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THE IMPACT OF BANDITRY ON NIGERIA'S NATIONAL INTEREST

By

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Abstract
Banditry in Nigeria is a complex and critical phenomenon that has plagued the North-West region. The spate of banditry has become worrisome as activities of the various non-state actors threaten state, sub-regional and national security agenda. This paper examines the factors that trigger banditry, groups involved, legislations to stem the phenomenon and the socio- economic implications of banditry. The study is essentially qualitative in nature, relying on secondary sources of information. It is premised on the theory of deviance and strategy approach. It is safe to assert that there are diverse groups of bandits that operate independently under the sponsorship of certain members of the elite in society, acting as patrons. Members of bandit groups are mainly vulnerable youths encumbered with poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. In rural communities, women have been abused and hindered from agricultural activities. Politicians need to address banditry, given that good governance is a strong pillar for human capacity development in Nigeria's North-West zone. Among the recommendations is the urgency to seek strong collaborative support from the international community to combat banditry strategically in the northern zone.

Keywords: Banditry, Security, Threat, Peace, Development, Nigeria

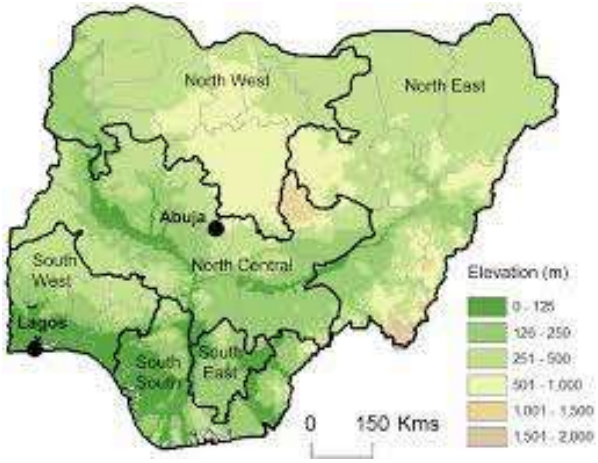
1. Introduction

Security is sine qua non to peace and socio-economic development in every part of the globe. Societies can only develop and pursue the ideals of co-habitation when peace is evident. Peace is therefore tantamount to security. In essence, it is suggestive that peace and security tend to correlate (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019). All societies treasure peace, security and development, and set up constitutional, legal and military arrangements to establish and sustain these ideals (Fisher, 2019). But evidence still shows that threats emerge somehow against peace, development and security in Nigeria (Odinkalu, 2018; Ogalah, 2021). In the West African sub-region, Nigeria is a hub of economic activities, and perceived as a huge democracy (Agbaeze *et al*., 2015). But to the contrary, the country's unity, security, peace and development are overtime being threatened by banditry (Ogaden, 2017).

Banditry, as currently characterized, was alien to Nigeria between 1960 and 1998. In West African history, banditry was identified with armed militants who waylaid traders to dispossess them forcefully of their belongings (Boahen, 1964). Such actions were never approved as civic behaviour in any national constitutional. Before Nigeria's democratic dispensation, bandits were scanty and, to a minimum extent, mindful of the law. However, in the current era, bandits have shown tactical resistance and boldness against both the government and the law. Indeed, groups of bandits have grown across northern Nigeria and in some selected parts of country (Ogbonnaya, 2013). Groups of bandits have increased in number, owing to the pecuniary benefits they enjoy, the support received from sponsors and weakness of the law enforcement agents to tackle them effectively. Indeed, the fight against banditry in Nigeria is entwined in religious bigotry, ethnic insinuation and political coloration.

Figure 1 is a geographical illustration of Nigeria's geopolitical zones and the structure of the north of the country.

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria's Six Geopolitical Zones



Source: Doi:10.1371/journal.pntd.0002416.g001

North-West, North-East and North-Central are expansive and interlocked, providing accessible surveillance for bandits. Most bandits who are Fulanis are intuitively conversant with the geographical terrain and can maneuver from forest to forest, and from village to village. The situation in both North-West and North-East Nigeria has attracted international attention, which tends to cast aspersion on Nigeria's ability to curtail insurgents, given the accolade the country has received as the giant of Africa (Zimako, 2009).

Although some efforts have been made to curb banditry in the north of Nigeria, such efforts are yet to bring about peace. The criminal law in Nigeria is sufficient to evoke punishments on bandits after apprehension, trial and conviction. But judging by the severity of their uncivil behaviour, bandits deserve quick judgment at special tribunals. In essence, special crime tribunals need be convened to handle such cases with dispatch. The Nigerian Constitution is clear about procedures for the administration of justice and punishment of crimes (Akinyemi, 2002), but loopholes, system corruption and weakness of public institutions have been indirectly exploited by bandits. Bandits work against people's exercise of fundamental human rights for which rights advocates have pleaded for fresh legal framework to deal with banditry (Abiodun & Abila, 2018).

Since the aggressive onslaught of banditry in Nigeria's north, there has been no effective legislation by the National Assembly to deal with the threat. Security forces in the affected northern states could be viewed as overwhelmed by the tactics and sophistication of banditry. From its posture, the federal government appears clueless, helpless and challenged with saboteurs (Odinkalu, 2018). Retardation of socio-economic development through the nefarious operations of bandits is a problem to which sustainable solution must be sought. The paper is hinged on this gap. However, objective of the paper is essentially to examine factors that immediately trigger banditry in North-West Nigeria. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 explores the principal concepts and selected theories. Section 3 dwells on factors that trigger banditry while section 4 focuses on effects and implications of banditry. Section 5 concludes and makes recommendations.

2. Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

For a deeper understanding of the problems that banditry imposes on victims and the society, it is imperative to examine the concepts that drive this paper.

Banditry

Banditry is conceived as groups of lawless individuals and their characteristic behaviour, which runs contrary to civilized norms. Banditry, as an illegitimate violent man-handling of innocent citizens, has

assumed a more sophisticated dimension with the application of modern weapons, use of communication gadgets among members and prior surveillance of territory of operations (Osasona, 2023). Violence is a major feature of banditry, and it used to terrorize, inflict injury and extort personal possessions from victims (Ogalah, 2021). But several other objectives have been attached to modern banditry. In the old dispensation, bandits carried out their activities in remote places and dark alleys. In current times, activities of bandits are engaged in the open without fear of the law, partly because they are fully armed (Marvasti, 2017). Conception of bandits has extended to incorporate cattle herders, unemployed youths, miscreants, *Boko Haram* insurgents, Islamist militants and armed individuals whose main mission is to use violence to meet their objectives in society (Abiodun & Abila, 2018). The common trend in the activities of these groups is violence and use of arms. It has been adduced that where a group of individuals use force to disrupt the peace of the environment, they quality to be labeled as bandits, provided their mission is contrary to civil expectation (Levine et *al*., 2019). In Nigeria, different categories and groups have been tagged as bandits solely on ground of lawlessness and engagement in violence to the breach of peace. In terms of demographic linkage, banditry can only be associated with the youth between 18 years and 40 years, who still show enough energy and youthful stamina to engage in violence (Nte et al., 2022). Violence is associated with strength and energy (Santhirasegaram, 2008), violence linked to the drive to escape from law enforcement agents.

National Interest

National Interest is what a nation feels to be necessary to its security and well being … National interest reflects the general and continuing ends for which a nation acts. National Interest is that which states seek to protect or achieve in relation to each other. The meaning of national interest is survival—the protection of physical, political and cultural identity against encroachments by state and non-state actors

National Interests can be defined as the claims, objectives, goals, demands and interests which a nation always tries to preserve, protect, defend and secure in her day to day dealings. According to Joseph Frankel cited in Ojo and Sassey (2002), national interest is the sum total of all the interests and policies actually pursued by a state . However all of the interests and policies been pursued by states, national survival is the most vital interest. National survival has to do with the protection of her territorial integrity, protection of the lives of its citizens as well as protection of its economic, political, religious or social institutions. States prepare to go to war once anyone of these objectives are tampered with. It was this reason; Nigeria went to war in 1967 with Biafra to preserve the integrity of Nigeria. It was also the same reasons that made Nigeria to declare war against terrorist organizations, separatist movements and other criminals that endangers Nigerian national interest.

Theoretical Framework

This paper takes cognizance of two theoretical approaches. First is the theory of deviance and second is the strategy approach. Since deviance is somewhat connected to violence, though not in all cases, it is expedient to adopt a strategy to stalk its occurrence. In the light of banditry and its implications for societal peace and development, advancing both deviance theory and strategy approach is justified.

Theory of Deviance

Appropriateness of the theory of deviance to the current discourse is rooted in its emphasis on behaviour that is considered inimical to society. The theory is rooted in both psychology and sociology for an understanding of human behavioural tendencies (Levine *et al*., 2019). Although deviance has wider applicability, the common thread in its sense of application in non-conformity to moral normality in society. Unity and cohesion of societies are founded on the premises of norms, moral values and behaviours which promote peace, love and harmony. But any human act to the contrary is synonymous with deviance.

Sociology researchers have found deviance in theory to associate with crime (Popa & Iurchevici, 2021). Consequently, crime is a substantial form of deviance. Crime, as viewed in the theory of social deviance, deviation by conduct from what is morally acknowledged as good by society (Bala & Ishaya, 2013), and for which the law prescribes punishment. Crime is therefore actions that perpetrate

disorder, civil disturbance and destruction thereby constituting a threat to public peace. The theory advances that law maintains a peace-keeping function and punishes deviance that is detrimental to society. Although not all acts of social deviance are criminal, acts which threaten lives and breach of society's peace are punishable by law to serve as a deterrent to others. Indeed, the displacement of families and loss of thousands of lives at the whims, caprices and unprovoked sentiments of bandits across Nigeria justify appropriate punishment by law.

In like association, banditry falls into the class of acts that reflect social deviance, and as such, is considered a crime. Deviance may not be a crime if it does not result in unprovoked killing, forcible rape and willful physical assault, but once the law attaches these immoral behaviours to it and prescribes punishments, then deviance is a criminal offense. Indeed, the immoral behaviour described herein is associated with violence. As a consequence, a theoretical insight into strategy for addressing violence is germane.

Strategy Approach

The logic behind the strategy approach is proper thinking for the adoption of an articulate means by which violence can be avoided. The approach is premised on the use of violence-avoiding measures in territories inhabited by innocent civilians (Danmaigoro *et al*., 2023). However, it emphasizes a military alternative type of strategy. The strategy approach prescribes military and defence policies as the best alternative of securing stability and peace. Proponents of the approach are of the opinion that serious threat to peace and security demands strategic planning and preparation against forces that show the potential destabilize social order (Abia, 2000). Frequent unprovoked attempts by bandits amount to a war situation, and are liable to degenerate into a state of anarchy. The strategy approach therefore demands a declaration of war against violence and its perpetrators, which is why the approach highlights strong preparation in dealing with lawlessness. Dealing with violence such as manifested by bandits suggests the use of military intervention, considering the ruthlessness of modern bandits in Nigeria.

3. Factors that Trigger Banditry

Idle hands and idle minds need survival for which they find expression at any slight opportunity. This analogy is supported by the causal factors which drive banditry. In the first instance, it has been theorized that ignorance gives birth to banditry (Oseni, 2022). All bandits are male of school age by educational classification. Being out of school or not being exposed to formal education breeds uncomplimentary social vices among the youths who constitute membership of bandit groups (Marvasti, 2017). This phenomenon is thus the product of high level of illiteracy among the northern youths. Numerous other factors have been found to exacerbate banditry in the North-West of Nigeria. For one, the weak security architecture in the region gives space to bandits to regroup and operate unchecked, thereby beating all state security operatives to intelligence (Nte *et al.*, 2022). It has been found also that Nigeria's borders are porous thus allowing foreign bandits to penetrate into the country unsuspectingly (Babatola, 2015).

Nigeria has been tagged a poor country (Dada, 2023), and consistently, the level of poverty has risen since 2015. Poverty is presumed to have compelled unemployed youths to take up arms as well as display behaviours found to be inconsistent with morality and civil norms. In the same vein, harsh socio-economic conditions further aggravated by rising prices, food shortage and poor welfare standards combine with other factors to trigger banditry among able-bodied youths. Findings have also revealed that successive governments in Nigeria's northern states have not demonstrated any significant political will to address the welfare of the youths (Abdulyakeen, 2020). Concern for youth development is at the lowest ebb on most governments' agenda. Subsequently, the welfare inadequacy has promoted youth unemployment, leaving the youths to seek solace in violence as a reactionary response.

Furthermore, evidence has equally shown that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons gives impetus to violence and banditry (Oduku, 2021). Unemployed youths effortlessly gain access to small arms, owing to weak security checks by law enforcement agents. Consequently, illegal trade in arms and unchecked entry of arms at Nigeria's borders could be adduced as factors which further

trigger banditry in the North-West. Evidently, a weak judicial system that delays justice such as is observable in Nigeria is a contributory factor. In certain cases, arrested bandits escape justice even while awaiting trial. Such escape could not have been without connivance with some law enforcement agents on the solidarity platform of ethnicity, religion or the political influence of some indigenes. Observers have reported also that ungoverned spaces such the forests and mass lands which characterize most parts of the North-West and North-East of Nigeria provide hideouts and facilitate free movement for bandits (Onwuzuruigbo, 2021). While ungoverned spaces may be difficult to man, by means of technology through adequate investment, bandits' hideouts could be discovered. Nevertheless, complicity among law enforcement officers and behaviour that reflects sabotage tend to complicate government's efforts at combatting banditry effectively.

4. Effects and Implications of Banditry in Nigeria

Banditry has psychological and socio-economic effects on victims as well as non-victims. Its political implications for Nigeria as a geographical entity are all too evident in the eyes of members of the international community. Given that no significant economic activities can take place in any zone that is banditry-prone, the total effect is loss of employment opportunities and economic stagnation (Todaro & Smith, 2011). Indeed, economic growth could be as much as a mirage. Bandits are known to target women whom they rape with brutality (Abdulyakeen, 2020). One of the major consequences of banditry is looting associated with wanton destruction and burning. Figure 2 hereunder illustrates the degree of destruction that bandits perpetrate in their operation.

Figure 2: House Burnt by Bandits



Source: Getty Image. www.bbc.com

In recent times, kidnapping has featured purposely with banditry for economic gains, not for any political ideology. As integral outcomes of banditry are plundering, destruction of farms, and residential houses, all of which have rendered thousands of indigenes homeless and in deep poverty (Egbuta, 2018). Records show that internally displaced persons are over a million in North-West Nigeria alone (Abiodun & Abila, 2018). The psychological effect of family displacement among victims of banditry is traumatic and emotional. In the main, unprovoked killing and brutality are violent signals to instill fear into women to force them into submission. The number of deaths arising from banditry across the north between 2010 and 2023 is staggering to scare foreigners from investing in the zone (Abdulyakeen, 2020). Also, school closure, owing to fear of kidnapping by bandits, is the current safety measure approved by government authorities in banditry-prone zones. The resulting effect of such a measure is dwindling academic standard and obstruction of educational growth in the north of Nigeria. Statistics about the activities of bandits in northern Nigeria are inconclusive, non-specific and to an extent inflated (Yaba, 2022). While the records are not straight, it remains evident that the spate of banditry has continued to increase on a daily basis. An average of three attacks per week seems plausible. Between 2021 and 2023, a working total of 4,329 attacks were on the average reported (Odinkalu, 2018; Yaba, 2021).

Unabated banditry running since 2010 in the north implies that both the state and federal governments have lost control over bandits. It is suggestive that strategic and tactical efforts by

government security agencies to tackle insecurity have failed to attain any objectives of peace keeping and maintenance of law and order. By the same token, continued onslaught of banditry has drastically stalled socio-economic development, thus deepening fear, trauma and dislocation among rural dwellers. The current state of affairs reduces the quality of life of the average citizen in the North-West of Nigeria. Economic development hardly flourishes in any environment characterized by prolonged banditry and chaos. This is the scenario in North-West Nigeria from where corporate organisations have relocated, causing also expatriates to vacate the terrain. The situation has further aggravated unemployment and its impact. Without peace, economic development is regressive. Even the level of public infrastructure acquired over time has been destroyed through bombing. The spate of banditry in Nigeria's northern zone has consequently retarded economic growth of nearly most states in North-West and North-East zones.

5. The Implications of Banditry for Nigeria's National Interest

The scourge of banditry in Nigeria has emerged as a major threat to national interest, destabilizing communities, undermining economic development, and eroding public safety (Abimbola, 2023). These armed groups, operating primarily in the North-Western and North-Central regions, engage in a wide range of criminal activities, including kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, attacks on villages, and armed robbery (Adebayo, 2020). This chronic insecurity has created a humanitarian crisis and poses a substantial challenge to governance, peace, and stability in the nation (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Banditry disrupts economic activities, particularly agriculture, a mainstay of many rural communities. Farmers are frequently targeted, forced to abandon their lands and livelihoods due to the constant threat of violence (Abimbola, 2023). This has led to displacement, food insecurity, and a decline in agricultural production, disrupting local and regional economies (Adebayo, 2020). Moreover, businesses struggle to operate in this volatile environment, with attacks on transport routes hampering trade and investment.

The psychological toll of banditry on Nigerian citizens is profound. The fear of kidnappings and attacks has created a pervasive climate of anxiety, eroding public trust and hindering daily life (International Crisis Group, 2020). Entire communities have been displaced, forced to flee their homes and leaving behind their belongings (Abimbola, 2023). This displacement further exacerbates social and economic vulnerabilities, creating a cycle of instability. Furthermore, the frequent abductions of schoolchildren have instilled fear in parents, disrupting education and undermining the future prospects of an entire generation (Adebayo, 2020).

Banditry undermines government authority and weakens public confidence in the state's ability to provide security (International Crisis Group, 2020). The audacity and frequency of attacks challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force, posing a direct threat to national security (Adebayo, 2020). This erosion of trust can create fertile ground for extremist groups to capitalize on grievances and further destabilize the region. Additionally, a vast amount of resources must be diverted to combating banditry, draining funds that could be used for critical development projects and social services (Abimbola, 2023).

The complex factors fueling this wave of banditry include poverty, unemployment, climate change, and porous borders (International Crisis Group, 2020). Addressing this crisis requires a multi-faceted approach that tackles its root causes, strengthens the capacity of security forces, and fosters cooperation at both regional and national levels (Abimbola, 2023). While efforts have been made to address banditry, the sheer scale of the challenge highlights the urgent need for sustained and effective action (Adebayo, 2020).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Security challenges arising from banditry have become recurrent issues in Nigeria since 2010. Indeed, the federal government's weak handling of *Boko Haram* and cattle herders gave impetus to bandits' ruthless operations across the northern parts of Nigeria. Bandits' penetration into the south of the

country was further emboldened by the government's non-challant attitude and what was perceived as support for the Fulanis who constitute a large proportion of bandits across Nigeria. Given that bandits are sponsored by certain wealthy individuals, who are also influential politicians, and being privy to official government information, it is difficult for the government to effectively deal with banditry in Nigeria. Nonetheless, strong-willed efforts still need be made to combat banditry to prevent further spread to other peaceful zones of Nigeria. For this reason, some recommendations are apt.

There needs to be a strong sense of patriotism among military security agents to enable them tackle insurgency with dispatch. Such patriotism can only be instilled through motivation and modern military training in the art of combating insurgency. Banditry is a crime which should be given strategic attention, considering its devastating effect on human life, livelihood and stigma on Nigeria's external image. Consequently, a well-coordinated military strategy among Nigeria's armed forces should suffice. Strategy will, however, ineffectual if it is not driven by effective communication among the security forces involved.

Handling bandits should be divorced from religious and ethnic sentiments in Nigeria, as perceived to be done. Banditry is a crime against humanity, and offenders, once apprehended should be immediately punished according to the prescribed criminal law. Delayed justice allows compromise and ultimate denial of justice. Nigeria needs the support of neighbouring countries in the fight against banditry. Therefore, the government needs to seek collaboration to fortify the borders. The various borders surrounding Nigeria need be adequately manned by a combined team of armed forces, supported by officers of the customs unit, to forestall the entry of illegal arms carriers, dealers and bandits from neighbouring West African countries. Proper surveillance can be engaged to track and arrest the sponsors of banditry in Nigeria. Similarly, the Nigerian government needs to maintain strong support of the international community in the fight against banditry.

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