JOURNAL OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE
ISSN Print: 2992-2763 – ISSN Online: 2992-4618 | Vol. 4, No. 3 / September, 2026
https://www.jopd.com.ng

R2P DOCTRINE VERSUS STATE SOVEREIGNTY: NIGERIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL DUTY AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY'S ROLE

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DOI:https://doi.org/10.57233/jopd.v4i3.08

ABSTRACT
The tension between the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and state sovereignty is particularly evident in Nigeria, whose 1999 Constitution (as amended) affirms its sovereignty while assigning government the duty to protect citizens' welfare. Since 2009, the Boko Haram/Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency has caused extensive deaths and displacement, exposing challenges in Nigeria's capacity to fulfill this duty and raising questions about the application of R2P's second and third pillars. Using a qualitative doctrinal and documentary research design, this study examines Nigeria's constitutional-legal framework, the humanitarian impact of the insurgency, and international and regional responses to R2P. Drawing on United Nations, African Union, ECOWAS, Nigerian governmental, and independent sources, the study finds that R2P has gained significant recognition in international practice, while the African Union's Constitutive Act provides a regional basis for intervention under Article 4(h). However, R2P has not been formally invoked in Nigeria despite the severity of the crisis. The study argues that this reflects Nigeria's regional influence, peacekeeping role, and the international community's preference for assistance-based engagement over coercive intervention. It concludes that Nigeria's constitutional duty and R2P are complementary and recommends stronger atrocity-prevention measures, clearer AU/ECOWAS early-warning criteria, and sustained international assistance.
Keywords*: Responsibility to Protect, Sovereignty, Nigeria, Boko Haram, Constitution, Article 4(h), atrocity prevention*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

State sovereignty has traditionally been understood as a state's authority to govern its territory without external interference. However, the mass atrocities witnessed in Rwanda, Cambodia, Srebrenica, and other conflicts demonstrated the limitations of treating sovereignty as an absolute principle when governments fail to protect their populations. In response to these concerns, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) introduced the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2001, redefining sovereignty as a responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (ICISS, 2001). The principle was endorsed by UN member states at the 2005 World Summit through three pillars emphasizing state responsibility, international assistance, and collective action when states manifestly fail to protect their populations (UN General Assembly, 2005).

Africa has developed a distinctive approach to this principle. The African Union (AU) moved beyond the Organisation of African Unity's traditional emphasis on non-interference by adopting Article 4(h) of its Constitutive Act, which permits intervention in grave

circumstances involving genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (Kioko, 2003). This reflects the AU's broader shift from non-interference toward non-indifference, although Article 4(h) has never been formally invoked against a member state.

Nigeria provides an important case for examining the relationship between sovereignty and R2P. Its 1999 Constitution (as amended) recognizes Nigeria as a sovereign state while also identifying the security and welfare of its people as a primary responsibility of government (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, s.14(2)(b)). This obligation closely corresponds with R2P's first pillar. However, the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency since 2009 has resulted in extensive civilian casualties, displacement, and continuing insecurity, raising concerns about the state's capacity to fulfill this responsibility.

Existing studies have examined Boko Haram, R2P, AU intervention, and regional responses separately, but limited attention has been given to the relationship between Nigeria's constitutional duty to protect its citizens and the international R2P framework. There is also insufficient comparative analysis of Nigeria's experience with regional cases such as The Gambia in 2017. This study addresses these gaps by examining Nigeria's constitutional responsibility to protect its population, assessing the humanitarian impact of the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, and evaluating international and regional responses to R2P. It seeks to explain why, despite the prolonged crisis, Nigeria has not been formally treated as an R2P or AU Article 4(h) case.

2.1 Constitutional Sovereignty and Protection Duty in Nigeria

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) articulates sovereignty at two levels. Section 1 establishes Nigeria as an indivisible, indissoluble and supreme legal order, while section 14(2)(a) locates ultimate sovereignty in the people, from whom government derives its authority, and section 14(2)(b) declares that the security and welfare of the people is the primary purpose of government (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Crucially, section 14 sits within Chapter II of the Constitution, the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy, which section 6(6)(c) renders non-justiciable that is, not directly enforceable by citizens through the courts. This is a significant conceptual nuance largely absent from R2P-focused literature on Nigeria: the constitutional protection duty exists as a directive political obligation rather than a judicially enforceable right, a distinction later developed in this study's discussion of findings.

2.2 Non-Interference and Non-Indifference

The 1963 OAU Charter's Article II committed the organisation to defending the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of member states through strict non-interference in internal affairs, a posture scholars associate with the OAU's failure to prevent gross violations such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Amvane, 2015). The African Union's 2000 Constitutive Act, and specifically Article 4(h), marked a deliberate departure from this posture towards what AU discourse terms non-indifference an explicit textual right of the Union to intervene in a member state facing war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity (Kioko, 2003).

~~2.3~~ Sovereignty as Responsibility

This study adopts Sovereignty as Responsibility, developed by Deng, Kimaro, Lyons, Rothchild and Zartman (1996),

Basic assumptions of the theory

Protection of Citizens: Sovereignty means more than political independence; it requires governments to protect the lives, rights, security, and welfare of their populations (ICISS, 2001).

International Support: When a state lacks the capacity to protect its people, the international community has a responsibility to provide assistance through prevention, humanitarian support, and capacity building.

Responsibility to Respond: When a state seriously fails to protect its population from mass atrocities, the international community may take collective action, with coercive measures considered only as a last resort and in accordance with international law (ICISS, 2001).

2.4 Justification for the Framework

Sovereignty as Responsibility provides the most suitable theoretical framework for this study for three main reasons. First, it directly informed the ICISS's 2001 R2P framework and therefore provides a foundation for understanding the principle from its original conceptual basis. Second, the theory connects domestic state responsibilities with international obligations, which aligns with this study's focus on both Nigeria's constitutional duty to protect its citizens and international responses through the UN and AU. Third, its development in response to African experiences of conflict and governance makes it particularly relevant to analysing Nigeria's security and protection challenges.

3.1 Sources of Data

All data used are verifiable secondary data drawn from three categories of source. The first category comprises primary legal instruments: the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000), the UN Charter, the ICISS 2001 report, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document. The second category comprises institutional and monitoring data: the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect's resolution registers, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans, UNHCR annual results reports, the United States Department of State's country human rights reports, and Statista/Council on Foreign Relations conflict-fatality data. The third category comprises peer-reviewed literature published in Security Journal, African Security Review, the African Human Rights Law Journal, Africa Spectrum, and the Law and Social Justice Review.

3.2 Selection Criteria

Sources were selected based on three criteria: (a) publication or last update between 1996 and 2026; (b) direct relevance to R2P, Nigerian constitutional sovereignty, or AU/ECOWAS intervention practices; and (c) independent verifiability through identifiable institutional,

governmental, or peer-reviewed sources. Anecdotal, unsourced, or single-source claims that could not be corroborated by at least one independent source were excluded.

Findings are presented against the study's three objectives, each supported by a table and a chart derived from the verifiable secondary data described in Section 5, followed by a two-hundred-word interpretation.

3.3 Objective 1: Constitutional and Legal Basis of Nigeria's Sovereignty and Protection Duty

Provision	Content (summarised)	R2P Pillar Equivalent	Justiciability
Section 1	Nigeria is one indivisible, indissoluble and supreme sovereign state.	Baseline sovereignty claim (pre-R2P)	Justiciable (supremacy clause)
Section 14(2)(a)	Sovereignty belongs to the people; government derives authority from the Constitution.	Domestic legitimacy basis for Pillar One	Non-justiciable (Chapter II)
Section 14(2)(b)	Security and welfare of the people is the primary purpose of government.	Direct equivalent of Pillar One	Non-justiciable (Chapter II, s.6(6)(c))
Sections 217–218	Establishes armed forces for defence of Nigeria and suppression of insurrection.	Operational Pillar One tool	Justiciable (Chapter V, operational powers)
Section 305	Empowers the President to proclaim a state of emergency.	Operational Pillar One tool	Justiciable (procedural safeguards apply)

Source? *Table 2: Nigeria's Constitutional Sovereignty and Protection-Duty Provisions*

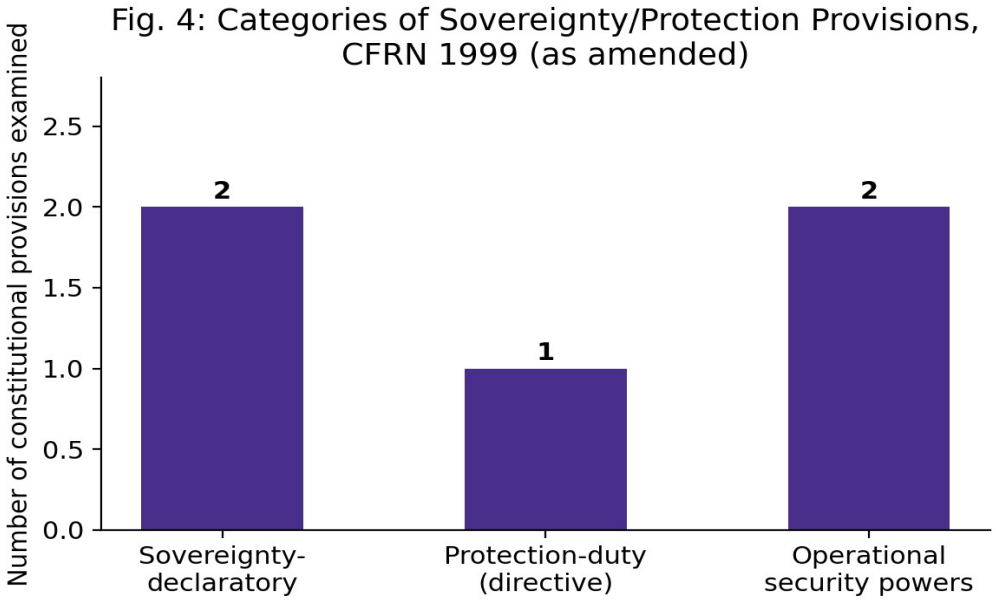


Figure 1: Categories of Sovereignty/Protection Provisions Examined, CFRN 1999 (as amended)

Table 2 and Figure 1 show that Nigeria's Constitution addresses sovereignty and protection through three distinct categories of provision: two sovereignty-declaratory clauses (sections 1 and 14(2)(a)) that assert Nigeria's supreme and popular sovereignty; one protection-duty clause (section 14(2)(b)) that directly mirrors R2P's first pillar by making the security and welfare of the people the primary purpose of government; and two operational security-power clauses (sections 217–218 and 305) that equip the state to act on that duty through the armed forces and emergency powers. The most significant finding is structural rather than numerical: the single clause that most closely operationalises R2P's Pillar One section 14(2)(b) sits within Chapter II of the Constitution, the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy, which section 6(6)(c) renders non-justiciable. This means that, unlike the sovereignty-declaratory and security-power provisions, which are enforceable through ordinary constitutional litigation, no Nigerian citizen can directly petition a court to compel the executive to perform its protection duty under section 14(2)(b). Nigeria's constitutional architecture therefore already contains a domestic articulation of sovereignty as responsibility consistent with R2P's first pillar, but that articulation is politically aspirational rather than judicially enforceable a structural weakness that becomes significant when read alongside the scale of the humanitarian crisis examined under Objective 2.

3.4 Objective 2: Scale of the Humanitarian Crisis as an Empirical Test of the Protection *Duty*

Year	Estimated IDPs, NE Nigeria (millions)	Source	Notes
2016–2017	2.6	Amnesty International, reported by AFP (2017)	Cumulative displacement since 2009
2020	2.1	UN estimate, GlobalSecurity.org (2022)	Lake Chad Basin total ≈ 3 million
2022	2.1	UN estimate, GlobalSecurity.org (2022)	IDPs in Nigeria specifically
2024	2.3	OCHA (2025), NE Nigeria HNRP	National all-crisis total: 3.6m (US Dept. of State, 2025)

Table 3: Boko Haram/ISWAP-Linked Displacement in North-East Nigeria, Selected Years

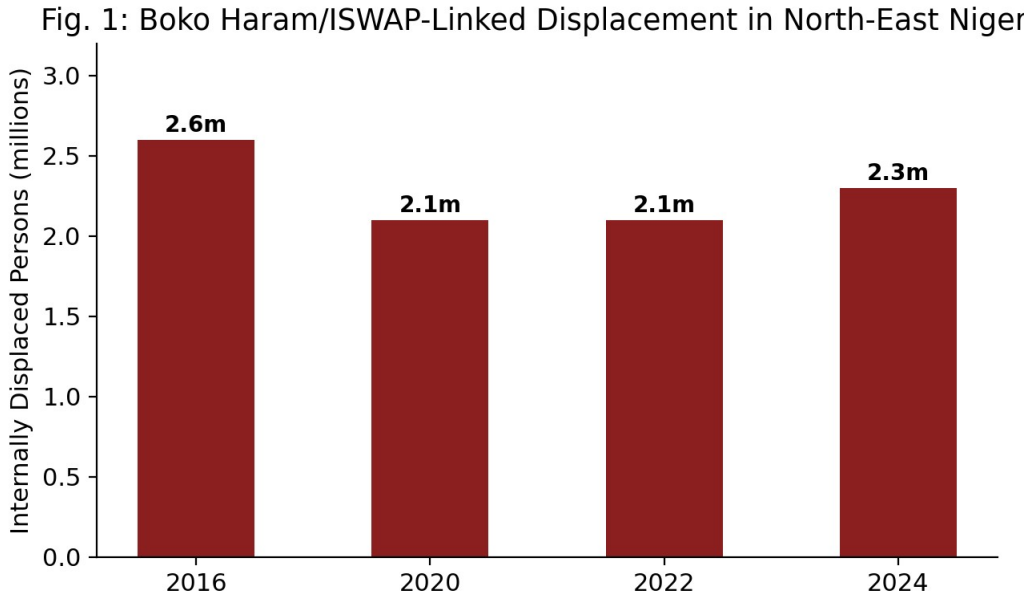


Figure 2: Boko Haram/ISWAP-Linked Displacement in North-East Nigeria (millions)

Table 3 and Figure 2, triangulated across Amnesty International/AFP, UN-derived estimates and OCHA's 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, show that internal displacement linked to the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency has remained above two million persons in north-east Nigeria continuously since at least 2016, with no year in the reviewed period falling below 2.1 million. When the broader, all-crisis national IDP figure of 3.6 million and

383,000 refugees reported by the US Department of State (2025) is considered, the scale becomes still more pronounced. This is not a transient spike but a structural, fifteen-year-long humanitarian condition, reinforced by Council on Foreign Relations/Statista (2023) data placing cumulative deaths in Borno State alone above thirty-eight thousand, and by continuing lethal attacks as late as September 2025 (The New Humanitarian, 2025). Measured against the four atrocity crimes that define R2P's scope, the conduct documented mass killing of civilians, abduction and sexual enslavement of women and girls, and forced conscription of children (US Department of State, 2025) falls within the definitional boundaries of war crimes and crimes against humanity. On a purely empirical reading, therefore, the scale and persistence of the crisis constitute the kind of evidence that R2P's framers envisaged as triggering, at minimum, an active Pillar Two response, and arguably sustained scrutiny as to whether Pillar One has been adequately discharged.

3.5 Objective 3: Pattern of International and Regional Engagement with R2P

UN Organ	Resolutions Referencing R2P (cumulative)	Source
UN Security Council	95+	Global Centre for R2P (n.d.-a)
UN Human Rights Council	80+	Global Centre for R2P (n.d.-a)
UN General Assembly	40+	Global Centre for R2P (n.d.-a)

Table 4: Cumulative UN Resolutions Referencing R2P Since 2006

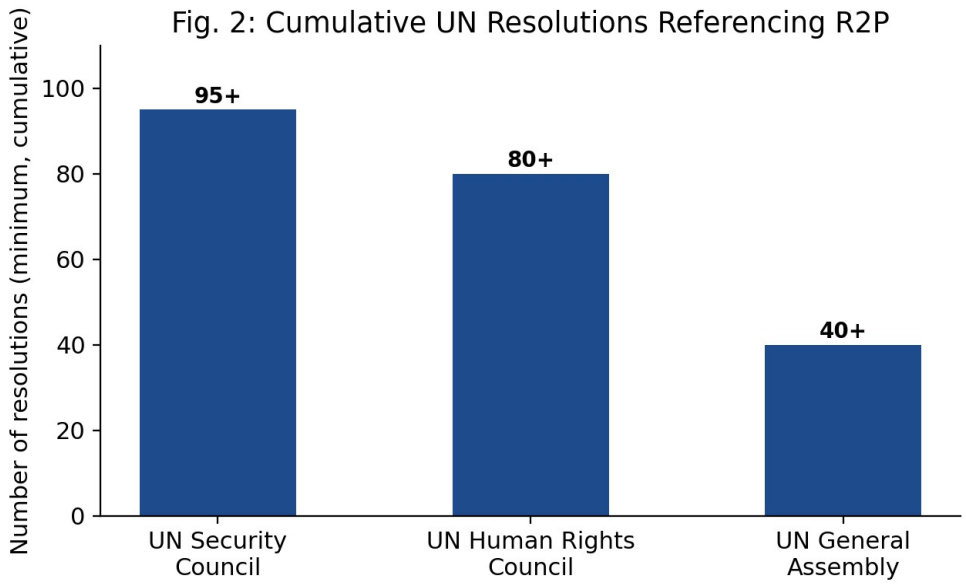


Figure 3: Cumulative UN Resolutions Referencing R2P

Period / Case	Coercive Interventions	Notes
1990s: Liberia, Sierra Leone	2	ECOMOG-led deployments under evolving ECOWAS security mandates
2000s: Côte d'Ivoire	1	UNOCI/French-supported stabilisation force
2010s: The Gambia (2017)	1	ECOMIG deployment of up to 7,000 troops; Jammeh exiled without combat (Hartmann, 2017)
Nigeria (Boko Haram, since 2009)	0	No formal Article 4(h) or UNSC Pillar Three coercive measure invoked to date

Table 5: Regional (ECOWAS/AU) Coercive Interventions Compared with Nigeria's Case

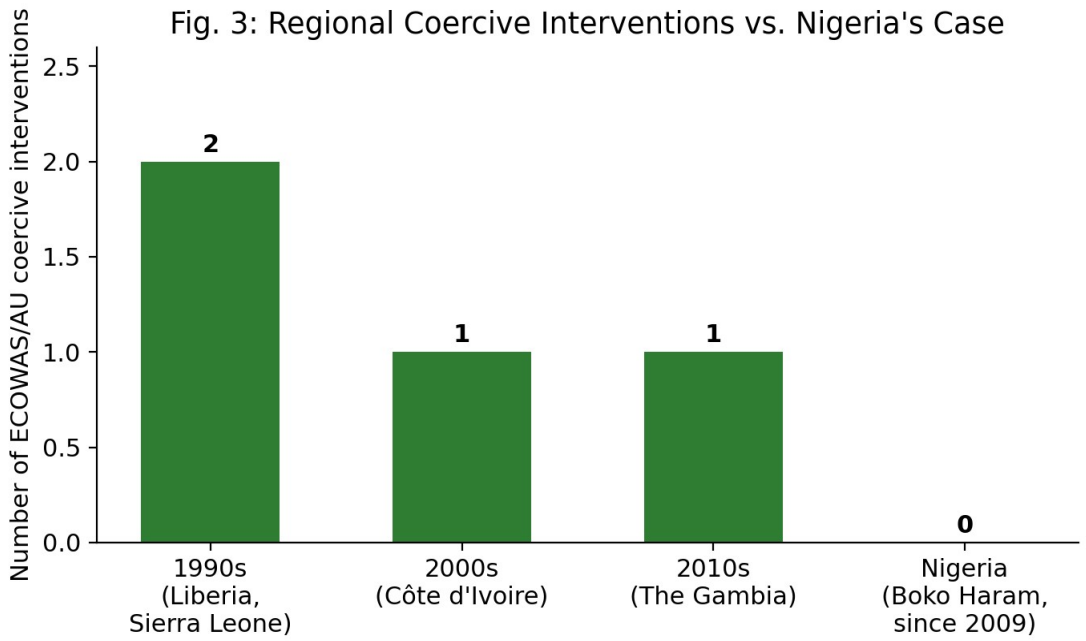


Figure 4: Regional Coercive Interventions vs. Nigeria's Case

Tables 4 and 5, and Figures 3 and 4, together show a clear pattern. At the global level, R2P is an actively used normative reference, invoked cumulatively in well over two hundred UN resolutions across three organs since 2006. At the regional level, ECOWAS and the AU have shown a demonstrated willingness to deploy coercive force in West Africa on four occasions since 1990, most recently and rapidly in The Gambia in 2017, where roughly seven thousand troops were mobilised within weeks of a contested political transition that produced no recorded mass-casualty violence (Hartmann, 2017). Against this backdrop, the complete absence of any formal Article 4(h) or Pillar Three measure directed at Nigeria's Boko Haram/ISWAP crisis despite fifteen years of activity, tens of thousands of deaths and millions displaced is the study's most striking finding. It indicates that formal coercive

R2P/Article 4(h) machinery is not triggered by the scale of harm alone, but by a combination of the target state's political weight, its continued governmental and military function, and the international community's assessment of comparative political and strategic risk in acting within, rather than alongside, a major regional power.

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The finding that Nigeria's constitutional protection duty under section 14(2)(b) is non-justiciable resonates with, and extends, the LASJURE (2023) conclusion that the 1999 Constitution privileges territorial integrity and unity over other competing claims, reflecting what that study terms an absolutist sovereignty posture. Where LASJURE (2023) examined this in relation to self-determination, the present study shows the same structural absolutism operates against the protection duty itself: sovereignty is judicially defended, but the corresponding obligation of protection is not judicially enforceable. This helps explain why Ekumaoko and Ezemenaka (2020) could conclude that the Nigerian state had failed to adequately protect north-east civilians without identifying any domestic judicial remedy for that failure the remedy, if any, was always going to have to be political or international rather than constitutional-judicial in the ordinary sense.

The scale of displacement and fatality documented under Objective 2 supports Maiangwa and Popovski's (2016) argument that community self-protection emerged as an informal 'fourth pillar' of R2P precisely because formal Pillar One performance was inconsistent. Their case-level observation of vigilante self-organisation after the 2014 Chibok abductions is corroborated at the aggregate level by this study's triangulated displacement figures, which show that the underlying conditions Maiangwa and Popovski describe were not a single episode but a sustained, multi-year condition still evident in 2024–2025 (OCHA, 2025; The New Humanitarian, 2025).

The absence of formal Pillar Three or Article 4(h) action, established under Objective 3, is best explained through the combined lens of the reviewed legal scholarship. Kioko (2003) and Amvane (2015) both note that Article 4(h), while textually unconditional, has in practice depended on Assembly-level political consensus and, where relevant, alignment with Security Council preferences a threshold Amvane (2015) shows was not even met in the far more internationally scrutinised case of Libya without significant contestation. Hartmann's (2017) explanation of ECOWAS's Gambia success a small, diplomatically isolated target state, clear regional legal mandate, and negligible risk of a protracted military engagement throws Nigeria's case into sharp relief by contrast: Nigeria is ECOWAS's largest member and a leading AU troop and diplomatic contributor, meaning that any external coercive posture directed at Nigeria itself would invert the usual regional power relationship on which interventions such as Gambia's depended. This is consistent with broader critiques that Security Council and regional decision-making on R2P are shaped as much by the political weight of the state in question as by the severity of harm to its population (Academy 4SC Learning Hub, n.d.).

A further distinction, not fully articulated in the reviewed literature, helps explain the Nigerian outcome: R2P's 'manifestly failing' threshold has, in international practice, been most readily applied either to states whose governments are themselves perpetrators of atrocity (as in Darfur) or to states that have effectively lost central governmental capacity (as

in Libya after 2011). Nigeria fits neither pattern precisely: it is not the perpetrator of the atrocities in question, and it retains a functioning central government, judiciary and military actively (if imperfectly) engaged in counter-insurgency and humanitarian coordination through structures such as the Multinational Joint Task Force. Under the sovereignty-as-responsibility framework applied in Section 4, this places Nigeria's case within Pillar Two rather than Pillar Three: a state struggling to fully discharge its responsibility, appropriately met with assistance, rather than a state that has abdicated responsibility altogether.

5.0 IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS

1. For Nigerian constitutional practice, the non-justiciability of section 14(2)(b) leaves citizens without a direct domestic legal remedy when the state under-performs its protection duty, implying a need for either purposive judicial interpretation linking Chapter II objectives to the justiciable right to life in Chapter IV, or legislative reform giving the protection duty concrete, enforceable content.

2. For international law and R2P doctrine, Nigeria's case illustrates that the practical operation of R2P privileges Pillar Two assistance over Pillar Three coercion even where casualty and displacement figures are very large, reinforcing existing critiques that R2P's coercive pillar risks being applied selectively according to a target state's geopolitical weight rather than the severity of harm alone.

3. For the African Union and ECOWAS, the continued non-use of Article 4(h), even in a member state of Nigeria's scale and duration of crisis, risks eroding the provision's credibility as a genuine instrument of non-indifference and strengthens the case for developing objective, depoliticised atrocity-threshold indicators rather than leaving invocation to ad hoc Assembly-level political judgement.

4. For policy and practice, the findings imply that continued international engagement with Nigeria is most appropriately channelled through capacity-building support military, judicial, and humanitarian rather than coercive frameworks, for as long as the Nigerian state continues to demonstrate good-faith counter-insurgency and humanitarian response efforts.

This study set out to examine the constitutional basis of Nigeria's sovereignty and protection duty, the empirical scale of the Boko Haram/ISWAP crisis, and the pattern of international and regional engagement with R2P in relation to Nigeria. It finds that Nigeria's 1999 Constitution already articulates a sovereignty-as-responsibility model closely consonant with R2P's first pillar, but that the key protection-duty clause is constitutionally non-justiciable; that the humanitarian scale of the insurgency, triangulated across multiple independent and verifiable sources, has been substantial and sustained for approximately fifteen years; and that, despite this, neither the UN Security Council nor the African Union has formally treated Nigeria as a Pillar Three or Article 4(h) case, in marked contrast to swifter regional action taken in smaller, less internationally consequential states. The best explanation for this pattern is not an absence of legal or factual grounds, but the combined effect of a high 'manifestly failing' threshold, Nigeria's continued governmental and military function, and its political and strategic weight within the regional and international system. The relationship

between R2P and Nigerian sovereignty is therefore best understood as complementary rather than adversarial: both instruments articulate the same underlying norm that protection of the population is the primary purpose of legitimate authority, and the live policy question is not whether Nigeria's sovereignty should be overridden, but how Pillar Two assistance can be strengthened so that Pillar Three coercion never becomes necessary.

Recommendations

1. The National Assembly should legislate specific, measurable atrocity-prevention and civilian-protection benchmarks such as IDP resettlement safety standards and humanitarian access timelines that give operational content to section 14(2)(b) beyond its current non-justiciable, aspirational status.

2. Nigerian courts and public-interest litigants should pursue strategic litigation reading Chapter II protection duties purposively alongside the justiciable rights to life and dignity in Chapter IV, narrowing the enforcement gap identified in this study.

3. The African Union should develop objective, depoliticised early-warning indicators for Article 4(h) consideration, distinct from ad hoc Assembly-level political discretion, so that the provision functions as an operative rather than a purely symbolic instrument.

4. ECOWAS and the African Union should expand non-coercive Pillar Two support to Nigeria and the Multinational Joint Task Force including troop-contribution coordination, intelligence-sharing and predictable humanitarian financing rather than treating coercive intervention as the only meaningful expression of non-indifference.

5. The UN Security Council and Human Rights Council should maintain and strengthen thematic R2P monitoring of the Lake Chad Basin crisis, keeping Nigeria's case visible in atrocity-prevention reporting even in the continued absence of formal Pillar Three action.

6. Future research should complement this study's desk-based secondary-data design with primary, field-based data collection surveys and interviews with affected communities, security officials and policymakers to test whether the 'manifestly failing' threshold is being applied consistently across comparable African cases.

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