitutional right of citizens to self-defence, saying state houses of assembly had passed laws creating the body to aid the police. In April 2021, when the governors of the five ethnic Igbo South East states established a similar security network, Ebubeagu (Igbo for “the leopard’s fearsome aura”), the federal government kept silent, suggesting that it may now accept vigilantes as a necessity. Yet the lack of clarity about these groups’ legal status could create tensions with state governments, or worse, clashes between vigilantes and federal security agencies.

A second concern relates to what equipment, particularly firearms, the vigilante groups should have. The Nigerian Fire Arms Act (1990) stipulates that no person may have in his (or her) possession or under his (or her) control any firearm or ammunition except with a licence from the president or police inspector general. Most vigilantes carry no gun larger than a single-shot game-hunting rifle. But some groups say they need more firepower to fight insurgents and criminals armed with military-grade weapons (automatic rifles, machine guns and even rocket-propelled grenade launchers). In the North West, some vigilantes have obtained assault rifles in secret.⁶³ Several state governors have urged the federal government to lift restrictions on the use of firearms.⁶⁴ In March 2021, Niger state governor, Sani Bello, said he would provide pump-action rifles to vigilantes fighting criminal gangs in the state.⁶⁵ Better armed vigilantes would presumably be more effective but they would also be more dangerous, particularly those who are not part of a trained, professional force.

The third major concern is about human rights and lack of accountability. Some early vigilante groups – such as the Bakassi Boys in the Igbo-speaking South East states or the *yan sakai* in the North West – committed serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings of criminal suspects, some of whom they burned alive or dismembered with machetes in public.⁶⁶ Many newer

⁶² “Malami explains why Amotekun is illegal”, *Vanguard*, 14 January 2020; “Amotekun is illegal, Malami insists”, *Premium Times*, 23 January 2020.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, vigilante group leader, Suleja, Niger State, 10 December 2021.

⁶⁴ In June 2021, gunmen (whom residents alleged were Fulani herders) attacked Igangan town in Oyo state, killing about twenty people. Governor Makinde said the assailants had AK-47 automatic rifles and thus overwhelmed the Amotekun personnel guarding the town with Dane guns. He asked the federal government to allow vigilantes bear similar weapons. “Igangang massacre won’t happen again, says Makinde: Asks FG to allow Amotekun use AK-47”, *Daily Sun*, 9 June 2021.

⁶⁵ “Niger state to arm vigilante group with guns to combat bandits”, *The Guardian*, 10 March 2021.

⁶⁶ See “The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture”, Human Rights Watch, May 2002; and M.A. Rufa’i, “Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State: Excesses and Con-

vigilante groups are reportedly continuing these abuses.⁶⁷ Extortion of locals – especially those accused of crimes – is also widespread. For the most part, abuses appear to be fuelled by several factors: poor training; absence of police and judicial institutions; low public confidence in the institutions that do exist; and the preference, in many areas, for speedier if rougher forms of justice for crime. Abuses tend to be more common among self-funded groups: members feel no obligation to a sponsor and sometimes justify shakedowns of civilians as necessary for sustaining their operations.⁶⁸ These abuses and other excesses have prompted some state governments to ban some volunteer vigilante groups.⁶⁹

Without stronger oversight from some combination of federal and state authorities, community leaders and civil society, many worry this problem could get worse, with further and potentially more egregious abuses, deepening the prevailing culture of impunity and aggravating insecurity.⁷⁰ An additional concern is the risk that politicians and other elites could enlist vigilante groups for their own purposes, detrimental to peace and security. There are precedents. For instance, in the countdown to the 2003 elections, some South East politicians engaged the Bakassi Boys to intimidate opponents, leading to gross human rights violations including extrajudicial killings.⁷¹ Ahead of the 2023 elections, there are already concerning developments in this vein.⁷²

traditions”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, vol. 7, no. 6 (2018), pp. 65-73.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante members, community leaders, civil society representatives, Gusau, Zamfara state; Ibadan, Oyo state; Port Harcourt, Rivers state; August and September 2021. See also “Amotekun killed my cousin, shot five others in our family house”, *Sunday Punch*, 16 January 2021; “Yobe: Police arrest 3 vigilante members over death of suspect”, *Leadership*, 2 September 2020; “Delta vigilantes torture 26-year-old man to death”, *The Punch*, 31 August 2020; “OPC killed my sister, burnt N5m, 6 motorcycles – Wakili”, *Daily Trust*, 10 March 2021; “Vigilante kills air force officer in Rivers”, *Daily Sun*, 6 January 2022; “Police arrest vigilante commander for torturing female cop in Anambra”, *Sunday Punch*, 16 January 2022; “Report: How Nigeria’s religious police, Hisbah repress freedom in Kano”, International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 24 January 2022.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, civil society representatives, Enugu, Enugu state and Port Harcourt, Rivers state, August and September 2021.

⁶⁹ “Reprisal killings: Sokoto government bans vigilante groups”, *Premium Times*, 30 November 2021; “Adamawa bans hunters association over abuse of power”, *The Punch*, 6 December 2021; “Extrajudicial killings: Katsina government bans Yansaki vigilante group”, Channels Television, 15 February 2022.

⁷⁰ For recent reports of vigilantes abusing citizens, see, for instance, “OPC members allegedly beat man to death”, *Premium Times*, 15 February 2021; “Many hospitalized as Rivers vigilante allegedly inflict gun injuries on defaulters of night curfew”, *Daily Post*, 15 May 2021; “Vigilante shoots commercial motorcyclist dead in Delta community”, *Daily Post*, 17 June 2021; “Man tortured to death by vigilante in Kogi”, *Vanguard*, 10 March 2020; “Amotekun killed my cousin, shot five others in our family house – Eyewitness”, *Saturday Punch*, 16 January 2021; “Police destroy illegal detention facility over missing Rivers school boy”, *Sunday Punch*, 14 November 2021; “Police arrest two vigilantes over killing of suspected motorcycle thief”, *Premium Times*, 11 October 2021; “Vigilante members beat 25-year-old man to death in Jigawa”, *Daily Post*, 8 September 2021.

⁷¹ Notable cases occurred in Anambra state in 2002-2003, when Bakassi Boys were involved in assassinations of the state governor’s political opponents. “Government Critics at Risk after Political Killings”, Human Rights Watch, 19 September 2002.

⁷² On 11 December 2021, a faction of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria said it had endorsed the Kogi state governor, Yahaya Bello, to succeed President Buhari. The faction’s leader, Usman Mohammed Jahun, made the declaration while visiting the governor at the Kogi state capital, Lokoja, but an

Politicians in some states, especially those belonging to opposition parties, fear that state governors could use state-established vigilante groups against their rivals, heightening dangers of fraud and violence.⁷³

In Nigeria's heterogeneous society, the rise of ethnic vigilante groups risks eroding intercommunal ties. The formation of Amotekun in the Yoruba South West and Ebubeagu in the Igbo South East, both prompted largely by herder-farmer violence and crime attributed to gangs associated with Fulani herders, has stirred charges in the North that these groups are meant to "humiliate, harass and intimidate" pastoralists and, more broadly, northerners in those zones.⁷⁴ The perceived challenge spurred formation of a pan-northern vigilante group, Shege Ka Fasa (Hausa for "I dare you").⁷⁵ Ethnically partisan vigilantism, real or perceived, could harm inter-ethnic relations, particularly if vigilante groups seek to operate outside their own traditional areas.⁷⁶ Should ethnically exclusive vigilante groups over time turn into ethnic militias, it would further undermine social cohesion at a time when security challenges are already testing national unity.⁷⁷

opposing faction promptly dismissed the endorsement as inconsistent with the group's mandate. "2023: We support Gov. Bello's transition to Aso Villa – Nigerian vigilantes", *Vanguard*, 11 December 2021; "2023: Gov. Yahaya Bello duped by endorser", *PM News*, 14 December 2021.

⁷³ "Gov may abuse state police, regional security outfits", *The Punch*, 17 January 2022. In Ebonyi state, the opposition Peoples Democratic Party has charged that the regional security network, Ebubeagu, "was formed to prosecute" the agenda of the ruling All Progressives Congress. "2023: Ebonyi PDP legal adviser calls for conference over zoning", *Independent*, 2 February 2022.

⁷⁴ "Proscribe Amotekun, northern youths tell FG", *Leadership*, 1 November 2021.

⁷⁵ The Coalition of Northern Groups that announced the initiative said its objectives were "to promote security ... and to anticipate and checkmate the likely fallout of the evolution of similar outfits like the Amotekun in the South West that were pregnant with complications and unforeseen consequences". "Northern youths set to float Arewa Security Marshals", *Leadership*, 12 February 2021. The Abuja-based coalition comprises 52 civil society organisations spread across the nineteen states created out of the former Northern Region.

⁷⁶ For instance, after a Fulani herders' group, Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, announced it would deploy 100,000 vigilantes to protect herders and their cattle countrywide, the O'odua People's Congress leader Gani Adams (who is also the *aare ona kakanfo* or generalissimo of Yoruba land), warned: "Establishing a vigilante group by the Fulani in other people's land is driving the country toward anarchy, and nobody has a monopoly of violence". "We won't allow Miyetti Allah take over Yorubaland – Gani Adams, YCE, others", *The Sun*, 17 April 2021.

⁷⁷ After the South West states launched the Amotekun in January 2020, a former Kaduna state governor, Abdulkadir Balarabe Musa, urged the federal government to block the initiative, as he feared it was a first step toward declaration of an ethnic Yoruba republic. "Amotekun ploy to declare Oduduwa Republic – Balarabe Musa, ex-Kaduna governor", *The Sun*, 19 January 2020.

IV. How to Address the Concerns

Efforts to curb vigilante activities have largely failed. In 2002, then President Olusegun Obasanjo sought parliamentary approval to outlaw certain groups – but to no avail. More recently, the Buhari administration unsuccessfully tried to stop some state governments from establishing regional networks of vigilante groups, which the federal attorney general said were “unconstitutional and illegal”. There is a wide (and reasonable) perception that, in spite of the concerns about the risks these groups pose, their contribution to filling security gaps across the country makes them a continuing necessity. Federal security agencies simply cannot keep every area of the country safe. Significantly, the National Security Summit organized by the House of Representatives in June 2021 observed that: “Vigilante groups have played a formidable role in addressing the gaps left open by the absence or inadequate presence of security operatives. ... Given this gap, it is imperative to include vigilante groups in the security infrastructure and to seek ways to institutionalise them within the local security estate”.⁷⁸

But even if moving away from vigilantism is not a realistic goal for the foreseeable future, there is a compelling need for policy responses to address the concerns it has raised, for strategies to curb the groups’ proliferation and for plans to improve policing in the long term so that, eventually, the state can either absorb these groups into its own security apparatus or phase out the partnerships. Developing policy initiatives will be a huge challenge, particularly because the vigilante groups are so diverse. Four areas where the federal government and its partners should focus their efforts are as follows.

A. *Build Confidence through Inclusion in Federal Security Agencies*

As a first step, the federal government urgently needs to rebuild citizens’ confidence in its capacity to protect them from crime and other forms of violence and its commitment to do so even-handedly. One way the government can demonstrate such commitment is by ensuring that the leadership of federal security agencies – including the military; police; intelligence and narcotics enforcement agencies; customs, immigration and corrections services; and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps – reflect the “federal character” provisions in the country’s constitution. These require that the state conduct its affairs “in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty”.⁷⁹

The diversity these provisions are intended to promote is lacking at present. Of the fourteen officers heading the federal security agencies highlighted above, eleven

⁷⁸ “National Security Summit Report: Full Report of the Special Summit on National Security”, op. cit., p. 85.

⁷⁹ The full text of the “federal character” principle, introduced in Nigeria’s constitution in 1979 and reaffirmed in the 1999 constitution, Section 14 (3), states: “The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few States or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies”.

are from the north (mostly from the North East and North West), three are from the south (of which two are from South West, one from South and none from South East). No South Easterner has headed any of these agencies since President Buhari took office in 2015. Greater inclusiveness in the highest security policy circles would give ethno-regional groups throughout the country confidence that the state is giving their interests proper attention so that they feel less compelled to organise in self-defence.

B. Reform the Federal Police and Address Impunity

In the long term, curbing the proliferation of vigilante organisations will require serious reform of the Nigeria Police Force. This task is enormous. It will have to encompass several areas of effort, including funding, recruiting, training, logistics, equipment, staff welfare and motivation.⁸⁰

First, the police need much better funding. On 23 June 2019, President Buhari signed the Nigeria Police Trust Fund (Establishment) Bill into law. The Fund created by this law is meant to provide the police with resources in addition to annual budget allocations. It is to be derived from 0.5 per cent of total revenues accruing to the Federation Account, a levy of 0.005 per cent on the net profits of all private companies in the country, aid from international agencies and NGO assistance, as well as donations, grants and other sources.⁸¹ In January 2022, the police received the first equipment procured through the Fund – including 1,000 vehicles and 1,200 bulletproof vests. But while the Fund is a good start, it falls far short of the needs. A minimum annual police budget should be enshrined in law and supported by the Trust Fund in order to enable the further reforms described below.

Secondly, the police need more officers, more efficiently deployed. The federal government should step up efforts to bolster the police force's strength.⁸² Authorities should also use existing personnel better, particularly by at least halving the huge number protecting VIPs, as described above, and sending more back to normal police duties. All Nigerian citizens are entitled to police protection, but not to personal bodyguards; private individuals who wish to have personal security details should be asked to employ them from private security companies – which could also create jobs.

The force needs to strengthen its recruitment practices. At the moment, too many persons seeking to join the force are not fit for the responsibilities it entails.⁸³ Due to poor remuneration and working conditions, the applicant pool increasingly comprises youths who are not committed to professional police work, but simply have few other

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, retired senior police officers, Abuja and Lagos, December 2021 and January 2022.

⁸¹ The Federation Account, or Federal Account, is referred to in Section 162 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999. Maintained by the federal government, it is the single account into which all revenues collected by the government of the federation are paid. Also called the Distributive Poll Account, it is the account from which revenues are shared between the federal, state and local governments, based on a predetermined allocation formula.

⁸² The retired senior officer Balogun has said: "The country needs at least 1,000,000 policemen and women". "You can't expect good service from frustrated police – Ret CP Balogun", *op. cit.*

⁸³ "Over 90% of applicants fail police recruitment examination – PSC", *Vanguard*, 14 January 2022.

options for making a decent living. Many recruits lack basic skills, including literacy, making it difficult to train them for a modern police force.⁸⁴

Police personnel need to be better trained, equipped and motivated. Better training will require rehabilitating police training institutions, expanding their capacity and providing continuous professional development opportunities.⁸⁵ The police force also needs more advanced training in a range of functions, including intelligence collection; criminal investigation techniques, like handling of evidence; forensic and internet tools; unit leadership and management; and crowd control. The force additionally needs to upgrade its equipment including with surveillance drones, trackers, scanners, communications instruments and non-lethal weaponry.⁸⁶

The government should also improve pay and working conditions, as well as retirement and injury benefits, in order to boost morale and job satisfaction. On 15 December 2021, the government announced a 20 per cent salary increase for the police – the first in almost ten years. The pay hike was a response, it said, to a demand raised amid the pandemic-related #EndSARS protests in 2020.⁸⁷ But given the years that have passed without any pay raise, and with inflation galloping at about 16 per cent, the increase will make little difference to police well-being. If policing is made a budgetary priority, including through the Police Trust Fund, it should be possible to develop a new wage structure for the police that would help retain officers and reduce the motive to request bribes.

More funding, personnel and equipment are all necessary but insufficient conditions for better security. The police will remain compromised as long as citizens see its personnel to be committing rampant extortion and human rights violations. To regain public trust, the police will have to shift to a more citizen-friendly culture, imparted through training and constantly reinforced by senior officers' daily conduct. The force should make deliberate efforts to repair strained ties with civilians, including through police-community relations committees. It should also strengthen accountability standards and sanction personnel for abuses. The police need a robust internal affairs unit that, with the aid of special prosecutors, can ensure that all abusive personnel face appropriate legal penalties. Building accountability should also include publicising the findings of investigations and the sanctions that were imposed on officers found guilty.

The Nigeria Police Act of 2020 provides a strong legal basis for the needed reforms.⁸⁸ It calls for a more effective and better organised police force, driven by the principles of transparency and accountability in its operations and management. The Act also establishes a firmer funding framework for the police in line with what is obtainable in other key federal institutions and increases training opportunities. Further, it ad-

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, retired and serving police officers, Abuja and Lagos, October–November 2021.

⁸⁵ “You can’t expect good service from frustrated police – Ret. CP Balogun”, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, retired and serving police officers, Abuja and Lagos, October–November 2021.

⁸⁷ The government also increased the police duty tour allowance to 6 per cent and approved release of 1.2 billion naira (about \$2.92 million) for payment of uninsured benefits. “#EndSARS: FEC approves salary increase for Nigerian police personnel”, *Premium Times*, 15 December 2021.

⁸⁸ The Nigeria Police Act of 2020 was signed into law by President Buhari in September 2020, replacing the Police Act Cap. P19. Laws of the Federation, 2004.

dresses the challenges of appointments, promotions, discipline, postings, living conditions, pensions and retirement benefits, and encourages stronger partnerships between the police and citizens in maintaining law and order. All agencies and officials with a stake in the police and its performance – including the Ministry of Police Affairs, Inspector-general of police, Police service Commission, National Human Rights Commission and Police Trust Fund – should redouble efforts to ensure that this Act’s provisions are enforced.

Beyond police reform, Nigerian authorities should work to curb impunity for violent and other serious crimes by strengthening judicial capacity significantly, including by establishing more courts, appointing more magistrates and judges, enhancing coordination among criminal justice institutions (the police, prosecutors, the courts and the prison service) and expediting trials. Rapid, comprehensive judicial reform will require federal and state governments to increase their financial allocation to the judiciary significantly above the 110 billion naira (about \$256 million) approved in the 2021 budget. Given the federal government’s constraints, authorities should also engage with international partners to solicit financial and technical support. Judicial officers should also commit more firmly to complying with the provisions of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act, particularly its directive that criminal cases be exhausted between 30 and 180 days from the commencement of trials. Visible progress in these areas could reduce impunity and discourage citizens from further resort to self-protection arrangements.

In March 2020 and June 2021, respectively, the Senate and the House of Representatives submitted reports to the executive on insecurity in the country.⁸⁹ Both reports, which Crisis Group obtained, lay out elaborate executive and legislative measures for urgently reviewing, restructuring and reorganising Nigeria’s security architecture and strengthening national security. The recommendations remain largely unheeded. The executive and federal legislature should redouble efforts to reform statutory security agencies and curb insecurity across the country.

C. Start Devolving Police Powers

Reforming the federal police, as presently structured, will not fully address Nigeria’s policing deficit. Administrative and operational reforms need to be accompanied by structural reforms. A debate is under way about the desirability of devolving police powers from the federal to the state and/or local level.⁹⁰ While proponents may disagree on the structure and modalities for devolution, it seems clear that the present centralised police structure can no longer meet the country’s increasingly complex policing needs. Some measure of devolution increasingly seems imperative.

⁸⁹ “Report of the Ad-Hoc Committee on Nigeria’s Security Challenges: Urgent Need to Restructure, Review and Reorganize the Current Security Architecture”, The Senate, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 17 March 2020; “National Security Summit Report: Full Report of the Special Summit on National Security”, op. cit.

⁹⁰ In September 2021, the Kano state House of Assembly called for renewed efforts to amend the 1999 constitution so as to devolve police powers to state and local governments. “Kano Assembly seeks constitutional amendment for state police”, *The Punch*, 9 September 2021.

One contentious idea is to establish state police services. Proponents including Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, former President Obasanjo and the state governors say this step would be consonant with the country's federal system and crucial to improving security, as it would enable faster responses to incidents endangering public safety.⁹¹

Others oppose the measure on two main counts. First, they argue that state governments already struggle to pay civil servants and will be unable to pay police as well – though state governments counter that they are spending hugely to support federal police operations in their states and could switch those resources to state police with better results.⁹² Secondly, opponents say many governors exhibit autocratic tendencies and might turn state police services into personal instruments for hounding critics.⁹³

The debate is on hold for now. On 5 January 2022, President Buhari sided with the opponents, asserting that “state police are not an option”.⁹⁴ But his administration has barely a year left in office, meaning that the idea could soon return when the country is under new leadership.

Meanwhile, the need for grassroots policing remains. While the decision on state police may be deferred to the next federal administration, the government should proceed with the community policing program launched in 2003, left dormant since then, but for which Buhari approved 13.3 billion naira (about \$32 million) in October 2021.⁹⁵ This program is expected to recruit, train and deploy 40,000 constables, for a start, among the country's 774 local government areas.

D. *Regulate Vigilantes Nationwide*

Pending long-term police reform, states and communities will almost surely continue to rely on vigilante groups with at least some federal acquiescence. Against this backdrop, the federal and state governments should work together to properly regulate, hold accountable and, where appropriate, support vigilante groups in their efforts to curb insecurity.

The first step should be to develop a national framework for regulating vigilante activity. The federal government, in collaboration with state governments and civil society organisations, should draft a broad set of laws for managing vigilantism countrywide. The laws should, at a minimum, require all vigilante groups to register with local, state or federal government authorities (depending on the scope of their operations) and also include provisions for the oversight of organisations, basic training standards for new recruits, a code of conduct for group members together with dis-

⁹¹ “Osinbajo advocates state police, devolution of powers”, *Premium Times*, 5 October 2019; “State policing is the way forward – Osinbajo speaks on building multi-ethnic Nigeria”, *The Cable*, 7 March 2021; “Nothing can stop state police – govts”, *Vanguard*, 30 November 2021. “Obasanjo insists state police remains only alternative to tackle insecurity”, International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 30 October 2021.

⁹² “Niger spends 5bn on security in 2 years – SSG”, *Vanguard*, 23 November 2021.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, retired and serving police officers, Abuja and Lagos, October–November 2021.

⁹⁴ “Buhari rules out creation of state police, accuses states of causing imbalance”, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2022.

⁹⁵ “Buhari approves N13.3 billion for take-off of Community Policing Initiative”, *Premium Times*, 11 October 2021.

ciplinary mechanisms, protocols for relations between vigilantes and police (including how they should share intelligence and cooperate in arrests) and modalities for funding and equipment. It may be impossible to develop a framework that applies evenly to the full panoply of vigilante groups, particularly given the diverse circumstances in which they were formed and the different security challenges they face. Even so, any regulation in the areas indicated for the legal framework above will be useful for better mapping and monitoring the groups and for guiding their activities.

Secondly, within this framework, the police and other federal agencies should monitor the vigilante groups' activities more closely to make sure they remain within the bounds of the law. State governments and community leaders should reserve their support for vigilante organisations that have effective oversight mechanisms, including governing boards and internal disciplinary committees. These leaders must also make clear that they will hold vigilantes who engage in serious human rights abuses, such as illegal detentions, torture and public executions, accountable for their crimes – even when the public is hailing these same organisations for curbing crime. At the local level, communities should establish community accountability forums – which could serve as roundtables where vigilante leaders meet periodically with the public to address complaints of excesses, air disputes and discuss security issues.

Thirdly, state and local government authorities, as well as other patrons, should take certain steps to improve recruitment procedures and training courses for vigilante group members. They should undertake more intensive vetting, including comprehensive background checks, before bringing new members on board. Beyond basic training in law enforcement (including evidence gathering, surveillance and arrest procedures), curricula should lay greater emphasis on respect for human rights and civil liberties, as well as gender, ethnic and religious sensitivity. Members should also be required to attend refresher courses and capacity building workshops periodically. Trainers should not be limited to government officials and security operatives as has hitherto been the case. They should include leaders of credible NGOs working in the security field, such as the CLEEN Foundation, Centre for Democracy and Development, Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative (also known as Partners West Africa), and Rule of Law and Accountability Advocacy Centre.

International partners should offer technical support for improving vigilante training. Years ago, the Justice for All Programme, funded by the UK's Department for International Development, produced a 46-page manual titled "Guidelines for the Voluntary Policing Sector (Vigilante Groups)", which laid out how such groups should be organised and administered, what powers they should have and how members should behave.⁹⁶ The UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office team in Abuja should revive this important document and make it available to state and local government authorities across the country. Donors might also look at providing funding to NGOs involved in training vigilante group members.

Fourthly, as a companion to improving oversight for vigilante groups, state and local governments, as well as communities, should also help them improve their dis-

⁹⁶ Justice for All was a partnership between the Nigerian Government and the UK Department for International Development from 2010 to 2017. Managed by the British Council, it was a justice sector reform program that involved the courts, police, anti-corruption agencies and civil society, and was aimed at improving capacity, accountability and responsiveness in the sector.

cipline and effectiveness by assisting them with additional resources that can be used for better pay and equipment for members. Governors and local government chairpersons should commit more of their “security votes” (a monthly allowance for responding to security threats) to provisioning for the vigilante groups.⁹⁷ States like Lagos, Oyo and Edo, which have been raising money for the police and other security agencies through trust funds, might consider including vigilante groups among the beneficiaries of such support – and other states might establish similar arrangements.⁹⁸

Finally, on the particular issue of firearms, one proposal being advanced by some security experts is that the president, while retaining his exclusive power to authorise use of military-grade weapons, issue the most embattled state governments licence to acquire specified numbers of arms.⁹⁹ Under the proposal, state governors would be permitted to give these arms to vigilantes for joint patrols and other specific operations in partnership with federal security operatives. The proposal has evident risks and its viability may turn on the question of whether governors can make firm guarantees that they would work with federal security agencies to track distribution of these weapons and collect them back in government hands as soon as security conditions permit.

⁹⁷ In Nigeria, “security vote”, a relic of military rule, is a monthly allowance that is allocated to each of the 36 states for purposes of early response to security threats, including by sponsoring local dialogues and mediations, funding state-level security mechanisms and supporting federal security services operating within the state. According to Transparency International, this fund is estimated at 241.2 billion naira (about \$670 million) annually. In the absence of any law requiring state governors to account for their use, the funds have become increasingly corruption-prone, with much of it diverted from enhancing public security to enriching state governors and their cronies. See Mathew T. Page, “Camouflaged Cash: How ‘Security Votes’ Fuel Corruption in Nigeria”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace/Transparency International, 1 May 2018.

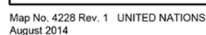
⁹⁸ The Lagos state established its Security Trust Fund in 2007, Oyo state in 2012 and Edo state in 2018, as public-private partnerships for supporting the operations of security agencies. Contributions to the trust funds, in cash and in kind, come from state governments, corporations (public and private) and individuals, and are used to support security agencies with crime fighting.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, Bulama Bukarti, “To thwart state-initiated anarchy, Nigeria needs a legal framework for vigilantism”, *Daily Trust*, 14 April 2021.

V. Conclusion

The rise of insecurity across Nigeria in recent years has compelled desperate responses from many states, ethnic groups and communities, spawning a new generation of vigilante organisations alongside those that have long existed. For now, any attempt to rein in these organisations will be futile: they are too valuable in fighting crime and maintaining public safety in places where the police cannot do either. Yet the widespread resort to vigilantism is an improvisation that cannot be a permanent solution and that poses immediate risks to intercommunal relations, human rights and national security. Over the short and medium term, federal and state authorities should work to better regulate, support and shape the activities of these groups. Over the longer term, federal and state governments must focus on improving the police service through comprehensive reform and devolution of policing to the state and community levels. The goal should be to reverse the proliferation of vigilante groups and reach a point where those of their members who have the requisite qualifications can be absorbed into official security forces while others are demobilised and, where appropriate, helped to pursue other livelihoods.

Abuja/Dakar/Nairobi/Brussels, 21 April 2022



Appendix B: 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.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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 Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

Martti Ahtisaari
Chairman Emeritus

George Mitchell
Chairman Emeritus

Thomas R. Pickering
Chairman Emeritus

Gareth Evans
President Emeritus

Kenneth Adelman
Adnan Abu-Odeh
HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal
Celso Amorim
Óscar Arias
Richard Armitage
Diego Arria
Zainab Bangura
Nahum Barnea

Kim Beazley
Shlomo Ben-Ami
Christoph Bertram
Lakhdar Brahimi
Kim Campbell
Jorge Castañeda
Joaquim Alberto Chissano
Victor Chu
Mong Joon Chung
Sheila Coronel
Pat Cox
Gianfranco Dell'Alba
Jacques Delors
Alain Destexhe
Mou-Shih Ding
Uffe Ellemann-Jensen
Stanley Fischer
Carla Hills

Swanee Hunt
Wolfgang Ischinger
Aleksander Kwasniewski
Ricardo Lagos
Joanne Leedom-Ackerman
Todung Mulya Lubis
Graça Machel
Jessica T. Mathews
Miklós Németh
Christine Ockrent
Timothy Ong
Roza Otunbayeva
Olara Otunnu
Lord (Christopher) Patten
Fidel V. Ramos
Olympia Snowe
Javier Solana
Pär Stenbäck