

IS NO ONE SAFE ANYMORE IN NIGERIA?

By: A G Abubakar

The first duty of government is neither politics nor propaganda. It is protection. Section 14(2)(b) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) states unequivocally: "The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government." This is not a suggestion; it is a constitutional command. Beyond Nigeria's domestic law, international human rights instruments reinforce the same obligation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 3) affirms that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Even under conditions of war, international humanitarian law insists on the protection of civilian life and property. Protection, therefore, is not optional; it is mandatory. Yet, for more than a decade and a half, Nigeria has drifted dangerously away from this foundational obligation. What we have witnessed is not merely insecurity, but the gradual normalization of insecurity — and worse still, a culture of official denial. The gory stories that gained headlines include the cold-blooded murder of 162 people in Woro and Nuku, Muslim-majority communities in Kaiama LGA of Kwara State; the abduction of 177 worshippers from a church in Kajuru LGA of

certain freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection and the advancement of collective wellbeing. Simply put, citizens give up the right to self-help violence; the state assumes responsibility for protection. To execute this contract, governments establish institutional frameworks — security architecture, judicial systems, regulatory bodies, and administrative structures — designed to guarantee order and justice. These pillars give legitimacy to authority, especially when they are not highly compromised or self-serving, as is currently the case in Nigeria. No region of Nigeria is immune. The insurgency that erupted in 2009 in Borno and Yobe under Boko Haram — later morphing into factions aligned with ISWAP — ignited a security inferno in the North East. What began as an extremist uprising evolved into a prolonged insurgency with devastating humanitarian consequences? These groups now operate with military precision and sophistication. They increasingly take the offensive to the military, rather than the reverse. In the North West, a parallel crisis emerged: a lethal blend of banditry, mass kidnapping, rural terrorism, and creeping ideological radicalization. Entire communities have been displaced. Farming economies have collapsed. Kidnapping has become industrialized criminality. Islamist groups such as Lakurawa, Ansaru, JNIM, and Mamuda have reportedly infiltrated the region, with franchises extending into parts of Niger, Kogi, and Kwara States. They have gradually turned parts of the zone into a vast killing field. Portions of Oyo and Ekiti may be future targets. The spillover effects have intensified pre-existing ethno-religious tensions in North Central states such as Plateau and Benue, where communal conflicts over land, identity, and political representation have become more deadly and entrenched. Armed herdsmen and local opportunists now operate with impunity, treating human lives as disposable, as the security system fails to rein them in effectively.



Kaduna State; and coordinated attacks on two military bases in Mandragirau (Biu) and Pulka (Gwoza), rural settlements in Borno State. The military lost personnel and critical equipment. Some members of the supporting Civilian JTF also lost their lives. Around the same time, Professor El-Jumma, an erudite scholar from the University of Maiduguri, sadly died under Boko Haram/ISWAP captivity. Within the same period, 10 people were killed in Barkin Ladi LGA of Plateau State, and several others in Apa LGA of neighbouring Benue State. In a bizarre show of audacity, armed bandits reportedly demanded N100 million from Muslim faithful in Ngaski LGA of Kebbi State before allowing them to continue this year's Ramadan tafsir (exegesis).

At the rate things are going, it may only be a matter of time before criminals take over vast swathes of the country. The relationship between citizens and the state is governed by what political philosophers have long described as the social contract. Thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau articulated the idea that individuals surrender

The South East has battled its own cycle of unrest. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and the emergence of the Eastern Security Network — alongside the phenomenon of "unknown gunmen" — have created a security environment that has severely disrupted economic life. The South-South region continues to grapple with the long shadows of militancy led by groups such as MEND and Asari Dokubo's NDPVF. Although large-scale hostilities have subsided, oil theft and pipeline vandalism persist at alarming levels. Dokubo, too, has since become a power broker unto himself, ready to challenge anyone who dares to cross his "oily path." Even the South West, long perceived as relatively stable, has begun to experience spillover insecurity, though at comparatively lower levels. Tens of thousands have lost their lives, and millions have been displaced needlessly. Security and economics are inseparable. Where life is insecure, opportunity shrinks. At one point in the early 2010s, Nigeria's GDP rose above \$400 billion, making it Africa's largest economy. Today, the figure fluctuates at nearly half that level, battered by currency depreciation, reduced oil output, and structural weaknesses. Oil production — the backbone of

Nigeria stands at such a threshold. The crisis before it is not merely about insurgents, bandits, militants, separatists, or oil thieves. It is about the integrity of the Nigerian state itself. A government that cannot effectively protect its citizens forfeits moral authority. A state that outsources its coercive powers mortgages its sovereignty. And a leadership that denies reality weakens the very foundation it claims to defend. The social contract is not a ceremonial clause in a constitution; it is the living covenant that binds a people together. When citizens begin to doubt that the state can secure their lives, they retreat into ethnic, religious, and regional fortresses. Trust evaporates. Loyalty fractures. The very idea of nationhood thins.

foreign exchange earnings — fell drastically below OPEC allocations in recent years due to theft, sabotage, and infrastructural decay. Billions of dollars have been lost to crude oil bunkering networks. Meanwhile, poverty has deepened. By World Bank estimates, tens of millions of Nigerians — roughly 80 percent — live below the poverty line. Youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high, exceeding 30 percent, fueling frustration and vulnerability to criminal recruitment. Even the celebrated 4 percent GDP growth has largely been jobless growth. It is not driven by high labour-absorption sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing — sectors constrained by chronic electricity shortages and insecurity. The crisis is not fundamentally one of resources. Nigeria possesses manpower, military structures, intelligence agencies, and financial capacity. The deeper deficit is political will — the disciplined consistency required to enforce the law without fear or favour. Where willpower weakens, improvisation replaces strategy.

In the fight against insurgency and banditry, the state has increasingly shifted operational burdens to civilian auxiliaries — Civilian JTF units, vigilantes, hunters, forest guards — and even ad hoc negotiations with violent actors. While local defense initiatives may be understandable in emergencies, they are not substitutes for a coherent national security doctrine. Encouraging communities to negotiate with terrorists or bandits who have not been decisively degraded may embolden them to terrorize civilians with reckless abandon. Experiences in Katsina, Kaduna, and Zamfara illustrate this risk. In the Niger Delta, pipeline protection contracts were awarded to former militant leaders, including Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo). The paradox is stark: individuals once accused of destabilizing national infrastructure now serve as its custodians — at significant public cost. Oil theft has not disappeared; it may simply have been reorganized under more complex patronage systems. The masked losses may, in fact, be greater this time. In the South East, it required assertive subnational leadership to challenge economically destructive “stay-at-home” enforcement. The national security apparatus appeared hesitant, reactive, and politically cautious. It took political courage from Governor Soludo of Anambra State to confront IPOB's enforcement mechanisms after years of limited federal success.

Nigerian cities are not left out of security challenges as urban violence and criminality have steadily been rising, making streets and homes unsafe. Internal weakness invites external leverage. As Nigeria's security and governance challenges have deepened, foreign actors have intensified their scrutiny and influence. Allegations of religious persecution, genocide narratives, and ideological extremism have gained international traction. Whether framed as advocacy or geopolitical calculation, such interventions expose domestic fractures.

Today, Nigeria's security, economic, and intelligence ecosystems are increasingly entangled with, and/or outsourced to external “partnerships.” The US has already hijacked the nation's intelligence and security system to manipulate and exploit at will. France has expanded its economic footprint by cornering the Nigerian fiscal space by taking charge of the taxation system. China and India remain major buyers of Nigeria's primary commodities and key infrastructure financiers. Often on unequal economic terms. The UK continues to exert economic and diplomatic influence consistent with its historical ties. International cooperation is not inherently problematic. In a globalized world, strategic partnerships are necessary. However, when dependence flows from internal dysfunction rather than deliberate strategic choice, sovereignty becomes fragile and hollow; defined merely by national anthem and flag and characterized by debt burden and sustained dependence. A dwarfed nation. Perhaps the most troubling feature of the crisis is not the violence itself, but the reflex of denial that often accompanies it. Official statements frequently minimize severity, deflect blame, or shift responsibility to citizens, state governments, or vague conspiracies. Denial deepens distrust. The social contract weakens not only when government fails, but when it refuses to acknowledge failure.

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Nigeria still possesses the capacity to reverse course — but only through deliberate courage: the courage to confront uncomfortable truths, reform broken institutions, enforce justice without bias, and rebuild public trust through measurable action rather than reassuring speeches. Without these, governance becomes performative. Security becomes rhetorical. Sovereignty becomes negotiable. If the present trajectory persists, Nigeria risks existing in name while eroding in substance — a state recognized on maps but weakened in authority. The social contract can still be repaired. But repair requires honesty and decisive action. As a way forward, the government should declare a national state of emergency on insecurity. It should recalibrate its security architecture and strategize a calculated, all-out offensive against criminal networks across the country. Many nations have adopted emergency measures to confront domestic insecurity — France in 2015, Turkey in 2016, and the US, after the 9/11 attacks. However, such measures must be implemented within the ambit of the law and backed by an appropriate social safety net to mitigate unintended consequences. Time is of the essence before the crisis tears the nation apart irretrievably.