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Immigration and  
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration  
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

## Nigeria: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), including objectives, structure, activities, relations with other Biafran independence groups, and treatment by authorities (2014-October 2016) [NGA105658.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Overview

Sources describe the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as a "separatist" organization (BBC 15 Dec. 2015; International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015) or as a "secessionist" group (Jamestown Foundation 16 Sept. 2016; BBC 18 Dec. 2015). Sources indicate that Biafra is a region in the south east of Nigeria [1] (International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015; *Newsweek* 7 Dec. 2015). *Newsweek* indicates that the region is "mainly populated by the Igbo [Ibo] ethnic group" (7 Dec. 2015). Sources indicate that from 1967 until 1970, Nigeria fought a civil war against Biafran secessionists, in which more than one million people died (BBC 18 Dec. 2015; AFP 31 May 2016). Agence France-Presse (AFP) cites Uchenna Madu, the leader of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), another pro-Biafra group, as stating that the objective of pro-Biafran groups, including MASSOB and IPOB, is "a separate homeland for the Igbo people" (10 Apr. 2016).

BBC reports that young people who belong to secessionist groups such as IPOB are mainly ethnic Igbos who "feel they have been discriminated against by those in power" (18 Dec. 2015). Similarly, according to the International Crisis Group, the activities of Biafran separatist groups, including IPOB, are "an attempt to attract attention and spending from the central government, ... based on a cocktail of longstanding and recent economic and political grievances" (4 Dec. 2015). In an article on the Biafra secessionist movement in the *Journal of Research in National Development*, O. O. Thompson, C. C. Ojukwu and O. G. F. Nwaoegu, academics from the Department of Communication and General Studies, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, state that IPOB's grievances are that they have been "politically, socio-economically, and culturally marginalized in the Nigerian project" (Thompson et al. June 2016, 1).

According to an April 2016 AFP article, IPOB was founded by Nnamdi Kanu (10 Apr. 2016). Thompson et al. describe IPOB as "a faction" of MASSOB (June 2016, 1). For further information on MASSOB, including its relations to IPOB and IPOB's origins, see Response to Information Request NGA105577 of July 2016.

Without providing further details, International Crisis Group indicates that Kanu "fell out" with the former leader of MASSOB in 2009, and "emerged as the leader of IPOB in 2012" (4 Dec. 2015). An IPOB statement cited in an article of the Nigerian branch of News24, a South African "digital publishing house" (News24 n.d.),

indicates that Kanu was formally given the "mantle of leadership of IPOB by the High Command of the Biafran Army," in Enugu on 30 May 2014 (ibid. 28 July 2016).

International Crisis Group states that IPOB "has a strong following among the Ibo in Rivers State, particularly in its chief city, Port Harcourt" (4 Dec. 2015). A January 2016 article in *The Guardian* describes IPOB as a "small" group (15 Jan. 2016). Further and corroborating information about the size of IPOB could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 1.1 Other IPOB Groups

The website of the Customary Government IPOB states that they are a movement "to help Biafrans achieve self-determination within the framework of [the] law" through "diplomacy, civil rights activism (human right[s] movement), mass media, political and every other legitimate process" (Customary Government IPOB n.d.a.). The website further states that under the customary government law administration, the Supreme Council of Elders (SCE) is the governing body of IPOB and is led by Chief Justice Eze Ozubu (ibid.). In an article by the *Guardian* (Nigeria), Dr. Dozie Ikedife, is named as the "Deputy Chairman, Supreme Council" of IPOB (28 Sep. 2016). According to its "policy statement," the SCE "ostracized" Kanu and his followers in May 2014 in response to a call for violence from "some of the pro-Biafran activists led by Mr. Nnamdi Kanu" (Customary Government IPOB n.d.b.). A July 2016 article on the Nigerian website of News24, cites a statement from IPOB distancing itself from the Customary Government IPOB and Ikedife, stating that "there is no such thing as Customary Government of Biafra" and that IPOB currently only consists of "freedom fighters" with Kanu as its leader (28 July 2016). Further and corroborating information about the SCE Customary Government IPOB, and its relations with the Kanu-led IPOB, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In August 2016, an article in *Vanguard*, a Nigerian newspaper, reported that "the Re-branded Indigenous People of Biafra" (TRIOPOB) [TRPOB] broke away from the Kanu-led IPOB because IPOB's position was too "defeatist" (*Vanguard* 24 Aug. 2016). *Vanguard* also reports that TRIOPOB said it would make a public denunciation of a secessionist Biafra in Abuja and instead pursues "the spirit and intent of Biafra" within Nigeria (ibid.). Today, a Nigerian digital newspaper, reports that IPOB claims that Department of State Services (DSS) [2] created fake splinter groups of IPOB (Today 8 Sept. 2016). Additional information on these splinter groups could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Leadership and Structure

### 2.1 Nnamdi Kanu

Sources state that Nnamdi Kanu is the leader of IPOB (AI 24 Feb. 2016; BBC 18 Dec. 2015; News24 28 July 2016). Sources report that Kanu was arrested in October 2015 (AFP 10 Apr. 2016; AI 24 Feb. 2016; *Vanguard* 13 Aug. 2016). Sources indicate that Kanu is a dual British and Nigerian citizen (Thompson et al. June 2016, 8; *Vanguard* 31 Mar. 2016; *The Guardian* 15 Jan. 2016), who lived in London and was arrested during a visit to Nigeria (ibid.). According to Amnesty International (AI), Kanu was charged with "criminal conspiracy, managing and belonging to an unlawful society and intimidation" in October 2015, and charged with "treason" in December 2015 (AI 24 Feb. 2016). According to *Vanguard*, Kanu was charged with "six-counts of treason" (13 Aug. 2016). Sources report that a court in Abuja ordered Kanu's release in December 2015, but that he was not released (AI 24 Feb. 2016; BBC 18 Dec. 2015). The BBC indicates that the police said he was not released because they were "still investigating his alleged involvement in terrorist activities" (ibid.). Similarly, in a May 2016 article, AFP states that "the government has repeatedly refused to release [Kanu] despite several court rulings granting him bail" (31 May 2016). In October 2016, sources report that IPOB filed a lawsuit with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court to fight Kanu's continued detention (*This Day* 5 Oct. 2016; *Vanguard* 5 Oct. 2016).

### 2.2 Other Leaders

Media sources cite the following people as holding positions in IPOB:

- Anayo Chukwu-Okpara, spokesman (AFP 31 May 2016; Al Jazeera 1 June 2016);
- Mr. Emma Powerful, Media and Publicity Secretary (*The Advocate* 5 Oct. 2016; National Mirror 8 Oct. 2016); and
- Emma Nmezu and Clifford Iroanya, spokespersons (*The Sun* 3 Oct. 2016).

Further and corroborating information about the leaders and structure of IPOB could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 3. Links with Other Groups

A 23 September 2016 article in the *Nigerian Tribune*, a Nigerian newspaper, refers to an "IPOB/MASSOB coalition" (23 Sept. 2016). Additional information on the IPOB/MASSOB coalition could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. Sources report that IPOB has expressed support for the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) (Jamestown Foundation 16 Sept. 2016; *Vanguard* 25 June 2016; *Newsweek* 27 May 2016). Media sources describe the NDA as a "militant group" in the Niger Delta (BBC 2 June 2016; IBTimes 19 June 2016). *Newsweek* reports that, according to an independent researcher, there are "operational links" between the NDA and IPOB, but the extent of the links is unclear (27 May 2016). Sources report that the NDA have called for Kanu's release from government detention and threatened to shut down oil plants unless Kanu was released (IBTimes 19 June 2016; *Newsweek* 30 May 2016). In addition, the NDA has "avowed support" for Kanu (ibid. 27 May 2016). For further information on the NDA, see Response to Information Request NGA105595 from August 2016.

### 4. Activities

The International Crisis Group indicates that IPOB is "the main group coordinating the recent 'free Kanu and restore Biafra' agitation" (International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015). The same source reports that "Kanu has strongly endorsed violence as an instrument for resuscitating Biafra" (ibid.).

Sources indicate that Kanu is also the director of Radio Biafra (ibid.; AI 24 Feb. 2016). The International Crisis Group describes Radio Biafra as "an unlicensed station urging violent struggle to achieve independence for Biafra," and states that it broadcasts "highly provocative messages laced with misinformation, hate speech and anti-Nigeria derision" (ibid.). *Jane's Intelligence Review* indicates that the Nigerian government called Radio Biafra a "'seditious pirate radio station' that broadcast unsavoury hate messages" (19 Nov. 2015). An AFP article also describes it as a "pirate" station where Kanu was "alleged to be broadcasting 'seditious messages' against Nigeria" (AFP 10 Apr. 2016). Sources indicate that Radio Biafra broadcasts from London (BBC 30 Nov. 2015; International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015).

Sources indicate that there is a video uploaded on YouTube showing that, in the World Igbo Conference in the US in September 2015, Kanu solicited weapons for Biafra from the Igbo diaspora (ibid.; BBC 30 Nov. 2016). However, in a March 2016 article, *Jane's Intelligence Review* states that Biafran separatists, including both IPOB and MASSOB, "have no capacity to carry out well-planned security operations" (2 March 2016). Corroborating information on IPOB's capacity for violence, or violent activities, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In April 2016, AFP reports that the Nigerian secret police accused IPOB of killing 55 people whose bodies were found buried in a forest in Abia state, which included 5 Hausa-Fulani residents who the government accused IPOB of abducting (AFP 10 Apr. 2016). The same article cites a spokesperson of MASSOB denying the allegations with regards to IPOB, stating that "IPOB and MASSOB are non-violent organizations" (ibid.).

Sources report that IPOB and its members were involved in the following:

- "A series of protests ... across the country" in "recent months" against the government's detention of Kanu and demands for a separate state for the Igbo (AFP 10 Apr. 2016). According to *Jane's Intelligence Review* since the arrest of Kanu on 18 October 2015, "demonstrations have taken place in several major cities in southeastern Nigerian states where the Igbo ethnic group is in a majority, as well as in the Rivers state capital of Port Harcourt" (19 Nov. 2015);
- issuance of a statement, in conjunction with MASSOB, in March 2016, demanding that all "Fulani herdsman" retreat to northern Nigeria, as "their safety [could] no longer be guaranteed" because MASSOB and IPOB "can no longer tolerate the systematic killing of our people and invasion of our land in the name of cattle grazing" (*Vanguard* 7 March 2016);
- ordering a "sit-at-home" protest in states in the South East to demand Kanu's release from detention, in which residents were ordered to stay home on 23 September 2016 (*Nigerian Tribune* 23 Sept. 2016; *The Sun* 24 Sept. 2016). Sources report that in most areas of the south-east people did not follow the order (ibid.; *Nigerian Tribune* 23 Sept. 2016). *Nigerian Tribune* notes that the order affected the "commercial and academic activities in Onitsha," and that markets, banks and schools were closed (*Nigerian Tribune* 23 Sept. 2016). *The Sun* states that the cities of Onitsha and Nnewi in Anambra state "were shut down" as a result of IPOB's order (*The Sun* 24 Sept. 2016).

### 5. State Response and Treatment

International Crisis Group reports that the authorities' response to Biafran separatist activities, "initially" was restrained, although they broke up rallies and arrested "scores" of people, including the filing of charges against 137 pro-Biafran people as of 1 December 2015 (International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015). However, the

same source reports that on 2 December 2015, the police shot at protesters and clashes between pro-separatist protesters and police led to the deaths of "at least eight" protesters and two policemen (ibid.). In September 2016, AI stated that "[o]n several occasions security forces have used excessive force against pro-Biafran activists who have attended protest marches across south-eastern Nigeria, or who have attempted to do so" (AI 28 Sept. 2016). AI notes that it has "documented cases of arrest, enforced disappearance, and often killing of supporters and members of various pro-Biafran groups in the region" (ibid.). AI also states that "scores" of Biafran independence supporters are in detention "for attempting to hold or participating in peaceful assemblies," many of them since January 2016 (ibid.).

Sources report that, according to the police, on 30 May 2016, in the city of Onitsha in Anambra state and the city of Asaba in Delta state, ten people were killed during protests to mark the anniversary of the start of the 1967 Biafra war when police officers opened fire on members of IPOB (AFP 31 May 2016; AI Jazeera 1 June 2016). However, sources report that, according to an IPOB spokesperson, "at least 35 members of the group were killed in Onitsha" (ibid.; AFP 31 May 2016). Sources report that the police claim that they shot at protesters after IPOB members fired at them, a claim IPOB denied (ibid.; AI Jazeera 1 June 2016). AI states that evidence gathered during an on-the-ground investigation indicates that, during commemoration activities for Biafra between 29 and 30 May 2016, the Nigerian military opened fire on members and supporters of IPOB, as well as on bystanders, at three locations in the town of Onitsha, Anambra state, and that after an investigation, AI "confirmed" that this resulted in "at least" 17 deaths and 50 injuries (AI 10 June 2016). According to AI, the information they gathered "indicates that the deaths of supporters and members of IPOB was the consequence of excessive, and unnecessary use of force" (ibid.).

AI notes that, between August 2015 and May 2016, there were "at least five similar incidents in Onitsha alone[,] where the police and military shot unarmed IPOB members and supporters" (ibid.). AI reports that the military open fired on peaceful IPOB supporters and protesters, and that "killings and mass arrests" of members and supporters by joint military and police operations happened in October, November and December 2015 (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report the following state responses to IPOB activities:

- On 17 December 2015 in Onitsha, the military killed five IPOB supporters who were celebrating the court order for the release of Nnamdi Kanu (AI 10 June 2016; BBC 18 Dec. 2015). BBC reports that the police said that "shots were fired after officers were attacked," but an IPOB co-ordinator said the demonstrators were unarmed (ibid.).
- AI reports that in February 2016, the military used "excessive force" to disperse a peaceful gathering of IPOB supporters in a school compound in Aba, killing "at least" 9 people and injuring "many more" (10 June 2016). Similarly, *Vanguard* reports that three Nigerian human rights organizations (the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, Intersociety, and the South East Based Coalition of Human Rights Organizations) sent a letter to the Nigerian Minister of Defence alleging that, on 9 February 2016, the Nigerian military killed 22 and injured over 30 unarmed IPOB members who had gathered in a school in Aba for a "prayer/meeting," and that the military dumped 13 of the bodies in a borrow pit in Aba state (20 Feb. 2016).
- In September 2016, the police arrested 12 IPOB members in a market in Enugu for allegedly calling for the market to be shut down for a sit-at-home protest of one day (P.M. News 20 Sept. 2016; *Nigerian Tribune* 20 Sept. 2016).
- In September 2016, in response to IPOB's call for the sit-at-home protest, the Commissioner of Police in Imo stated that police "would arrest and prosecute any IPOB member if their actions lead to breach of security and public peace" (P.M. News 21 Sept. 2016). The *Sun*, a Nigerian weekly newspaper, reported that, on 23 September 2016, the day that the sit-at-home protest occurred, there was a "heavy presence" of police at "every strategic point, particularly at the Asaba end of the River Niger Head Bridge which is the entry point from the eastern part of the country" (*The Sun* 24 Sept. 2016).

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 International Crisis Group, Biafra does not currently exist as a distinct unit in Nigeria and

the separatists are not clear about how they see the territory of the "new Biafra". Some claim it would include all areas inhabited by people of Ibo descent, including parts of the oil-rich Niger Delta to the south and Benue state to the north, but the other peoples of these regions vehemently oppose inclusion in any new Biafra. Other separatists say a restored Biafra would be

limited to the five core Ibo states - Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo - referred to administratively as Nigeria's "South East Zone". (International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015).

[2] According to an AFP article, the DSS is "Nigeria's domestic spy agency" (AFP 31 May 2016)

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