

ARMED CRIMINALITY AND FOOD SECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

The Gulf of Guinea has emerged as a focal point of concern due to its entrenched armed criminality, which poses significant threats to regional stability and food security. Rooted in systemic issues such as bad governance, corruption, and socio-economic disparities, the region grapples with recurrent violent conflicts fueled by struggles for economic control. Rural banditry, a pervasive form of domestic insurgency, exacerbates these challenges, undermining efforts towards regional integration and security in West Africa. This paper examines the dynamics of armed criminality within Nigeria, shedding light on its international security implications and its impact on broader regional security initiatives. Drawing from secondary data sources, the study identifies rural banditry as a multifaceted conflict driven by resource competition, elite collusion, and socio-economic deprivation. Factors such as bad governance, climate change, and the erosion of traditional livelihoods further compound the crisis, transforming it into a sub-regional threat with far-reaching consequences. The implications of armed criminality extend beyond immediate security concerns, manifesting in radicalised youth, heightened unemployment, and illicit trade networks across the sub-region. Moreover, the collapse of agricultural and livestock sectors, the proliferation of small arms, and the erosion of traditional institutions exacerbate the crisis, fostering ethnic tensions and refugee influxes. In response, the paper advocates for a comprehensive review of regional security frameworks, emphasising enhanced intelligence cooperation among ECOWAS countries and bolstered border surveillance. Furthermore, community-based dialogue and awareness initiatives are recommended to mitigate the root causes of rural banditry and foster sustainable peace and stability across West Africa.

Keywords: Armed Criminality, Rural Banditry, Food Security, Gulf of Guinea, Regional Integration, West Africa, Security Cooperation, Socio-economic Implications.

INTRODUCTION

Life survives on food, and life extinguishes without food. This mysterious universe itself appears to be a mass of food for both animate and inanimate things, with every component of the creation becoming food for some other constituent part of nature (Grand, 2001). Food exists in innumerable forms with astounding contents—explored and exploited—and its manifestation is simply stunning. This planet Earth, covered by two-thirds of water and one-third of land with the opulence of life-sustaining vegetation, is a perpetual and renewable source of food for all creatures. The oceanic wealth is a readily consumable cafeteria of human need and greed; the prowess of plants, rivers, and valleys caters to the rational and irrational utility of speaking mammals and other brained animals. Ironically, there is enough in nature for the needs of humans, but not up to his greed.'

All faiths and religions vociferously eulogise the food needs and preach the piety of feeding the poor. Food is beyond religion. The relationship between food and justice is traceable to Vedic and Biblical references. The Old Testament prophets said sharing bread with the hungry pleases God (Isaiah 58:7). The New Testament stressed that feeding the poor was like feeding Christ. (Mt. 25:35). The Church argues the right to life is universal and inviolable, and food is needed. Pope Benedict XVI declared that hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world with enough production, resources, and understanding to eliminate such tragedies and their effects. Islamic Zakah and Sadaqaah separate two types of kindness. Kindness and goodwill define charity. God has provided an ample reward for His servant—material, moral, and spiritual—so the provider should not expect a reward from the receiver (Awang et al., 2017). Both Muslims and non-Muslims benefit. Islam, like many Christians, values helping others. Muslims have traditionally donated to poverty relief projects.

As per the Global Hunger Index, only 9.6% of infants aged 6 to 23 months can meet their minimum food requirements (Manyong, et al., 2021). Due to public defecation, even though new toilets are constructed, the growth of children is affected. Since the beginning of creation, the pristine and profuse nature has been plundered perniciously much by the human species and less by calamities. The scientific advancement of human wisdom escalated to quell nature and man to an abysmal depth of agony and want, the impact extending not only to innocuous human specimens but also to the intimidating ferocity of wildlife. Man has eaten away all the fruits of plants and vegetation, exhausted the entrenched minerals and materials in the bowels of the earth, and fumed poison in the air.

The Gulf of Guinea, a region synonymous with violent conflicts and political instability, stands as a testament to the complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors shaping the security landscape of West Africa. At the heart of this turmoil lies the escalating menace of armed conflict, with profound implications for both regional stability and food security. Focusing on Nigeria as a case study, this research endeavours to unravel the intricate nature and dynamics of armed criminality while exploring its overarching international security implications and its integration into West African states' efforts towards regional security.

Drawing upon a wealth of secondary data, the study exposes armed criminality as a resource-based conflict driven by elite conspiracy, a relentless pursuit of wealth, and the pervasive poverty affecting the West African populace. The research underscores the multifaceted factors

propelling the expansion of armed criminality, including bad governance, political clientelism, vanishing grazing lands and routes, urbanisation, climate change, and the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms. This evolving crisis has manifested in radicalised youth, escalating rates of unemployment, and the proliferation of illicit trades, including arms and narcotic drugs, across the sub-region. The paper also reveals a cascade of consequences, from the collapse of agricultural and livestock development to the proliferation of small arms, endangering traditional institutions and fostering hostile ethnic relations.

A historical perspective elucidates that rural banditry, though not a novel phenomenon in West Africa, has evolved, with its roots deeply intertwined with socio-economic and political realities. The struggle for political independence and the subsequent establishment of post-colonial states have played pivotal roles in shaping the patterns of armed criminality in the sub-region.

PARADOX OF FOOD: INTERNATIONAL HUNGER

Food issues or problems are no longer regional since the entire globe is claimed to be a village. Inaccessibility to food or non-availability of means of production attracts global consideration. Food has become a commercial product in perpetual demand. Food is expensive in five-star terrain, priced considerably in restaurants, served among the poor out of compassion, and given in alms for the destitute and forlorn. Thus, the costume of food varies according to character. But fundamentally, it is the only substance for survival. In the plentiful nature, scarcity has become a regular glimpse of human life. If statistics are to be believed, the Millennium Development Goals, which primarily focus on the eradication of poverty and the annihilation of hunger, noticed that the Global Hunger Index of 2028 brought new insights to the global debate on food insecurity and food scarcity (Larson & Larson, 2019). Since 1990, hunger in developing countries has dropped 39%. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimated that 805 million people still go hungry in 2017 (Larson & Larson, 2019).

The global average hides huge regional and national variances. Africa south of the Sahara and South Asia have the highest hunger rates and the greatest absolute gains since 2005. South Asia had the greatest GHI reduction since 1990. Overcoming child underweight was the main reason the region's GHI score improved after 1990. From 1990 to 2014, 26 countries cut their scores by 50% or more. Angola, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Chad, Ghana, Malawi, Niger, Rwanda, Thailand, and Vietnam saw the most score gains between the 1990 and 2014 GHIs.

Burundi and Eritrea are among 16 countries with extremely worrying hunger. Hidden hunger, or micronutrient insufficiency, affects 2 billion people worldwide and is generally overlooked (Otekunrin, et al., 2020). A lack of key vitamins and minerals can have long-term, irreversible health and socioeconomic implications that can harm a person's well-being and development. It can hurt economies by lowering productivity.

Hidden hunger can harm a population's health and development due to poor food, disease, decreased absorption, and increased micronutrient needs during pregnancy, lactation, and infancy. Human well-being depends on a good diet.

Food helps brains and immune systems develop normally before birth and during infancy. A good diet saves young children's lives and helps them grow. It leads to improved school

performance, healthier women who have healthier children, and more productive and higher-paid individuals. Middle-aged metabolisms are better prepared to fight diet- and exercise-related illnesses. Without appropriate nutrition, lives and livelihoods are built on quicksand. Food insecurity and malnutrition are caused by complex factors other than war or natural disasters. They stem from social injustice, political and economic exclusion, and discrimination. Hundreds of millions of undernourished individuals are politically and socially excluded and denied nourishment.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasise good nutrition.

Good nutrition is sustained throughout life and generations. It strengthens individuals against climate change and extreme price swings (Otekunrin, et al., 2020). It fosters innovation to improve current and future generations' lives sustainably. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation insists that national governments are responsible for safeguarding the right to enough food and freedom from hunger. Hunger is a human rights violation and a social, political, and economic barrier. Many countries have entrenched the right to food in their constitutions, but national legislation to realise it is rare, and a hunger-free society is still a fantasy. Goals for Sustainable Development Ending hunger, food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture are Goal 2. To reduce excessive food price volatility, it aims to ensure the correct operation of food commodity markets and their derivatives and promote prompt access to market information, including food reserves.

RIGHT TO FOOD AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The right to food has been integrated into several international documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR in December 2008 (Bellows et al., 2015). The right to adequate food, as a socioeconomic right, varies from civil and political rights in several significant ways that undercut its importance and implementation. To begin, a state's economic capacity and growth determine its ability to provide rights. Second, the right is not necessarily justiciable, and its infringement provides the foundation for court or quasi-judicial remedies. Finally, the right does not meet certain characteristics, such as universality, paramount importance, or practicality, to be considered a fundamental human right. The aforementioned scepticism towards the right to adequate food and the fundamental right to be free from hunger appears to have increased hunger malnutrition and starvation deaths in some parts of the world, prompting international institutions such as the FAO and the UN Human Rights Council to take steps to further elucidate the concept of the right to food and its associated obligations. In response to the 1996 Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action, the international community chose to transition from an anti-hunger policy focused on food security to one based on the right to food (Hospes, 2010).

In its General Comment No. 12, the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights defined the right to adequate food as follows: "The right to food is realised when every man, woman, and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access to adequate food or means of procurement at all times." According to Motala (2010), achieving the right to adequate food would take time (p. 8). However, states have a fundamental commitment

to take the required action to reduce and alleviate hunger, as outlined in Paragraph 2 of Article 11, even in the face of natural or other disasters.

The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, while further elucidating the meaning of the right to adequate food, said The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent, and free access, either directly or through financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual or collective, fulfilment. The normative framework for the right to adequate food includes three fundamental elements: adequacy, food availability, and permanent access to food with dignity.

The second part of the right to food, the fundamental right to be free of hunger, represents the right's minimum content. Implying a minimum standard below which no one should ever go under any circumstances. This entails an obligation specified in General Comment 12: Every state is required to provide everyone under its control with access to the bare minimum of basic food that is sufficient, nutritionally enough, and safe to keep them from going hungry. Thus, the right to be free from hunger entails the right to have access to the bare minimum of essential food, which is sufficient to ensure that no one goes hungry or suffers physical deterioration that leads to death. The fulfilment of the right to food requires several commitments on the part of governments, the international community, and civil society. Aside from that, the following conventions and conferences stressed and justified the right to food. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) recognised the child's right to the highest standard of health and the obligation of signatory governments to take appropriate measures to combat disease and malnutrition, including, inter alia, the provision of adequately nutritious foods (Besson, 2007). Art. 27 also specifies good nutrition as part of the adequate standard of living to which children have a right.

Below are some international conventions and conferences on the right to food:

1. The 1974 World Food Conference states that every man, woman, and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition (Besson, 2007).
2. Conference on the Nutritional Rights of Man, Barcelona Declaration, 1992, Art. 1, 2, and 3.
3. United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) 1996, held in Istanbul.
4. International Conference on Sustainable Constitution of Fisheries for Food Security (Kyoto Declaration, 1995) (van der Burgt, 2013).
5. Right to Food Voluntary Guidelines: To Support the Progressive Realisation of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, adopted by the 127th Session of the FAO Council in November 2004, Rome-2005.
6. High Commissioner for Human Rights: Right to Food Resolution 2000 and 2010.
7. Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition, 1974, Article 1.

8. World Summit on Food Security, Rome, 2009.

Despite some positive results in implementing various international and national declarations and commitments in some parts of the globe, the factual situation about ending hunger in many parts of the globe, particularly Sub-Saharan African states and South Asian and Latin American States, and the horrific famines and hunger devouring millions of people would dishearten the spirits of humanity, only to say in desperation. Institutions are generous and humane in theory, but individual operators are cruel towards people's food. In 2004, "the Right to Food" Guidelines were adopted, offering guidance to states on how to implement their obligations on the right to food. Human efforts shall not cease or get exhausted to address this never-ending problem. Despite earnest efforts, hunger is found to be associated with the 'dance of death' (van der Burgt, 2013). The F.A.O. estimate for 2010 reveals that 925 million people—nearly 13.6% of the world population of around 7 billion—are hungry and undernourished, and nearly all of them are in developing countries (Von Grebmer, et al, 2010).

Despite these improvements, several factors, including deep and persistent inequalities, undermine efforts to end hunger and undernutrition worldwide. As a result, even as the average global hunger level has declined, certain regions of the world still struggle with hunger more than others; disadvantaged populations experience hunger more acutely than their better-off neighbours; and isolated and war-torn areas are ravaged by famine. The rapid elimination of famines in India since independence is certainly an accomplishment that contrasts with the failures of many other developing countries. There are two types of hunger, namely, explicit hunger and chronic or endemic hunger. The former was largely self-reported and was due to the non-availability of sufficient food. The latter manifests itself in a lower intake of essential calories, proteins, fats, and micronutrients, resulting in the underdevelopment of the body and mind. Explicit hunger, or self-reported hunger, is measured by asking people about the availability of two square meals a day. However, the suitability of this method is often questioned on the grounds of subjectivity and the nature of the respondent. The second kind of hunger occurs when the human body gets used to having less food than is necessary for healthy development, leading to malnutrition. This type of hidden hunger can be measured by using objective indicators such as calorie consumption, body-mass index, stunting, and a lack of sufficient variety in food intake.

FOOD SECURITY AND CONFLICT

The concept of food security has evolved to encompass global concerns and development. Generally, it is defined as ensuring that all individuals have consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active and healthy life (Gibson, 2012). This definition highlights food security as a multi-dimensional concept, focusing on factors such as availability, accessibility, adequacy, utilisation, and stability of food. Thus, when individuals cannot fulfil one or more of these requirements, they experience food insecurity.

The determinants of food insecurity vary, ranging from chronic factors like persistent poverty to transitory factors such as low agricultural production due to subsistence farming, limited access to food supplies, inadequate infrastructure, low public investment in agriculture and markets, weak financial systems, and extreme weather conditions. While these factors are common, conflicts introduce another layer of complexity to the issue of food security, hindering mitigation

efforts. Similarly, conflict, like food security, defies a singular definition due to its context-specific, multicausal, and multidimensional nature (Gibson, 2012). However, this study focuses on violent conflict, characterized by at least two parties employing physical force to address competing claims or interests (Free and Wilen, 2015). Violent conflicts can be classified based on common goals, such as anti-regime wars or wars for autonomy, and by the political status or group of actors involved. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (n.d.), armed conflict involves contested incompatibilities related to governance and/or territory, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year (Wallensteen, 2021).

Regardless of the conflict's classification, various factors contribute to its occurrence, including political and institutional dynamics, cultural or religious tensions, ethnicity, resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic disparities. While each conflict type is unique, it typically involves the use of force, clashes, and population displacement. Time-series data from the UCDP indicates a significant increase in intra-state conflicts worldwide (conflicts between state and non-state actors) compared to previous years, although casualties may not match those of civil wars (Szayna et al., 2017). The impacts of conflict are extensive and well-documented. For instance, according to a report, 22 out of 34 countries farthest from achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are either in conflict with or emerging from them (Wilkinson, & Hulme, 2012). Conflicts disrupt economies and harm living standards by diverting funds towards caring for the injured, displacing individuals, damaging infrastructure, and disrupting local activities.

Moreover, conflicts create market imbalances, affecting both demand and supply dynamics. Fearful farmers refrain from agricultural activities, while restricted access to farmlands hampers food transportation, leading to reduced output and diminished labour productivity. Consequently, food availability suffers, primarily affecting the supply side. Disruptions in both demand and supply chains impede food accessibility, erecting physical and economic barriers to food acquisition. Business interruptions and infrastructure destruction limit income-generating opportunities, constraining people's ability to afford food in terms of quantity and quality, thereby disrupting efficient food utilization. Over time, deteriorating food supply chains and access to clean water exacerbate nutritional deficiencies, adversely impacting both population health and economic productivity. Any compromise in one food dimension signifies a lack of food stability, given its interconnection with all aspects of food security.

Conversely, food insecurity can precipitate various forms of conflict. While inherently challenging to measure, food insecurity can incite anti-social behaviour, potentially disrupting household or community peace. Left unchecked, such behaviour may escalate into violent conflict. Recent studies explore scenarios where individuals, driven by desperation, align themselves with armed groups in exchange for protection, thus bolstering these groups' growth. Additionally, some authors argue that low agricultural productivity and food price fluctuations can incite violent conflicts against governments, citing examples from African nations (Martin-Shields and Stojetz, 2018).

Over time, unchecked factors and unresolved conflicts create a persistent cycle of food insecurity and conflict within the country. These intertwined challenges pose significant complications for research in these domains, as issues of endogeneity emerge due to the phenomenon of reverse causality.

THE ROOTS OF INSECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA

The Gulf of Guinea has gained notoriety for its violent conflicts and political instability, stemming from underlying factors such as bad governance, corruption, and deficiencies in social and economic development (Grindon, 2023). Periodic outbreaks of crises are fueled by violent power struggles and competition for economic control, exacerbating the persistent and widespread nature of insecurity in the region. Efforts by the international community aim to transition countries in the Gulf of Guinea towards a more stable trajectory, while West Africa is also endeavouring to develop a coordinated approach to address regional challenges through a unified security architecture. Such subregional initiatives hold promise for fostering long-term stability. Geographically, the Gulf of Guinea spans from Liberia to Gabon, encompassing the island territories of Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe (Grindon, 2023). In policy discussions, the inclusion of Sierra Leone and the Guineas to the west and Congo-Brazzaville to the east is common practice. The Gulf of Guinea, a region synonymous with violent conflicts and political instability, stands as a testament to the complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors shaping the security landscape of West Africa. At the heart of this turmoil lies the escalating menace of armed conflict, with profound implications for both regional stability and food security. Focusing on Nigeria as a case study, this research endeavours to unravel the intricate nature and dynamics of armed criminality while exploring its overarching international security implications and its integration into West African states' efforts towards regional security.

CIVIL CONFLICTS AND GOVERNANCE FAILURES

The arbitrary delineation of territory by colonial powers in the Gulf of Guinea precipitated numerous disputes among newly independent African states, including those between Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, Benin and Burkina Faso, Guinea and Sierra Leone, and Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon. While no full-scale interstate wars occurred in the post-independence era, internal turmoil gave rise to civil conflicts, resulting in between half a million and a million deaths. Notable civil wars include Nigeria's Biafran War from 1967 to 1970, Liberia's conflicts from 1989 to 1996 and 1998 to 2003, Sierra Leone's civil strife from 1991 to 2000, and Guinea-Bissau's brief civil war in 1998 and 1999 (Mathews, 2002). Additionally, the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) experienced the "War of 5 June" from 1997 to 1999, while Côte d'Ivoire's civil war spanned from 2002 to 2007, with renewed violence in 2010 and 2011 following disputed elections. Despite a tumultuous post-independence period, Cameroon, Benin, and Ghana managed to avert violent conflicts, though others, such as Togo, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, have gradually stabilized (Mandanda & Ping, 2016).

Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau serve as notable examples of the enduring interaction between the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea. Traditionally, the Sahel region supplied the Gulf countries with cattle, labour, and trade routes to the Arabic and European realms, while the Gulf coastline offered mineral and agricultural resources, connecting West Africa to the global market via its rivers and ports. However, in the post-independence era, African states primarily focused on fostering national unity through strong centralized power structures, often resulting in military regimes or one-party states, exacerbated by the Cold War's static confrontation. Despite the Cold

War's end, some Gulf of Guinea countries remained under authoritarian regimes inherited from colonial powers (e.g., Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon), while others descended into near anarchy (e.g., Liberia and Sierra Leone) or faced condemnation for military governments (e.g., Nigeria) (Mandanda & Ping, 2016).

Except for Ghana, no West African nation had successfully transitioned towards democratization. The prevalent strong governance systems failed to establish robust and autonomous administrations capable of competent and ethical state management. The absence of effective checks and balances facilitated rampant corruption, eroding state institutions, and fostering public distrust or contempt towards political leadership. Even countries like Benin and Mali, initially garnering international confidence, succumbed to autocracy and corruption.

Despite a climate conducive to agriculture, political instability and postcolonial conflicts perpetuated a vicious cycle of physical insecurity, leading to food insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. Wars triggered famines in Nigeria's Biafra, Sierra Leone, and Liberia between 1989 and 2001. Moreover, political and social instability exacerbated malnutrition in regions like the Niger Delta, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau.

PIRACY AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Across the Gulf of Guinea, maritime banditry is entwined with various illicit undertakings at sea, encompassing arms trafficking, illegal immigration, and an escalating trend of drug transshipment from South America to Europe via Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Ghana, and now Nigeria. The situation has been deteriorating, as evidenced by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) reporting 54 attacks on ships in the Gulf of Guinea in 2013, of which 34 were successful. This marked a surge from 64 attacks in 2012 and 61 in 2023 (Mohammed, 2023). Nearly half of the 2022 incidents involved ships being alongside or at anchor. Although there were no casualties, 93 crew members were taken hostage, and nine ships were hijacked, with subsequent releases. These incidents accounted for 18 per cent of the 298 global sea attacks, indicating a 12.6 per cent decline from 2022 figures (Fuller, 2022).

In the Niger Delta, the epicentre of the most sensational incidents, the predominant activity is the hostage-taking of expatriates for ransom, particularly from offshore oil installations, exploration vessels, and tankers in loading operations. Security at sea, prevalent along the entire coast but notably in the Niger Delta, stems from inadequate governance on land and is an extension of onshore activities like drug trafficking, kidnapping, and "bunkering"—the illicit syphoning of oil. In the Niger Delta, these crimes often carry political motivations, reflecting the local population's resistance to environmental degradation, particularly pollution, and their perception of an unjust distribution of oil profits. Following the 2023 elections, parliamentarians from the Nigerian South-South geopolitical zone, unable to compensate militias who had provided campaign protection, permitted these militias to retain their arms in exchange for a share in the proceeds from illegal activities (Mustapha, et al., 2004). These activities, driven by both political and commercial motives, succeeded militant groups from the military dictatorship era, assuming the task of "protecting" oil facilities and personnel. It became evident that this protection entailed extortion from oil companies and victimising their staff. Local authorities not only proved

incapable of countering these criminal activities but also appeared complicit in ransom retrieval and loot seizures. As oil exploitation moved offshore, so did this form of "protection."

THREATS FROM THE SAHEL AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Following independence, states in the Gulf of Guinea primarily focused on addressing internal challenges rather than posing threats to each other. One notable exception was the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula, which was ultimately resolved through a UN-brokered deal (Lukong, 2011). Generally, neighbouring countries in the Sahel region refrained from intervening in Gulf of Guinea conflicts, except for Burkina Faso. The only state directly impacted by Islamic terrorism was Nigeria, particularly in its northern states, many of which lie within the Sahel's geographical band. Similar to other Sahelian areas, mismanagement exacerbated by resource scarcity intersected with religious militancy, as exemplified by the jihadist group Boko Haram.

Presently, insecurity across the Sahel, spanning from Sudan to Senegal, is partly fueled by drug trafficking originating from the Gulf of Guinea. This poses a shared threat to the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), notably impacting Mali, where drug trade inflows from the coast have destabilised state structures (Aguirre-Unceta, 2023). Mali's inability to address Tuareg unrest in the north, coupled with the influx of Islamic groups post-Qaddafi's fall in Libya, has transformed it into a focal point of insecurity, bordering and jeopardising Gulf of Guinea states. In Central Africa, Cameroon faces repercussions from crises in Chad and northern Nigeria. Additionally, Congo Brazzaville bears the brunt of the Sudanese crisis, extending into Chad and the Central African Republic (Ayithey, 2016).

Food (In)Security and Conflict in Nigeria

Focusing on Nigeria, Attah (2012) conducted a descriptive study on food security in Nigeria and the role of peasant farmers. He highlights the existing challenges faced by Nigeria in the agricultural sector, stemming from the prioritisation of the petroleum and oil industry over agriculture due to its status as the largest generator of foreign exchange. This shift resulted in decreased investment in the agricultural sector, leading to low productivity levels. Consequently, farmers face challenges such as a lack of infrastructure, relegation to small-scale farming practices, and high poverty levels, hindering access to credit for production boosts.

Kah (2017) examines conflict and food insecurity in Nigeria and Cameroon, utilising a qualitative approach and data from various sources, such as the World Bank and United Nations reports. The author notes that the Boko Haram insurgency not only affects Nigeria but also extends to parts of Northern Cameroon, leading to loss of livelihoods, disrupted food supply, and restricted access at borders. This exacerbates food insecurity, increasing reliance on international food aid.

Odozi & Oyelere (2021) take a broader perspective on the impact of conflict, assessing how conflict exposure affects economic welfare in Nigeria. Utilising panel data from the Nigeria General Household Survey and conflict data from ACLED, they find that regions exposed to longer and more intense conflict periods experience higher poverty levels.

Bertoni et al. (2019) studied the effect of Boko Haram on educational outcomes in northeastern Nigeria, utilising panel fixed effects and difference-in-difference estimation techniques. Their findings reveal a negative relationship between conflict and educational outcomes, including reduced enrollment, increased dropout rates, and declining quality of education. Eke-okocha & Eze (2023) focus on the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on childhood wasting in northeastern Nigeria, finding a negative effect on childhood wasting due to conflict. The study attributes this to the disruptive nature of conflict, particularly in underdeveloped regions.

George et al. (2020) investigate armed conflicts and food security in Nigeria, specifically the impact of Boko Haram attacks. Utilising panel data from the General Household Survey, they find a negative relationship between conflict intensity and food security, with conflict leading to lower food consumption scores. Otekunrin et al. (2023) constructed a food security index using the mean per capita food expenditure to assess food insecurity status in rural Nigerian households. Their findings indicate that approximately half of rural households in Nigeria suffer from food insecurity, with the highest incidence in the northern region.

Babatunde et al. (2007) examine the socio-economic characteristics and food security status of farming households in Kwara State, north-central Nigeria. Their study reveals a significant percentage of food-insecure households in Kwara State, with household income and educational status influencing food security levels.

BOKO HARAM: THE MAJOR CAUSE OF INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

The Nigerian National Security Strategy highlighted various challenges to the country's internal environment that jeopardise the well-being of its population. Terrorism, banditry, and militia actions manifest as kidnapping, armed robbery, and livestock rustling (Memud & Ojo, 2023). Others include damage to important national infrastructure, crude oil theft, and illegal bunkering caused by poverty-related socioeconomic difficulties. The Boko Haram terrorist group's insurgency in northern Nigeria is a significant issue in the country. The BHT is unquestionably the most formidable security danger to Nigeria. According to Comolli (2015), Islamic extremism in Nigeria began in the 1970s, with Mohammed Marwa leading an insurrection known as the Maitatsine Movement in Kano. He stated that following Mohammed Marwa's death, the organisation staged a large revolt in Northern Nigeria in the early 1980s, resulting in the wanton destruction of life and property. In 1995, Abubakar Lawan founded the Ahlussunna Wal Jama'ah Hijra, or Shabaab Group (Muslim Youth Organisation), in Maiduguri, Borno State (Comolli, 2015). The organisation was a conservative, nonviolent Islamic movement.

In 2002, Lawan left Nigeria to seek further Islamic ties with Saudi Arabia. During his absence, a council of shaykhs designated Mohammed Yusuf as the sect's leader (Comolli, 2015). Under Yusuf's leadership, the organisation went by several names, including Muhajirun, Ahlis Sunnah Wal Jama'a, and the Nigerian Taliban, among others, and their links with foreign groups are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: BHT Relationship with International Organizations

Hefner (2001) claims that their philosophy is based on authentic Islamic doctrine that considers everything Western to be entirely un-Islamic. The group's popular moniker, Boko Haram, which means "Western education is forbidden," stems from their rejection of these (Western) institutions. Nonetheless, the organisation wants to be known by its full name, Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad, which means People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad (Comolli, 2015). The basic goal of BHT is to substitute the democratic Nigerian state with Islamic Sharia law, while its ranks are filled with dissatisfied youngsters, jobless graduates, and destitute, primarily from Northern Nigeria. The group emerged in 2002 and, while forceful and disruptive, did not engage in violence throughout phase 1. However, as the government grows increasingly restrictive, the violence for which the organisation is now renowned begins in 2009 (phase 2) (Rodgers, 2009).

According to Mohaedou, their radicalization is a reaction to the state's radicalization. These days, Boko Haram is growing both domestically and globally. Their recent abduction of schoolgirls and their complete devastation of entire villages along with their occupants have brought them to the attention of the media (Idu, 2020). While some may believe that this problem is limited to northern Nigeria, Boko Haram also affects citizens of neighbouring countries like Cameroon and Niger. Dr Agoha said that several Abuja offices were closed for a few weeks as a result of a possible attack threat from Boko Haram on the city. Many people's lives are greatly threatened by them, and unless one is a member, they are likely at risk.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation has observed that agriculture currently engages approximately 70 per cent of Nigeria's workforce, making it a significant socio-economic pursuit, particularly in the country's northern region (Edafe, et al., 2023). However, activities by Boko Haram Terrorists (BHT) in northeastern Nigeria have compelled farmers to abandon their fields and markets due to life-threatening risks, thereby posing a substantial threat to food security and socio-economic progress in the area. Notably, agricultural production has a multiplier effect on economic development. For instance, certain agricultural outputs serve as primary materials in the value chains of agro-allied industries, while their byproducts find various applications, including in poultry and fish feed production (İliyasa & Zainalabidin, 2018). Nonetheless, between 2009 and 2014, there was a significant decline in the agricultural sector's contribution to the GDP, dropping from 37.3 to 19.1 per cent, as per World Bank Data, 2014 (refer to Figure 3.). Although, according to Statista (2021), this figure has rebounded to 22.19 per cent of Nigeria's GDP in 2021 (refer to Figure 4), the adverse effects of BHT activities have substantially disrupted socio-economic operations in the region, contributing to a notable rise in inflationary pressures.

Over the years, inflation, defined by Encyclopaedia Britannica as an excessive increase in the general level of prices, has progressively risen due to heightened insecurity. This insecurity has disrupted agriculture and various socio-economic activities, leading to scarcity (Ayugi et al., 2022). Consequently, all market sectors, including food, clothing, housing, and furnishing,

experienced the impact of escalating inflation and increased commodity costs (Poutakidou & Menegaki, 2023). Nigeria's annual inflation rate, measured by the Customer Price Index (CPI), eased to 18.12 per cent in April 2021, marking the first decline since August 2019. This rate is marginally lower than the 18.17 per cent recorded in March 2021. Figure 5 provides a graphical representation of the upward trend in inflation from August 2020 to July 2021 (Udoh & Kokoette, 2023). Inflation typically diminishes the purchasing power of individuals, potentially leading to increased criminality in society and exacerbating insecurity, which, in turn, hinders economic development.

Fig 5. Rate of Inflation from Aug 20 - Jul 21 (Source - NBS, 2021).

Farmers-Herders Conflict in Nigeria: Implications for Food Security in Nigeria

Nigeria is prioritising the promotion of agriculture as a viable alternative to oil, recognising it as a crucial pillar of the national economy. There has been a noticeable upsurge in agricultural activities, with more individuals engaging in farming and livestock breeding, particularly cow breeding. However, this surge in agricultural pursuits has also led to escalating conflicts between farmers and herders, resulting in the loss of lives and property. According to Akinrinde et al. (2021), attacks by Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria have resulted in the deaths of 3,780 individuals across the nation, excluding those injured or abducted. Conversely, farmers have retaliated by slaughtering dozens of cows and Fulani ranchers in response to the destruction of farms and agricultural produce by cows. These ongoing clashes between farmers and herders, exacerbated by the current herdsmen drive, have significantly heightened insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in the North Central region and beyond.

The root cause of these conflicts lies in the competition for available resources, particularly grazing land. Neglected agricultural areas with grazing reserves have received little to no attention from successive governments, leading herders to revert to their traditional and seasonal grazing routes, disrupted by various factors such as industrialization, urbanisation, demographic shifts, and natural forces. Consequently, clashes and violence have ensued between farmers and host communities, posing a severe threat to Nigeria's national security.

To address these complex issues, the federal government established a Strategic Action Committee in June 2015, tasked with investigating the problem and proposing recommendations for effective government intervention. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), a key stakeholder in this endeavour, identified climate change and desertification as major drivers of the annual trans-human migration from the North to the South (Adadu et al., 2022). Given that climate change and related factors are beyond the control of farmers or herders, concerted efforts involving the government, private sector, regional authorities, and the global community are imperative to tackle these challenges.

The majority of Nigeria's population resides in rural areas, where agriculture serves as the primary livelihood. Consequently, communal conflicts or disputes have significant repercussions for food supply and availability. Crop agriculture and livestock keeping are the primary economic activities in these regions, and communal conflicts disrupt the food chain as warring tribes or groups often employ coercion to gain access to food and cattle. Consequently, communal strife has led to food insecurity as a collateral effect.

Such strife is directly linked to food insecurity and frequently results in reduced productivity and revenue from cash crops and livestock, thereby compromising the ability of individuals who rely on these resources for sustenance. The Fulani herders play a crucial role in Nigeria's economy, serving as primary cattle breeders and meat producers and providing the most accessible and affordable source of animal proteins for Nigerians. With ownership of over 90% of the country's cattle population, the Fulani contribute significantly to agricultural GDP, accounting for one-third of it and 3.2% of total GDP (Mohammed & Baba, 2018). Their presence also significantly influences the local food system and national food security.

Additionally, Abughdyer (2021) documented that between 2010 and 2014, farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State resulted in the destruction of 664.4 hectares (56.4%) of farmland in the three local governments of Agatu, Guma, and Logo (Obikaeze et al., 2023). This poses a considerable risk to food production in Nigeria, as Benue State is a focal point for the country's food security.

The consequences of these conflicts extend beyond the realm of agriculture to encompass human, societal, economic, and security impacts. Farmer-herder disputes have profound humanitarian consequences, often culminating in fatalities, population displacement, injuries, and the loss of livelihoods (Kamais & Mosol, 2022). Violence not only claims lives but also renders individuals homeless, displaced, and impoverished. In addition to the direct casualties resulting from clashes between nomads and indigenous peoples, many individuals have been left widowed, orphaned, or disabled. Consequently, a significant number of people have become internally displaced, particularly women, who fear venturing to remote farms due to the risk of attacks by nomads.

Referring to the situation in Southern Kaduna between 1999 and 2017, a total of eighty-five (85) attacks were documented, resulting in the deaths of approximately one thousand three hundred and thirteen (1,131) individuals and the severe injury of sixty-nine (69) others (Ishaku, 2021). Numerous residences were set ablaze, and extensive property damage was reported. In summary, farmer-herder conflicts lead to fatalities among farmers, the destruction of their residences and assets, and the displacement of agricultural workers. According to Alli (2021), the social ramifications of farmer-pastoralist clashes jeopardise peace and harmony among diverse communities. Atobatele & Moliki (2022), in their analysis of herder-farmer disputes, asserted that such confrontations often generate tense and unstable inter-group relations among affected communities. Presently, there exists a palpable atmosphere of mutual distrust and animosity between indigenous communities and Fulani herders. Consequently, herders perceive the locals as threats to their collective survival, fostering a climate of mutual suspicion and perpetual tension detrimental to peaceful coexistence, security, and societal stability. The conflict has also resulted in threats and intimidation, compelling both farmers and herders to flee their conflict-ridden settlements. This atmosphere of apprehension has negatively impacted cooperation levels, agricultural activities, and economic exchanges between the two groups.

Armed Criminality in the Northwest: Implications on Security and Integration of West Africa

The Northwest region stands as one of Nigeria's largest geopolitical zones, boasting significant landmass and population. Encompassing an area of 192,689 square kilometres, equivalent to

83,415 square miles, it accommodates approximately 40 million people out of Nigeria's total population of 200 million (Irogbo, et al., 2023). The predominant ethnic groups in the Northwest are the Hausa and Fulani, with minority groups dispersed throughout the geopolitical zone. This zone consists of seven states: Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, Kaduna, Kano, and Jigawa. While a substantial portion of the Northwest is arid, the land is fertile and conducive to agricultural and livestock development.

Despite the region's potential, the Northwest has, since the restoration of democracy, grappled with severe rural banditry, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives and properties. What initially began as localised disputes between herders and farmers over access to land and water resources has, unfortunately, evolved into a deadly conflict, posing significant threats to national and regional security and integration. The nature and intensity of rural banditry in the Northwest are intertwined with socio-economic, environmental, and political factors that shape the zone's development trajectory.

Firstly, environmental factors, partly influenced by climatic conditions and changes, have played a pivotal role in fueling rural banditry. The Northwest region has experienced fluctuations in climatic patterns, including droughts, food insecurity, flooding, and river shrinkage. These environmental challenges have compelled herders and farmers to migrate in search of water resources and grazing lands, often transcending the boundaries of the region (Sambo & Sule, 2024). When these movements coincide with the harvest season, conflicts between farmers and herders ensue, resulting in detrimental effects on agricultural and livestock activities. Individuals who suffer losses in terms of farmlands produce, or cattle often resort to rural banditry as a survival strategy.

Furthermore, the rivalry between self-help groups, primarily the Hausas representing local communities, and the Fulanis, predominantly engaged in herding, exacerbates tensions. This rivalry, particularly pronounced in Zamfara and Katsina states, stems from longstanding grievances between the two ethnic groups, exacerbated by the mishandling of disputes by local traditional leaders (Adetula, 2005). The failure to address grievances effectively, coupled with hate speech and discriminatory actions, has escalated tensions, leading to sexual assaults, arson, and the destruction of local resources.

Another contributing factor to rural banditry is the gradual disappearance of grazing lands and routes due to indiscriminate land allocation and poor implementation of urban and regional development plans. Historically, colonial and post-colonial governments had instituted policies to acquire and maintain grazing lands and routes. However, the neglect of the agricultural sector in favour of oil discovery led to the appropriation of these lands for urban development projects. State governors, responsible for land allocation, often abused their powers for political gain, allocating lands for personal interests rather than rural development. This skewed allocation of resources intensified agricultural capitalism, resulting in competition for scarce land and water resources, ultimately fueling rural banditry.

Also, elite conspiracies driven by the pursuit of power and wealth further sustain rural banditry. Political elites, dissatisfied with state leadership, often collude with bandit groups to undermine political legitimacy. Traditional rulers, too, have been implicated in aiding and abetting banditry by providing safe havens for criminal activities. Public officials within security institutions

exacerbate the situation through the misappropriation of funds meant for combating banditry, leading to a breakdown in law enforcement and intelligence-gathering efforts.

Apart from elite conspiracy, both state and non-state institutions have contributed to the escalation of rural banditry in the Northwest region. One such institution is the Nigerian media, which has become polarised and biased in its reporting and coverage of rural banditry in the sub-region. The conflict is underreported, receiving little attention in public discourse. Additionally, the use of hate speech, name-calling, and offensive language, particularly on social media, by politicians and private media owners further exacerbates public disorder and the rural banditry problem. The Nigerian media's biased reporting on rural banditry appears to be part of a deliberate effort to create public disorder rather than serving as a means of providing solutions to the issue of banditry in the country.

Moreover, poor service delivery and the pervasive poverty situation in the Northwest, stemming from governance failures, have been identified as major factors contributing to the emergence of bandit groups across the region. Despite its significant population, the Northwest zone is reported to be the poorest in terms of infrastructure and social services, with a large proportion of its inhabitants living in absolute poverty, lacking access to quality education, healthcare, and basic security. Consequently, many youths in the region, deprived of opportunities for education and meaningful employment, have resorted to joining bandit groups as a means of survival. Some desperate politicians have exploited these vulnerable youths, using them as foot soldiers to advance their interests, thereby exacerbating the problem of rural banditry and political tensions within local communities and across the country.

The foregoing analysis suggests that rural banditry can be categorised into two types: need-based and greed-based. Need-based banditry is driven by individuals who have lost their livelihoods, such as peasant farmers and Fulani herders, due to natural or man-made factors. On the other hand, greed-based banditry is perpetrated by elites seeking power or wealth accumulation. Unfortunately, Nigeria's political leadership has focused more attention on addressing need-based banditry, neglecting the more severe greed-based variant. This oversight has allowed rural banditry to evolve into a major form of domestic conflict in the Northwest, gradually transforming into transborder crimes with the increasing involvement of non-Nigerians in the conflict. The porous borders, shared language, and religion among border communities, coupled with weak or absent state security institutions, have facilitated the expansion of banditry activities across the region and beyond.

The prevalence and transformation of rural banditry into a sub-regional conflict have significant implications for regional security and integration in West Africa. The prolonged conflicts have led to heightened insecurity, disrupted agricultural and livestock development, and exacerbated poverty and food insecurity across the sub-region. The decline in beef and milk production, coupled with increased migration and refugee flows, poses challenges to economic and political integration efforts within ECOWAS and undermines efforts to achieve sustainable peace and security in the region. Therefore, effective utilisation of agricultural resources and prioritising economic and political integration through agricultural development are essential for promoting peace and security in West Africa.

The phenomenon of rural banditry, accompanied by a culture of blame, hate speech, and derogatory labelling, is progressively evolving into ethnic and religious conflicts, disrupting the longstanding peaceful coexistence among tribal groups with centuries of shared history. Notably, instances of rural banditry, such as cattle rustling, particularly prevalent in ethnically diverse and volatile regions like Plateau, Benue, and Taraba states in Nigeria, have exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions between the Fulani Muslims, often perceived as settlers, and indigenous tribes such as the Hausas, Birom, Tivs, and Jukuns. According to the International Crisis Group (2017), Fulani herders, primarily Muslims and pastoralists from the northern regions, have been portrayed as agents of Islamization, leading any confrontation with other ethnic groups to be interpreted as an effort to expand the boundaries of the Fulani caliphate. Furthermore, political figures from various backgrounds, including Fulanis, have been implicated in the blame game, accused of complicity in the perceived wrongdoings of their ethnic groups in affected states. This ethnic framing of rural banditry has ramifications for state-society relations within the sub-region, as Fulanis from neighbouring West African countries, such as Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, often face discrimination and denial of rights and privileges in other ECOWAS countries, contravening protocols established by the ECOWAS. Consequently, the pursuit of regional integration and the establishment of hybrid socio-economic and political institutions, such as the ECOWAS Parliament, ECOWAS Central Bank, ECOWAS Court, and ECO currency, may encounter obstacles in an environment marked by heightened mutual distrust, suspicion, and fragile interethnic and interreligious relations. Despite the ethnic connotations attributed to rural banditry, evidence suggests that its essence transcends religion or ethnicity, as Fulanis and non-Fulanis have coexisted and engaged in economic activities for centuries. Both groups have mutually benefited from farming and transhumance pastoralism across West Africa. While some Fulani pastoralists have transitioned to sedentary lifestyles through crop cultivation alongside grazing, affluent farmers and industrialists have invested in cattle husbandry, occasionally entrusting their cattle to herders (Davindera, 1997). The active participation of diverse ethnic groups in farming and cattle husbandry has significantly contributed to the GDP of countries like Nigeria, Niger, and Chad, ranging from 5 to 10 per cent. Thus, the characterization of rural banditry as primarily ethnic or religious conflict is not only erroneous but also potentially a diversionary tactic aimed at destabilising diverse countries in West Africa. It is pertinent to recognise that the root causes of rural banditry and general insecurity in certain West African regions stem from issues of social injustice, exclusion, power struggles, disregard for the rule of law, and weak democratic institutions. Regardless of the perspective adopted to explain this phenomenon, rural banditry has indisputably impacted social relations among diverse populations across different parts of West Africa.

The escalation of rural banditry in Nigeria has significantly impeded the country's efforts and capacity to contribute effectively to the stability and integration of West Africa. This is evidenced by Nigeria's transformation into a transit point and destination for the distribution and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The widespread availability of arms has notably fueled the radicalization of youths and facilitated the establishment of gun runners' syndicates operating across West, Central, and East Africa, exacerbating conflicts and instability in the region. These syndicates establish supply chains and sales routes spanning Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Libya, thereby enhancing access to weapons for bandits and religious extremist groups.

According to an ECOWAS expert, Mali has become a well-established transit route for weapons travelling from the increasingly peaceful coastal states of West Africa to active conflict zones in

West and Central Africa (Ampomah, 2019). Moreover, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs asserted that armed groups from Niger and Chad are crossing into Nigeria to supply and assist domestic insurgent groups like Boko Haram in the Northeast and rural bandits in the Northwest, leading to attacks on public interests and the loss of innocent lives (Brechenmacher, 2019). These dynamics have contributed to the surge in banditry in border communities, with ramifications for border stability, control, and diplomatic relations among West African countries.

Border banditry has created a precarious security situation in the border communities of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Benin, disrupting informal trading relations that have existed for decades and have been instrumental in the economic growth and development of West and Central Africa. Notably, informal cross-border trade accounts for approximately 70 per cent of the GDP of countries such as Benin and the Niger Republic (Nwaokonko, 2022).

The participation of traditional rulers in activities such as cattle rustling and other forms of banditry has altered the narratives surrounding conflicts and their implications for the legitimacy of traditional institutions in West Africa. It is contended that before the colonial conquest of Africa, traditional institutions held paramount importance in conflict mediation, resolution, and the general administration of the continent. They were esteemed as custodians of African traditions and value systems. Given their strategic significance, traditional institutions have historically been utilized by political leaders to address communal and other conflicts throughout the subregion. Traditional institutions are widely respected across the continent and are often hailed as symbols of hope and unity, particularly in times of crisis.

Regrettably, the credibility of traditional institutions and the societal values they embody—such as respect, dignity, integrity, and mutual co-existence—that have traditionally fostered stability and security in the region are gradually diminishing. This decline is attributed to the perceived involvement of traditional rulers in safeguarding rural bandits, particularly in certain states within the Northwest Zone of Nigeria. This erosion of traditional values and institutions carries implications for state reconstruction and nation-building, particularly in conflict-prone areas of West Africa. Additionally, it impacts the political culture and socialisation of the emerging political leadership within the subregion.

The escalation of attacks and abductions of foreign nationals by rural bandits in various regions of Nigeria, including the economically vital Niger Delta area, has had adverse effects on infrastructural development, trade, and foreign direct investment. Onuoha et al., (2023) disclosed an incident wherein an expatriate engineer engaged in a project in Zamfara State was kidnapped and held for 12 days until his employer paid a ransom of ₦30 million, equivalent to \$83,100. Similarly, two foreign expatriates, accompanied by a police escort, were abducted and murdered while en route to their project site in Sokoto State. Several road construction companies affected by such incidents, including K & E and CGC, were compelled to abandon their projects and relocate to other African nations that offer greater peace and investment appeal. Comparable occurrences of banditry have also been witnessed among expatriates and native Africans employed in the oil and gas, as well as telecommunications, sectors throughout Nigeria.

The escalating trend of banditry has become a profitable enterprise amid the mounting levels of poverty and hunger across West Africa. Notably, one of the principal endeavours of the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is the extensive construction of roads linking various member countries. However, the increasing incidence of kidnappings and fatalities involving foreigners has impeded infrastructural development, a crucial focus area for economic integration spearheaded by ECOWAS. Infrastructural development within the sub-region is intended to facilitate trade and ensure the unimpeded movement of people, goods, and services across ECOWAS nations. In instances where infrastructural development opportunities are hindered due to insecurity issues, the scourge of banditry is likely to proliferate, thereby jeopardising the security and integration objectives of West Africa.

CONCLUSION

Achieving lasting stability in the Gulf of Guinea will be a gradual process, contingent upon the implementation of African-led solutions. A critical priority is the establishment of a subregional security sector that is both effective and cost-efficient, transcending internal and external distinctions while overcoming barriers posed by regional boundaries, particularly along the coast. Each national security apparatus should be structured to foster collaboration with neighbouring counterparts and coordinate with domestic justice systems. A primary objective will be to facilitate the disarmament and demobilisation of combatants, as well as to prevent the proliferation of criminal networks, particularly those involved in arms trafficking and armed groups operating along the coast and in the Sahel region.

Moreover, national and subregional security sectors must play a pivotal role in supporting the organisation and execution of legitimate electoral processes, as well as ensuring the implementation of electoral outcomes. This prerequisite is essential to prevent a regression into chaos. Legitimacy derived from such processes enables the state to effectively oversee the security sector, complemented by an accountable executive, an independent judiciary empowered to supervise security forces both on land and at sea and a legislature tasked with safeguarding minority rights.

Additionally, enduring stability in the Gulf of Guinea hinges on robust economic and social development. Such development is vital not only to finance security forces but also to foster equitable wealth distribution, addressing legitimate grievances within society. Relying solely on international aid for development is deemed unacceptable, as it risks funds falling into the hands of criminals, depriving many communities of their rightful benefits. Conversely, fostering a society capable of generating value and promoting socioeconomic mobility at the grassroots level is crucial for curbing criminal activities and preempting crises. This approach, particularly in dissuading youth from pursuing criminal pathways, represents the most effective strategy for ensuring long-term stability, both on land and at sea.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Numerous studies have examined the security threats facing West and Central Africa, with particular attention to the Gulf of Guinea. Many proposals have been put forward to address these challenges, some of which have been adopted by ECOWAS in its conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms and, to some extent, by ECCAS. More recently, the African Union has

initiated collaboration with ECCAS and the GGC. Therefore, the recommendations provided herein are focused on essential measures to prevent worst-case scenarios, halt further deterioration, and foster widespread and enduring security. These recommendations are organised into three broad categories: (1) suggestions for strengthening the foundational elements of security in the Gulf of Guinea; (2) recommendations for enhancing legal and judicial oversight of the security sector; and (3) steps to bolster transnational cooperation for ensuring security across the subregion.

1. Foundations for Security

1. Favour African Solutions: Halting conflicts at their inception is the responsibility of the entire international community. However, interventions should not exacerbate destabilization. The establishment of conditions conducive to lasting human security is a long-term endeavour that must originate within the subregion itself, with support from the broader African continent where feasible. In light of this, relevant stakeholders should consider the following recommendations:

1. Prioritise African solutions in security strategy, legal frameworks, and security policy rather than imposing Western-centric approaches. Respect African traditions in the use of force, particularly regarding the recruitment of combatants and conflict resolution.
2. Advocate for the development of integrated security sectors in West Africa and Central Africa through political and economic cooperation mechanisms that reconcile supranational, mutual assistance, and non-interference.
3. Advocate for the establishment or reinforcement of ad hoc structures across subregions within the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel region to facilitate seamless cooperation on security matters.
4. Promote a balanced approach to relations between subregions and Western and Asian powers, emphasising solidarity, non-interference, and cooperation.

2. Enhance Legislative Oversight

In general, the Nigerian legislative oversight of the executive aims to ensure equitable application of the law for all citizens, a principle particularly pertinent to the security sector. Bearing this in mind, states in the Gulf of Guinea and entities involved in state reconstruction should consider the following recommendations:

1. Subject security and defence budgets to parliamentary scrutiny during the formulation and reporting stages.
 1. Provide parliamentary committees with adequate resources to gather security-related information, particularly from the field, without unduly hindering access through unwarranted secrecy.
2. Facilitate intercommittee collaboration by convening joint activities involving parliamentary committees responsible for security and budget matters.

3. Conduct parliamentary oversight of the security sector with a focus on safeguarding minority interests, including ensuring the participation of various opposition factions.
4. Extend oversight of subregional security issues to the ECOWAS and ECCAS parliaments. This oversight should be obligatory, even if parliamentary opinions are not legally binding.
5. Ensure the integration of provisions from the Arms Trade Treaty into national legislation and the legal frameworks of ECOWAS and ECCAS.

3. Ensure judicial oversight.

Judicial oversight of the security sector is equally indispensable. Security sector personnel must not exploit their authority to wield force or their role as adjuncts to justice to infringe upon citizens' rights or challenge the authority of the state. Therefore, states in the Gulf of Guinea and entities involved in state reconstruction should heed the following recommendations:

1. Incorporate provisions into national criminal codes, enforceable through civil legal channels, specifically targeting the investigation and prosecution of serious crimes committed by security sector personnel in the line of duty or when exercising statutory powers and immunities.
2. Ensure that in cases of such serious crimes, investigators possess specialised expertise to probe infractions committed by members of the security sector and present their findings to prosecuting authorities.
3. Adhere unequivocally to international norms and standards governing the conduct of security forces and the investigation and punishment of alleged breaches of these norms.
4. Align domestic criminal legislation with these norms to enable trials in national courts of individuals charged with crimes outlined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Facilitate maritime security units in collecting, safeguarding, and furnishing evidence of piracy and other maritime crimes substantial enough to support criminal prosecution.

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

1. Strengthening the Subregional Security System

Subregional organisations in the Gulf of Guinea acknowledge that their member states lack adequate capacity to ensure security individually, emphasising the need to guarantee security for the entire subregion. ECOWAS stands at the forefront globally in conceptualizing and implementing a regional security apparatus, exemplified by ECOMOG's evolution into a Standby Brigade, reflecting West Africa's early recognition of the necessity for collective security assets to assist countries in distress. However, subregional security initiatives often exhibit traces of Western models, potentially resulting in technically inadequate and unnecessarily costly systems. To enhance cooperation efficiently and effectively for heightened security across the region, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. While maintaining distinct national security sectors, Gulf of Guinea states should foster interoperability among their security sectors, particularly with neighbouring countries.

2. ECOWAS should persist in its ongoing security sector reform efforts, with ECCAS extending similar reforms within its purview.

3. ECOWAS and ECCAS should establish a mechanism for coordinating regional security, facilitating personnel exchanges, and mutual assistance among security systems.

4. Enhanced collaboration with international security organisations, including the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the AU Peace and Security Council, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and the Gulf of Guinea Commission, should be pursued by ECOWAS and ECCAS.

5. To optimise cost-effectiveness, joint procurement, maintenance, operational planning, and deployment systems should be developed by ECOWAS and ECCAS for armed helicopters, tactical transport helicopters, aerial surveillance platforms (including drones and manned aircraft), and maritime surveillance assets.

2. Pursuing Disarmament and Preventing Transnational Organised Crime

In the aftermath of crises in the Gulf of Guinea, disarmament efforts have been incomplete, demobilisation superficial, and combatant reintegration limited. This situation poses a risk of relapse into conflict and the transformation of crisis-born armed actor networks into organised crime syndicates. To prevent further expansion and collaboration among criminal networks, the security sectors of Gulf states should collaborate to:

1. Implement the ECOWAS Convention on the Proliferation of Light Weapons to locate, seize, or repurchase circulating arms and publicly destroy them.

2. Cooperate at the subregional level to identify and dismantle clandestine networks surviving demobilisation, preventing their involvement in criminal activities or re-engagement in armed conflict.

3. Internationally, African states, in partnership with UNODC and the GGC, should monitor and obstruct arms and fighter movements along the Gulf Coast, tackling drug smuggling, illegal immigration, and arms trafficking.

3. Maritime and Aerial Cooperation

Maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea encompass various challenges necessitating costly countermeasures. Collaborative efforts among Gulf States and regional organisations are imperative to address these threats.

1. Translate the provisions of the International Ship and Port Security Code into national laws, ensuring corruption-free enforcement in Gulf ports and waters with assistance from the International Maritime Organisation and the Maritime Organisation for West and Central Africa.

2. Implement the Yaoundé Code of Conduct in regulating, planning, and doctrine maritime units of all Gulf-bordering countries.

3. Develop air and maritime patrol assets aligned with the Yaoundé Code of Conduct to safeguard Exclusive Economic Zones, considering cooperation among ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the GGC.
4. Establish specific riverine combat units, potentially utilised for national and multinational operations, with collaboration among Gulf states, ECOWAS, ECCAS, and/or the GGC.

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