

# Can Nigeria shoot its way out of terrorism?

## Funke Egbemode asks



terrorism, banditry and kidnapping. Can a nation shoot its way out of insecurity? Or, put differently, can Nigeria finally defeat terrorism by going beyond bullets and addressing the deeper problems of poverty, ignorance, hopelessness and social decay? Of course, the question is not as simple as it sounds. Every time terrorists attack a village, every time bandits kidnap schoolchildren, every time farmers abandon their land because of fear, the immediate reaction is always the same: send more soldiers, deploy more policemen, buy more weapons. Let us have more airstrikes. Nobody can fault that reaction. Government has a sacred duty to protect lives and property. Citizens deserve to sleep with both eyes closed.

**I**sn't it high time Nigeria dropped all other projects and face total economic empowerment and reorientation of the North? Yes, North, because this horrid terror monster was birthed there. And yes because our six-lane concrete roads can't be used or enjoyed if bandits are waiting there to kidnap us. No, we will not use the trains if it means buying tickets with our money to go and get abducted. Can we just deploy more money, real funds and national time and force to take children off the streets of the North already? It definitely can't be too much work to provide security operatives with 'NAFDAC Numbers', not those ones who flee just before bandits arrive, to keep our schools actually safe? If Christians are cancelling church vigils, aren't many parents in the north pulling out their children from schools? If na you nko? If these butchers of men are already in Oyo State, when won't we close churches and terminate school terms? Can we sit our Northern Leaders and Elders down and tell them what their future really looks like if they continue with the child marriage and almajiri system? These are desperate times and it does not look like our decade-old strategy has worked or is working. We need to start doing desperate and new things.

Buying bullets and increasing defence budgets have not worked. We must return to the drawing table or be ready to perish. I'm just not feeling optimistic today and I'm not offering any apologies for feeling my feelings. A few days ago, I found myself asking a question that has become increasingly important as Nigeria continues to bleed from the wounds of

Criminals deserve no sympathy, no mercy. But after more than a decade of battling insurgency, banditry and kidnapping, perhaps it is time to ask whether Nigeria is treating only the symptoms while leaving the disease untouched. We have shot everything at this monster, but it looks like every bullet has only toughened him. Every bomb has made him angrier. Now it is tall, black and menacing. And advancing towards Lagos. Oh no, you don't have to believe me. Let us just focus on the uncomfortable truth. Poverty is not the same thing as terrorism. There are millions of poor Nigerians who are honest, hardworking and law-abiding. Every morning, they wake up, struggle through impossible circumstances and still choose decency over crime. So poverty alone does not create terrorists. Yet poverty can create fertile ground for recruitment. Villa under tight security amid protest A hungry young man with no education, no employable skill and no hope for the future is easier to manipulate than one who has opportunities. A boy who sees no future may be tempted by anybody offering money, food, status or a sense of belonging. That is why economic empowerment must be part of the conversation. Northern Nigeria is blessed with vast agricultural land, energetic youth and enormous human potential. Imagine what would happen if millions of young people were productively engaged in farming, agro-processing, manufacturing, technology

and entrepreneurship. A young man earning an honest living is less likely to answer the call of a bandit leader. An idle young man is a different matter altogether.

However, let us not deceive ourselves. If poverty alone caused terrorism, then every poor community in Africa would be a terrorist enclave. The reality is more complicated. Groups such as Boko Haram were not built merely on economic frustration. They were built on ideas—dangerous ideas. They preached hatred. They preached violence. They preached rejection of modern education and the Nigerian state. You cannot defeat such ideas with bags of rice and empowerment grants alone. You fight bad ideas with better ideas. That is where reorientation comes in. For too long, we have treated education as merely a means of passing examinations. Real education should teach citizenship, responsibility, tolerance and critical thinking. The fight against terrorism must therefore involve teachers, parents, religious leaders, traditional rulers and community influencers. The battle is not only for territory. It is also for minds. And then comes the issue of cultural renewal. Before anybody sharpens their knives, let me explain. Cultural renewal does not mean abandoning tradition. It does not mean discarding faith. It does not mean becoming less northern, less southern, less Muslim or less Christian. It means rediscovering the values that once held communities together. Values such as respect for life, respect for learning, respect for honest labour and respect for communal responsibility. Many years ago, entire villages helped raise children. Elders corrected young people. Communities celebrated hard work and frowned at criminality. Today, too many communities are overwhelmed by unemployment, drug abuse, illiteracy and the erosion of social values. A society that produces millions of disconnected and frustrated young people is unknowingly manufacturing tomorrow's security challenges. Yet there is another truth we must not ignore. Economic empowerment, reorientation and cultural renewal are not substitutes for security. No nation negotiates its existence with terrorists.

No government can fold its arms while armed criminals slaughter citizens. Bandits who murder farmers, abduct children and terrorize communities must be confronted decisively. Terrorists who wage war against the state must face the full force of the law. Development is necessary. Security is non-negotiable. The two must work together. Then, there is the matter

of governance. Many communities affected by banditry complain that government appears only during elections. Roads are bad. Schools are inadequate. Healthcare facilities are scarce. Opportunities are limited. When government becomes distant, criminal groups often move in to fill the vacuum. A man who visits his wife once in a while must not delude himself into thinking someone else cannot fill the vacuum. Bad governance is a husband who visits his wife once in four years with plenty of gifts, sleeps with her every day for one month or two and then disappears for another four years. The gifts will be appreciated. The woman may even flaunt it. But there are no guarantees that the woman will happily wait for him, untouched, for another four years. Any number of bad things can happen when you



leave your goat to wander. She may be injured, stolen, killed, or even impregnated. A citizen who feels abandoned is easier for extremists to manipulate. A citizen who believes government cares is more likely to cooperate with law enforcement. This is why governance itself is a security strategy. In the end, Nigeria's challenge is not merely military. It is economic. It is educational. It is cultural. It is political. It is moral. The temptation is always to search for a single magic solution. Nigerians love silver bullets. We want one policy, one speech, one operation, one miracle. Unfortunately, terrorism does not work that way. Even if United States of America with its troops swoop in guns-blazing, will they stay here forever? Will we still be a sovereign nation if America remains here permanently? A nation defeats terrorism when it secures its borders, protects its citizens, educates its children, creates opportunities for its youth and builds institutions people can trust. Bullets can eliminate terrorists. But only a just, functional and hopeful society can stop new terrorists from emerging. That is the real battle before Nigeria. And until we fight it on all fronts, we may continue cutting off the branches while leaving the roots firmly planted in the soil.