

When the State Kneels Before the Gun

By Olusegun Adeniyi

The copyright to the above title belongs to Khaleed Yazeed, a young journalist. He has written several reports about the way bandit kingpins are being enabled with a policy of appeasement that has only escalated their violence on innocent people, especially in Zamfara and Katsina States. This is what provoked Yazeed's latest headline: "The chairman of Safana (local government area in Katsina State), Hon. Abdullahi Sani Safana, flanked by traditional rulers, Yariman Katsina, Hakimin Safana, and Hakimin Zakkah, walked deep into the Gemi forest... to negotiate with armed bandits. The same bandits who have murdered farmers, kidnapped children, burned villages, and turned farmlands into graveyards now sat at the table as partners. And the State, in full daylight, bowed to them. The Fulani militia, represented by Kachalla Ruga and his men, promised to 'allow' farmers back to their farms, 'permit' traders to go to markets, 'let' life return. And in exchange, the Nigerian state promised them freedom of movement, access to hospitals, repairs of their dams, and the comfort of legitimacy. This is not peace. This is surrender dressed in the language of diplomacy." Although Safana has justified his action by the relative peace currently enjoyed in his local government compared to others under constant attack, he fails to understand that it is such deals that have emboldened the bandits to run riot in Katsina State – now firmly in their grip. Last week Tuesday, these outlaws stormed a mosque in Unguwan Mantau, Malumfashi local government area, during the dawn (Fajr) prayer to rain bullets on innocent worshippers. Depending on whose figures you believe, the death toll is between 30 and 80. But the crisis goes beyond Malumfashi. On Tuesday, veteran journalist and Chairman of the Daily Trust Foundation Board of Trustees, Mallam Bilya Bala sent me a message to commend my last column. When I replied by asking after his family, he responded: "My immediate family is fine but relations, friends and a host of others who are at the warfront in my local government in Katsina State are not as lucky! People in my community, Kurfi, fight banditry on a daily basis just to survive. And no family is spared!"

I understand oga Bilya's pain. By virtue of working with the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, I not only cultivated many friends from Katsina, but I also fell in love with the people of what I now regard as my second state. When this problem of banditry was getting out hand about six years ago, I travelled to the state to speak with critical stakeholders, including security people and the Emir of Katsina, His Royal Highness, Dr Abdulmumini Kabir Usman. Of course, with the assistance of then Governor Aminu Bello Masari. My session with the emir was particularly fortuitous because on the day I visited the palace, he was receiving briefs on the security situation, and he allowed me to witness the session. On my return to Abuja, I did a detailed report in a column titled, 'Katsina: A State Under the Gun'.

Since my impression from interactions with the people was that the late President Muhammadu Buhari appeared unconcerned about their plight, this was the way I ended the column published on 25th June 2020: "President Buhari must act now, and very strongly, to retrieve his state of origin from the grip of murderous bandits and the country at large from those who threaten the lives and livelihoods of our people. He must particularly understand the meaning of the Katsina challenge. One of the planks on which he came to power is to tackle insecurity. If the state from where he hails continues to roil in turmoil, whenever he promises to secure any other part of the country,

there is the likelihood that some may remind him of the Yoruba adage: *Eni tí yóò ya'ni l'áṣọ, t'òrùn rẹ̀ lá á kó wò*. Crudely translated, it means before you take seriously someone who promises to robe you in a beautiful apparel, you will first check out what the person is wearing!"

Interested readers will find that insightful but rather long column at the end of this intervention because it addresses most of the issues. But the challenge is now far more complex. It appears to me that the bandits seem to be playing one group against another. Explaining why he went into the forest to meet the bandits, Safana said "The dialogue was initiated after interventions from community and religious leaders, acting on the advice of Fulani elders who acknowledged that most of the bandits are indigenes of the state and would listen to them." He added that there had been a cessation of attacks on communities within Safana local government since he struck the deal. "The bandits even asked whether the dialogue would extend to Kurfi, Dutsinma, and Charanchi local governments. When I said no, they requested that I deliver their message, saying they also want peace to reign in those places and called for time to speak with the chairmen."

Now, here is the problem. Since the chairmen of these neighbouring local governments are not willing to come to any agreement with criminal gangs, Safana is enjoying nothing but the peace of the graveyard. And with the 'Sector Commander' of the bandits in each of the other local government demanding a deal (and all the goodies that come from such unholy arrangement), it stands to reason that they would attack communities where the chairmen do not accede to this request. It is this divide-and-conquer approach that complicates the security challenge in Katsina State.

Meanwhile, the other chairmen have their reasons for believing it is a waste of time to strike deals with criminals. Previous such efforts by their predecessors only achieved temporary relief. Besides, there are reports of collusion between bandits and members of the local communities. This 'joint venture' dimension to criminality in our country that I have also witnessed in Plateau State is a story for another day. "In one case we are handling, the son of a victim provided information to the bandits about his father's whereabouts," according to the Kurfi Local Government chairman, Babangoda Abdullahi in a report published by Daily Trust at the weekend. "They collected N5 million in ransom and still killed the man. The boy was given just N50,000 from the ransom. This shows how deeply communities are involved in sustaining banditry in the state."

We must be clear, there is a connecting thread to the violence in the Northwest, especially in rural communities where inhabitants have been left to the mercy of non-state actors. We also require a conversation about rural communities in Nigeria since most are too small and isolated, hence vulnerable to attack. That is also an issue for another day. Meanwhile, there is a forest straddling Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina States that provides hideouts for sundry criminal cartels. It is one of the huge ungoverned spaces in the country for which the security agencies must adopt a strategic—not episodic—approach. But in the immediate term, there must be a coherent policy on how to approach the security challenge in Katsina State. If some local governments are offering 'carrots' to bandits and others believe in a law-and-order approach, the problem will continue to defy solution.

