

A National Emergency on Insecurity

By Reuben Abati

The biggest problem Nigeria faces at the moment, beyond the parlous state of the economy, is the general insecurity in the land, and it is about time government declared a national emergency on the challenge. Certainly, the phrase "national emergency" must be familiar with most Nigerians: it has been declared once too often by the Nigerian government to acknowledge that a particular aspect of national life is in urgent need of attention but once the spokespersons mouth the phrase, everyone soon moves on. Nothing is done. The problem persists. A classical case in point would be the declaration of an "immediate state of emergency on food insecurity" in July 2023 by the Tinubu administration. We were told that the government was "not unmindful of the rising cost of food and how it affects the citizens." At the time Nigeria's inflation rate was 22.41 per cent. Food inflation stood at 24.82 per cent. The plan was to deploy savings from the fuel subsidy removal into the agricultural sector, and bring "all matters pertaining to food and water availability within the purview of the National Security Council."

Months down the line, the emergency has had no effect in the short or medium term. As of December 2023, headline inflation had risen to 28.9 per cent, and food inflation was 33.93 per cent. The situation is now so bad that average Nigerians are groaning under the terror of sharp rises, over a consecutive 20-month period, in the average prices of oil and fat, meat, bread, cereals, potatoes, yam and other tubers, with food prices as high as 44.73 per cent in Kogi State, 41.33 per cent in Kwara and 39.55 per cent in Imo. The so-called savings from the fuel subsidy removal is seen majorly in terms of higher allocations to states and the Federal Government, the removal of fuel subsidy itself has fuelled further distortions within the economy to the people's disadvantage. People are now eating from dustbins. Nigerians are depressed and angry. The focus on food insecurity may have stemmed from the folkloric belief that once a people can feed themselves, then their poverty is significantly reduced. The reality is that more Nigerians have slipped into poverty and misery. Government may also have done well to recognise that insecurity is multi-dimensional, even if it has not made any difference or showed any signs in that direction. We have also seen that having your kinsman in power and



office does not guarantee prosperity on the grounds of proximity.

But the big elephant in the room, it seems, is the complete dehumanisation of the Nigerian person, the increasing worthlessness of lives and properties, the spread of violence and anomie in the land, in the face of an obvious and beguiling failure of the Nigerian state. The legitimacy of the modern state, beyond the controversies about sources and typologies, inheres more in the connection between state authority and the people's interests and how those interests are served through the deployment of state resources and infrastructure. In Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, the purpose of government is defined as ensuring the security and welfare of the people. But the Nigerian government is detached. The people are not sure if the government is for them or against them. What they see is the state apparatus at all levels being used to serve the people in power, who merely mouth commitment to their primary assignment as convenient slogans. The people do not feel secure, hence the resort to self-help by all manners of persons setting up ethnic militias, state militias, vigilante groups. With the government having failed them, and persistently showing a lack of capacity to listen and act, Nigeria is a security nightmare. Nobody is safe, not even traditional rulers who used to be sacred persons within the community. Yesterday, in Ekiti State, two traditional rulers – the Onimojo of Imojo-Ekiti and the Elesun of Esun-Ekiti – were killed in an ambush by armed men. Before now, there had been regular reports of the abduction of traditional rulers in the South-East, the most recent victim being the traditional ruler of Orodo Autonomous Community in Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State.

The problem is not new, but it has never been this bad in a literal sense. In 2014, the then emergent political Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), that is the All Progressives Congress, ran a campaign against the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan administration partly on the grounds that as a civilian, President Jonathan could not handle the country's security challenges. The party sold the dummy to the electorate that a leader with a military background was the best bet for Nigeria. They advertised General Muhammadu Buhari, a civil war hero and former military

Head of State, as the messiah who would drive the bandits, the terrorists, crude oil thieves, insurgents and all kinds of criminals away from the shores of Nigeria. The people bought this false narrative and Buhari became president, with the additional promise that he will strengthen the economy and fight corruption. Insecurity is making everything else difficult; it discourages foreign and local investments. Farmers cannot go to their farms. It is an act of faith to travel in certain parts of the country. The country is under threat. Anomie is upon the land, and the risk is real, given the manner in which such factors as religion, ethnicity, attachment to land, the fight over resources and indigene/settler conflicts have turned Nigeria into a keg of gunpowder. With the security establishment at its wits' end, all hands must be on deck to address the challenges urgently. For eight years we kept hearing that the Buhari government had decimated the ranks of terrorists and bandits. But nothing was decimated. Under Buhari, criminals became bolder. Trains were hijacked and attacked. Crude oil thieves in the Niger Delta had a field day. The economy failed, and that much has been confirmed by members of his own party who are now in charge in Abuja. No amount of deodorant can eliminate the stench of failure in those eight years. The APC retained power at the centre after the 2023 general elections, in the person of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who says he has a "Renewed Hope agenda." Under him, Nigeria has now even witnessed some of the most shocking security breaches in recent memory. Nobody has come forward to say that this is so because Bola Tinubu is a civilian and not a soldier. Buhari had exploded the myth that a man who had donned the uniform is best suited to fight in an asymmetrical war. Leading troops in a fratricidal civil war is not the same as fighting groups of terrorists, bandits, Jihadists and criminals. It must not be possible to fool Nigerians with such poppycock again. The Buhari administration indeed worsened the situation by sending wrong signals on the security situation. He would, on several occasions, direct the security forces to deal with terrorists, but at the same time his government actively sought to appease the same terrorists.

Terrorists were, for the most part, treated as agitators rather than as criminals. The Americans killed Osama Bin Laden, Al Baghdadi and Al Zawahiri, but in Buhari's Nigeria, the government pursued the task, so vigorously, of rehabilitating Nigerian terrorists who had been identified as the fourth deadliest in the world. They were given money, food, clothing and chieftaincy titles. In 2021, the Buhari administration pardoned over 1,000 Boko Haram fighters. The same government that talked about "Operation Lafiya Dole" and "Operation Last Hold" was also the same administration that adopted Operation Safe Corridor for terrorists! This policy incoherence merely emboldened the criminals. It did not help. In 2022, terrorists attacked innocent Nigerians travelling in a train between Abuja and Kaduna. They also attacked airports. The government was helpless, if not complicit. The Tinubu

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administration is facing the harvest of that failure. Criminal elements continue to dare his administration with such temerity that it is difficult to believe that Nigeria's security agencies take the lion's share of the country's annual budget estimates. What exactly do they do with all that money? On Christmas Eve in 2023, bandits killed close to 200 persons in three local government areas of Bokkos, Mangu and Barkin Ladi in Plateau state. At the mass burial of some of the victims, a commander of Operation Safe Haven told the grieving community that it was the "work of the Devil." The Devil has since returned to kill more people in Plateau and in other states like Zamfara, turning the Middle Belt and the North Central into the killing fields of Nigeria. As usual, the president condemned the killings, and gave the security chiefs marching orders to bring the perpetrators to book.

Terrorists and kidnappers in Nigeria are so used to these sermons that they merely shrug off statements from Aso Rock and move on to the next target. Kidnappers, in particular, have put the Nigerian security establishment to shame. They operate at will, collect ransoms openly, and even that does not guarantee safety or the release of the abducted persons. In one shocking example, kidnappers went to a military estate, and made away with people. When policemen and soldiers cannot protect themselves, where does that leave the people? The government keeps

feeding the people with the pill of hope and promises. Nigeria has a high rate of unemployment, poverty is rife. Certain elements have found kidnapping to be a more enabling business ecosystem, so much that there have been cases of persons who organised their own kidnap in order to extort money from family members! Desperate people resort to desperate means to survive.

But perhaps, The Economist newspaper in its editorial of 24 January titled, "Kidnappers are wreaking havoc in Nigeria, yet President Tinubu's security plan is worryingly like his predecessor's" placed its fingers on why the dilemma persists when it wrote, as follows: "How much politicians in Nigeria care about national insecurity has long been correlated with how close it gets to their mansions in Abuja, the capital." Is that leadership? And where does that leave the hapless people who live in places like central Nigeria, who are slaughtered in their hundreds, and the security agencies respond only after the damage has been done? The new ideas that we call for cannot come from the Security Council or Defence Headquarters and the rest of the security establishment. It has been established that intelligence is a problem at the heart of Nigeria's National Security Strategy. Even when actionable intelligence is made available to our security agencies, they are hardly ever pro-active. Our recommendation is, as a starting point, the convocation of a National Summit on Insecurity in Nigeria to be attended by a broad section of society drawn from among stakeholders at all levels. The Economist added: "At his inauguration last May, Mr. Tinubu declared security his "top priority." Yet more than 3,600 people were kidnapped in 2023, the most ever, according to ACLED, a global monitor of conflict. The snatching rose sharply after Mr. Tinubu took office. And almost 9,000 Nigerians were killed in conflict last year." Human beings oh, not animals! And hear this: "the government tends to splurge on fancy weapons systems that fail to tackle the roots of the problem which is poverty, poor education and anger at many atrocities...Another huge problem is graft in security spending...This is worsened by a system known as security votes, whereby parts of defence spending are deemed too sensitive." What the newspaper did not add is that even the language of engagement has not changed. The Defence Headquarters is always boasting that "perpetrators will be exposed" (for where?), when people have been killed, properties razed, the Police is always quick to wake up from its slumber to announce a special operation to be led by an Assistant Inspector General of Police, and the President summons a National Security Council meeting and gives directives. The Service Chiefs for the past eight years have told Nigerians that they are working on Nigeria's security architecture, or National Security Strategy, which will deploy kinetic and non-kinetic measures. To tell the truth, when I hear anybody talking about "kinetic and non-kinetic" I simply conclude that some security chiefs are again looking for an opportunity to collect more money and do nothing. It is pure madness to keep doing the same thing and keep

getting the same results again and again without any progress.

Nigeria needs new thinking, new ideas in security management. Hard questions need to be asked, more so as we are now at a turning point, even in the sub-region. The decision to withdraw, "without delay", from ECOWAS by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, this week, is bound to escalate the security crisis within the sub-region, and pose challenges for Nigeria. We share a border of about 1,668 kilometres with Niger. Our borders are porous. Niger may see no further obligation to help fight terrorists within its own borders to prevent a spill-over. The only thing we can safely assume is that the Tinubu administration may not resort to the old practice of providing accommodation, clothes and food for bandits and terrorists. Or could that be why there has been an unprecedented resurgence of criminality in the country? The new ideas that we call for cannot come from the Security Council or Defence Headquarters and the rest of the security establishment. It has been established that intelligence is a problem at the heart of Nigeria's National Security Strategy. Even when actionable intelligence is made available to our security agencies, they are hardly ever pro-active. Our recommendation is, as a starting point, the convocation of a National Summit on Insecurity in Nigeria to be attended by a broad section of society drawn from among stakeholders at all levels. The theme shall be strictly focused on insecurity and what needs to be done. A counter-argument may well be that there is nothing new under the sun, and that even if the best ideas emerge from the summit, how can anyone be sure that the ideas will be implemented, and correctly too? There may be some merit in this. After all, there have been studies and recommendations on the crisis in the Plateau since 1994. But it is either the reports are not implemented or they are not even considered at all. Our leaders don't care enough. Insecurity is making everything else difficult; it discourages foreign and local investments. Farmers cannot go to their farms. It is an act of faith to travel in certain parts of the country. The country is under threat. Anomie is upon the land, and the risk is real, given the manner in which such factors as religion, ethnicity, attachment to land, the fight over resources and indigene/settler conflicts have turned Nigeria into a keg of gunpowder. With the security establishment at its wits' end, all hands must be on deck to address the challenges urgently. Let the Federal Government declare a national emergency on insecurity. It needs not wait till the day when a sitting Governor is abducted, and kidnappers ask that ransom be paid before such a Governor and his family members are released. It would also not be enough to argue that some elements are out to sabotage the Tinubu administration. The time to act is now. Tinubu must take the security situation in the country more seriously. The solutions are within, not in Paris or London.

Reuben Abati, a former presidential spokesperson, writes from Lagos