

Why Nigeria's Government must bring banditry to an end.

By Dr. Emmanuel I. Umeonyirioha

As Nigeria steps deeper into 2026, a quiet desperation hangs over many communities, particularly across the North-West and parts of the North-Central regions. While headlines occasionally celebrate macroeconomic improvements or diplomatic wins, the reality for millions of Nigerians is far starker: farms lie fallow because farmers fear ambush, children walk miles to school because their classrooms were burned, and families live in constant anxiety over who might be taken next. The scourge of banditry is no longer a regional crisis but a national emergency that demands the full, unwavering attention of the Federal Government. If Nigeria is to realize its vast potential, securing the lives and livelihoods of its citizens cannot remain a secondary priority; it must become the central mission of this administration. The scale of the crisis is sobering. According to recent reports, Nigeria recorded more than 600,000 deaths from insecurity in just an 11-month period, with the North-West bearing the heaviest burden. Over two million Nigerians were kidnapped in that same time-frame, and an estimated N2.2 trillion changed hands as ransom payments, a grim statistic that reveals not just human suffering, but a thriving criminal economy. These are not abstract numbers; they represent fathers, mothers, students, traders, and farmers whose lives were cut short or whose futures were hijacked. When citizens are forced to pay for their own safety, the social contract between government and governed begins to fray. The state's most fundamental duty is to protect its people, and on that measure, Nigeria is falling short.

Banditry has evolved far beyond the cattle rustling and localized disputes of the past. What began as rural criminality has metastasized into a sophisticated, profit-driven enterprise with diversified revenue streams: ransom payments, illegal mining, arms trafficking, forced taxation, and even collaboration with transnational criminal

networks. These groups operate with military-grade weapons, intelligence networks, and a level of coordination that suggests they are not merely opportunistic thugs but organized criminal franchises. To treat them as anything less is to misunderstand the threat. As security expert Samuel Aruwan has argued, Nigeria has paid dearly for ignoring early warning signs, from Maitatsine (1970s–80s) to Boko Haram (2000s–present), and now banditry. The pattern is familiar: dismissal, appeasement, escalation, catastrophe. Breaking this cycle requires more than rhetorical resolve; it demands strategic clarity and decisive action. The economic consequences of inaction are staggering. When farmers cannot access their fields, food production drops, prices rise, and hunger spreads. When



schools close because they are soft targets for kidnapers, an entire generation loses access to education, deepening poverty and limiting future opportunities.

When investors both local and foreign see highways as danger zones and communities as unstable, capital flees, jobs vanish, and growth stalls. Insecurity is not just a humanitarian crisis; it is a direct assault on Nigeria's economic recovery. No amount of fiscal reform, monetary policy adjustment, or infrastructure investment can succeed if the basic conditions for life and enterprise remain under threat. Security is the foundation upon which all other development rests. Moreover, the human cost extends

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beyond immediate violence. Displacement has become endemic, with hundreds of thousands forced from their homes into overcrowded camps or unfamiliar urban slums. Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence, while children recruited or abducted by bandit groups lose their childhoods to trauma and exploitation. The psychological toll on survivors, living with grief, fear, and uncertainty is a wound that may take generations to heal. A government that claims to care about its people cannot stand by while this suffering unfolds. Compassion must translate into concrete policy: better intelligence, more responsive security forces, and robust support for displaced communities. Critics sometimes argue that military force alone cannot solve banditry, and they are right. But this is not an argument for inaction; it is a call for smarter, more comprehensive strategy. Effective counter-banditry requires distinguishing between different types of armed actors: those who took up arms defensively after suffering attacks, and those who lead profit-driven criminal networks responsible for mass kidnappings and killings. Dialogue and reintegration programmes have a place but only for those genuinely willing to lay down arms and submit to verification. For entrenched criminal enterprises, the response must be lawful, precise, and relentless, targeting command structures, arms supply chains, and financial networks. Nigeria cannot afford to negotiate with those whose business model depends on continued violence.

Crucially, security operations must be followed by

governance. Clearing bandits from a forest means little if the state does not then establish a permanent presence: reopening schools and clinics, restoring markets, and ensuring that justice is accessible to ordinary citizens. Bandits thrive in governance vacuums; filling those spaces with legitimate authority is how lasting peace is built. This requires coordination across federal and state levels, with clear lines of responsibility and adequate resources. It also demands accountability: security forces must operate within the rule of law, and abuses must be addressed swiftly to maintain public trust. Technology and intelligence must play a larger role.

Nigeria's security agencies have access to capabilities like satellite imagery, signals intelligence, human networks that can disrupt bandit operations before they escalate. But intelligence is only useful if it leads to timely action. Too often, early warnings are ignored until crises explode. Political leaders must empower security professionals to act on credible threats without waiting for consensus or fearing political fallout. Prevention is always cheaper in lives, resources, and legitimacy than reaction. Finally, the narrative around banditry must shift. Framing the crisis along ethnic or religious lines fuels division and plays into the hands of those who seek to exploit identity for criminal gain. Banditry is not a "Fulani problem" or a "Northern problem"; it is a Nigerian problem, perpetrated by criminals whose primary allegiance is to profit, not ethnicity. Official communication should reflect this reality, discouraging profiling and emphasizing that the fight against banditry is a fight for the common good. Media, civil society, and community leaders all have roles to play in promoting unity and rejecting divisive rhetoric. The window for action is narrowing. Nigerians are watching, and their patience is not infinite. Recent public sentiment makes clear that citizens want more than condolences after attacks; they want prevention, protection, and justice. President Bola Tinubu has described the security threats as "unacceptable", but words must now be matched by results. This means prioritizing security funding, empowering capable leaders, and measuring success not by statements issued but by lives saved and communities restored.

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