

Armed Banditry and Statehood Challenges in North-Western Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Armed Banditry and Statehood Challenges in North-Western Nigeria as part of the threats to national security that has setback the nation building. Therefore, states of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kebbi in the zone are facing the ever increasing and unquantifiable monstrosities of armed banditry that resulted to many villages deserted, thousands of innocent people killed, thousands kidnapped for ransom and hundreds thousands fled their homes. The study employed qualitative research method through the use of secondary sources of data for proper analysis. To this effect, the paper adopts Weber Conceptual Clarification of state which noted that state is a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. The paper finds out that, in North-Western Nigeria armed bandits have created a semblance of parallel authority that denies bonafide citizens access to their ancestral farmlands, imposing levies on communities, usurped power and have now begun to appoint District Heads and forests across the zone were grossly unregulated turned into their operational base. The paper recommends among others, powerful centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force, effective control of ungoverned spaces and protection racket in the vein of organized crime that would provide effective preventive measure, management strategies for intelligence gathering so that security agencies could be proactive and reasonably predict potential security threats with near perfect accuracy rather than being reactive.

Keywords: Armed Banditry, Statehood, Monstrosities, Ungoverned Spaces, North-Western Nigeria.

Introduction

The security situations in Nigeria has become worrisome considering the high rate of violent attacks which innocent people fall to the gun of armed criminals in the country today. In the past recent years no week passes without report of assailants taking human lives, abducts or maims in the villages and highways of North-Western Nigeria. The gigantic security threats which bedeviled North-western Nigeria is the monstrosity of armed banditry, a type of organized crime that includes village raids, kidnappings for ransom, armed robbery, murder, rape, maiming, cattle rustling and the exploitation of environmental resources. The devastated implications of the menace involved violent attacks of criminal activity, emergence of informal security sector, political chess game, proliferation of small/light weapons and humanitarian crisis as exemplified in the phenomenon of Boko Haram. This scenario has accentuated the significance of armed banditry as part of the fundamental threats to national security (Idris, 2021).

In some traditional African polities the exploits of bandits were celebrated in the oral narratives of the community names of individual brigands were immortalized by their community which in fact sanctioned and preserved the tradition of brigandage (Markakis 1974). Therefore, armed banditry

is an ancient practice that is associated with societies suffering from social and economic upheavals and where the structures and functioning of governance have collapsed or are significantly weakened (Rufai 2017). Further identified two forms of armed banditry:

i. Armed banditry by opposing ethnic groups or clans. This form of bandit's activities often involves large number of people from defined ethnic or family background. The purpose of this form of banditry is to build-up the stock of livestock wealth for the ethnic group or clans. The rustled cows and shared among the family or group members for breeding. In some situations, part of the cows may be given back to families or groups whose animals were previously rustled by the opposing parties. Examples of these forms of rustling are common in the Greater Horn of Africa, particularly in countries including Somalia, Kenya and Uganda.

ii. Armed banditry by criminal gangs or thieves who sell-off the stolen items or got money as ransom from abducted victims. The purpose of this form of banditry is purely criminal, it is to kidnaped for ransom, rape, raids villages and steal cows, goats, sheep's, donkeys, horses and other valuable items and sell them off for monetary gains. For this form of armed bandits to exist, there must be ready markets which are built around powerful cartels with wide networks and support from state institutions particularly security agencies.

Abdullahi (2019) noted that armed banditry is not something novel to West Africa. Its origin and development are as old as the sub-region itself dating back to inter-tribal periods characterized by conflicts and wars over scarce economic resources and territorial expansion for political influence. Most parts of Africa experienced these forms of brigandage during the slave trading, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Even though there have been remarkable changes on the nature and pattern of armed banditry and other forms of brigandage in West Africa, yet socio-economic and political reasons remain significant in explaining the prevalence of the phenomenon. Perhaps, this explains why the struggle for political independence and the subsequent establishment of the post-colonial state in West Africa were considered as some of the major events which shaped the pattern of armed banditry. For instance, in Tillaberi (Niger republic) the general poverty situations, poor governance and porous borders communities has a strong connections with armed banditry while in Mali, the evolution and development of armed banditry have been related to religious extremism by sectarian religious groups and further aggravated by weak state institutions.

The major form of statehood challenges in North-Western Nigeria that threatening democratic governance, hindered socioeconomic development and becomes an appealing method of income is the monstrosity of armed banditry. Furthermore, weak governance, youth unemployment, poverty and inequality have left people with depleted options for livelihood. The Security services are often understaffed and lack the proper resources to effectively combat these criminal armed gangs. Vast areas of unregulated forests allow for their easy concealment, police and military forces have difficulty in penetrating the rough terrain. Under-policed borders aided the proliferation of small and light weapons among bandits groups (Claire, 2021).

Empirical evidence revealed that many villages raided, thousands of people killed, hundreds thousand fled their homes, thousands abducted for ransom, hundreds thousand cattle rustled, houses, shops, private and public buildings burnt by the assailants. The question is what are the monstrosities of armed banditry and its Statehood Challenges in North-Western Nigeria? These rhetorical questions will investigate "Armed banditry and Statehood Challenges in North- Western Nigeria" because it is worrisome despite effort claimed by Government to curtail it yet the situations remain uncontained.

Conceptual Clarifications

Armed banditry: The concept of banditry has been changing over time, space and circumstances. A bandit in the 19th century Europe and Americas was a freedom fighter whose aim was partly to ensure the emancipation of the downtrodden from the upper class or colonized over the colonizer (Warto, 1994). Bandits like Chucho el Roto, Herachio Bernel and Santanon were often celebrated as heroes of Mexican independence. Therefore, Mexicans have warm regards and respect for those social workers" termed bandits, while on the contrary, the State often considered them as nuisance and outlaws that need to be eradicated (Watts, 1987). In some pre-industrial societies peasants sees bandits differently from the state not as outlaws, hoodlums and miscreants but as avengers and bread winners but banditry in African setting is entirely opposite to that of Americas and Europe. In African context armed bandits specialized in armed robbery, village raids, cattle rustling, rape, maiming, kidnappings for ransom, killings and other related crimes (Cheserek, 2012).

Abdullahi, (2019) viewed it as unlawful armed group terrorizing people and confiscating their properties. It is synonymous with the establishment of gang groups who used small and light weapons to carry out attacks against people. In this regard, banditry could mean a set up criminal activity deliberately designed and carried out for personal gains. Moreover, Okoli and Okpaleke (2014) to them armed banditry involves the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person or a group of persons in order to rob, rape or kill. While, Idris (2021) described armed banditry as criminal activity of villages raids, cattle rustling, illegal toll collection, rape, kidnappings for ransom, maiming, killings and population displacement by an outlawed armed groups usually operates within and along forests, highways, rural and border communities.

Statehood: The term "state" refers to a set of different but interrelated and often overlapping theories about a certain range of political phenomena. The common central points are the "centralized institution" that impose rules and back them up by force, over a territorially circumscribed population; a distinction between the ruler and the ruled: and an element of autonomy, stability and differentiation (Scheidel, 2013). The state is a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. The state is also like human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber, 1991).

John Locke argued that, state provides the basis for social cohesion and productivity, creating incentives for wealth-creation by providing guarantees protection for one's life, liberty and personal property. Meanwhile, Karl Marx described state as parasitic, built upon the superstructure of the economy, working against the public interest and nothing more than a committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie. Also, mirrors class relations in society in general acting as a regulator and repressor of class struggle, a tool of political power and domination for the ruling class (Mark, 2000).

Tilly, (1985) challenged narratives of the state as being the result of a societal contract or provision of services in a free market but characterizes it more akin as a protection racket in the vein of organized crime. Therefore, sees state as coercion-wielding organizations that are distinct from households and kinship groups and exercise clear priority in some respects over all other organizations within substantial territories. This includes city-states, theocracies and empires in his definition along with nation-states, but excludes tribes, lineages, firms and churches. Also, added that states has essential minimal activities such as eliminating or neutralizing their rivals,

eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside their territory, eliminating or neutralizing enemies of their clients, acquiring the means of carrying out the first three activities, authoritative settlement of dispute among members of the population, intervention in the allocation of goods among the members of the population, control of the creation and transformation of goods and services produced by the populations.

Another commonly accepted conceptualization of the state is the one given at the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties in 1933. It provides that “state as a person of international law” should possess the following qualifications (a) a permanent population (b) a defined territory (c) government and (d) capacity to enter into relations with the other states and that state shall constitute a sole person in the eyes of international law. The states are nonphysical persons of international law, governments are organizations and its state is one of representation and authorized agency (Crawford, 2007).

The Monstrosities of Armed Banditry In North-Western Nigeria

Village Raids

A small tit-for-tat community clash in 2011 between Hausa farmers and Fulani nomadic herdsmen over cattle rustling and poor handling by local authorities, who have been accused by both sides of bias, resulted in distrust that partly led to its escalation and later metamorphosed into a deadly violent crimes. Since 2011, the attacks carryout by these armed criminal gangs popularly known as armed bandits had left more than 4,000 people dead, rustled more than 25, 000 cattle and impacted about 500 villages in Zamfara state (www.Aljazeera.com May 15, 2019). Meanwhile, in neighbouring state of Katsina armed bandits on motorcycles launched an attacked and killed 21 people in Tsawa and another 19 in nearby village of Dankar, most of those killed were old people and children who couldn’t escape while in Kaduna state armed bandits burnt to death 21 people including 16 of members of a single family in a reprisal raid to avenge a vigilantee attacked on their hideout (ARABNEWS February 16, 2020).

Furthermore, an organized and simultaneous attacks in villages of Danmusa, Dutsenma and Safana Local Governments of Katsina state in north-western Nigeria by groups of armed bandits left hundreds of people been killed in 2019 in different forms of criminality such as village raids, armed robberies, kidnapping and cattle rustling. Such attacks have added to the pervasive security challenges in Africa’s most populous country, which is already struggling to contain the terrorists insurgencies in the Northeast and communal violence over grazing rights in central state (REUTERS April 19, 2020).

However, in July 2020 armed bandits raided 5 villages in North-Western Nigeria, the bandits stormed five neighboring rural communities in Maradun district of Zamfara state, firing indiscriminately and stealing livestock, 30 people were killed, seven persons in Sakkida, four in Farin Zare, eight in Orawa, seven in Gyadde and four in Sabon Gari, while seven other missing and presumed to have drowned in a nearby river while trying to escape the carnage. They attacked the villages simultaneously and took away a lot of cattle, sheep and goats, police in Zamfara confirmed the attacks through it spokesman Mohammed Shehu but said “only three people were killed” (Firstpost, July 29, 2020). Hence, a roughly of 150 armed bandits on Motorcycles opened fire on residents before looting shops and stealing cattle in a series of assaults which lasted for five hours in remote communities in Katsina state. The total number of 57 people were killed across six villages in the worst-hit village of Kisadau every shop was looted, over 200 cattle rustled and then moved to opened fire on a football pitch where young men were watching a local match and in a nearby village 24 people more people were killed.

While across the villages of Hayin Kabalawa, Garke, Marke, Kwakwere and Maigangun the assailants left two dozen people with bullet wounds (FRANCE24 November 6, 2020).

Daily Trust (April 22, 2021) armed bandits killed at least 25 people during deadly raids on six communities in Zamfara state while dozens of people including women and children are reportedly missing, houses, shops as well as private and public buildings have been burnt by the assailants. They first laid siege on 'Yar Doka a village about 7km west of Magami on motorbikes and shot any one at sight, then proceeded to Kango village and shot dead at least 11 people, 13 people in Ruwan Dawa community along Gusau-Dansadau road a 58km south of Gusau the state capital, 7 people at Madaba, 2 people at Mairairai, and 5 people at Arzikin Da communities. This occurred after simultaneous attacks by recalcitrant bandits on Gobirawa, Gora, Rini and Madoti Dankule villages of Maradun and Bakura Local Government Areas of the state on Tuesday 20th April, 2021 leading to the loss of lives of innocent members of the above mentioned communities.

Premium Times (October 18, 2021) Moreover, armed bandits gunned down at least 30 people and maimed others during an attack on a weekly market in Goronyo Local Government Area of Sokoto State. Over 150 to 200 of them (bandits) circled the market on motorcycles rode through the Gundumi forest to Goronyo town. They went straight into the market and started shooting sporadically. This happened barely 12 days after they had killed dozens of people in a similar attacks in Unguwar Lalle market in Sabon Birni, Goronyo, Isa, and Raba Local Government Areas of the state. Therefore, in another strange ugly monstrosity of armed bandits, some seasonal migrants have been burnt to death at Gidan Bawa village in Sabon Birni Local Government Area of Sokoto State. The migrants who were on their way to Gadan Gayan in Kaduna en-route to Southern part of the country in search of livelihood. Their vehicle was ambushed by the bandits who opened fire and the tyres broke down then somersaulted and burnt into flame, they surrounded them to ensure none of the passengers survived (Daily Trust December 7, 2021).

Mass Abductions

In a wave of mass abductions targeting schoolchildren and students in North-western Nigeria. Heavily-armed criminal gangs Kidnapped 149 students from a Bethel Baptist High School, a boarding school in Maramara Village of Chikun district outside the Kaduna state capital. The bandits scaled a fence to break into the school abducted most of the 165 pupils there overnight. Around 1,000 students and pupils have been abducted in different part of Nigeria states, most have been released after negotiations with local officials, although some are still in captivity. The Bethel Baptist High-School raid was the fourth mass abductions in Kaduna state since December 2020. The school abductions came just hours after armed criminals snatched eight medical employees from a Kaduna health center. They often raid villages to loot, steal cattle and abduct people for ransom and have increasingly targeted schools and colleges. They operate from camp in the Rugu forest, which cuts across Zamfara, Katsina and Kaduna states in Nigeria as well as Niger (www.cbsnews.com AFP July 5, 2021).

Seven months before Bethel Baptist High School Kaduna state students were kidnapped, Nigerian security rescued 80 students kidnapped by armed bandits in Katsina state of North western Nigeria. The kidnapping and rescue came just days after the released of more than 300 schoolboys in Kankara Local Government Area from a week in captivity which underscores serious concerns about security in the zone and also drew global condemnation. Also, the

Islamiyya school students, mostly girls were ambushed in Dandume Local Government Area of the state during a school procession to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The military said it rescued all the students including four others held by the bandits and recovered 12 cows (V.O.A December 21, 2020).

Between December 2020 and March 2021, 60 boarding house schools had been shut down in the North due the kidnap of school children. A breakdown according to IBP revealed that 344 were Kidnapped from Government Secondary School Kankara Katsina State, 27, students were Kidnapped in Government Secondary School Kagara Niger State, and another 300 girls were also Kidnapped in Government Girls College Jangebe Zamfara State. An estimates close to 800 students have been Kidnapped. This has also resulted to the closure of boarding schools in at least three states over the period and available data shows that over 60 schools in Niger, Zamfara, Katsina and some parts of Kaduna and Sokoto states with at least an average of 600 students are affected by these sudden closure (www.vanguardngr.com April 22, 2021).

As the last quarter of 2021 approached, armed bandits by large number stormed Government Day Secondary School Kaya in the remote village of Zamfara state in the series of attack and abducted more than 70 students. The bandits demanded large ransom payments from parents and while most pupils ultimately have been release some have died or been killed in captivity (www. Aljazeera.com September 1, 2021).

Involvements of Elites and Informants

Some political elites across political parties who might have lost the election and are dissatisfied with the state leadership support and conspired with bandit groups to discredit political leadership and erode its legitimacy in the eyes of the electorates. Late Abubakar Tsav a former Commissioner of Police in Lagos State stated that politicians are responsible for activities of the bandits terrorizing Nigeria. Banditry and most insecurities occurring in the country were created by politicians, most politicians knew exactly who the bandits were and why they were carrying out such activities. He added that “banditry and insecurity are created by politicians and the politicians know who the bandits are. They know why these people are doing this. “He appealed to political class to have a change of heart and cooperate with security agencies to reduce criminality in the land, also urged the police be courageous enough to search houses and monitor activities of politicians and see what they will recover from them” (Premium Times August 13, 2019).

Moreover, apart from political elites traditional rulers were also involved in aiding and abating armed banditry in the North-western Nigeria. Empirical evidence shows that some traditional rulers provide safety to bandits groups to carry out their illicit operations. They were accused of blatantly refusing to take action against armed bandits' activities in their communities. It is no longer something new that armed bandits enjoyed unprecedented immunity from traditional rulers and were seen around local markets working freely with dangerous weapons. They attacked innocent people, impose toll collection and demand ransom from traders and buyers on local markets days in Shinkafi, Birnin Magaji and other local communities in Zamfara state. In some cases, traditional rulers appoint their agents to negotiate terms and conditions of collaboration with the bandits on their behalf. In this regard, cases of banditry brought before the traditional rulers were either discharge without any serious interrogation or backfire on the communities (Abdullahi, 2019).

The committee report set up by Zamfara state governor Bello Matawalle has justified the above argument, the report indicted top military officers and traditional rulers as responsible for banditry

in the state. Zamfara is one of the states rocked by monstrosity of armed banditry. The committee set up in July, 2019 was headed by a former Inspector General of police Muhammad Abubakar. It was meant to find a solution to the intractable security challenges that rocking the state. However, the recommended the dismissal of some military officers and dethroning of the traditional rulers involved. Mr. Abubakar informed that “five, Emirs, 33 District Heads and several Village Heads were confirmed to be complicit in the banditry activities that lasted a decade”. Furthermore, the Committee also indicted 10 military officers as well as police and civilians as “supporting the bandits who have killed hundreds of innocent persons, burnt villages, destroyed farmlands, foodstuff and livestock” (Premium Times October 12, 2019).

Another worrisome aspect of this menace was the involvement of families and relations of victims of banditry in providing information to bandits in exchange for monetary incentives. Many families were confirmed to serve as an errand to bandits groups by providing them with information on the location, time, and where about of their victims. This indicates the degeneration of moral, cultural, and ethical values of brotherhood and communitarian tradition of African societies. It has created suspicions among families with negative consequences on state society relation in the North-western Nigeria. Meanwhile, Zamfara State Government says over 2,000 suspected informants of bandits have been arrested since it cut telecommunication services and the military launched offensive operations in the state. The government of the troubled North west states suspended telecommunications networks, banned weekly market and restricted the sale of petrol, among other drastic measures to check the activities of the bandits. The suspects have provided vital information on their activities and how they were allegedly supported by highly placed individuals (Premium Times September 30, 2021).

Proliferation of Small and Light Weapons

The growing intensity of armed banditry in North-western Nigeria has affected the country's efforts to protect its borderlands. This could be seen in the way Nigeria has turned into a transit route as well as the destination for the supply and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Arms proliferation has contributed significantly to the radicalization of youths and the creation of gun runners' syndicate who moved in and across the Nigeria-Niger and Chad borderlands to cause and involved in violent crimes. These syndicate groups create supply chain and sales routes from Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Libya, thereby increasing access to guns and other weapons to bandits and religious extremist groups. An ECOWAS expert reported that Mali had become an established transit route for weapons heading from West Africa's increasingly to active violent crimes in west and central Africa (IRIN, 2018).

Therefore, to buttress the above discussion Zamfara state governor (Matawalle) says “gun runners resorted to use of camels to smuggle weapons into Nigeria when it became pressure to smuggle weapons on vehicles” that’s why his government decided to assist with five vans for surveillance and drones to the border security of Nigeria and Niger in blocking the transits of weapons into the country during a meeting with former Nigerien Prime minister (Refini). However, Refini responded that banditry and terrorism is not peculiar to Nigeria and West African sub-region, his country is also facing the same from multiple fronts, then disclosed their internal strife in the kind of banditry and crimes are not new in the Niger Republic especially from Boko Haram and the insurgency from Mali border down to Burkina Faso” (Daily Trust August, 27, 2020).

Premium Times (March 5, 2021) Zamfara State Government said a Nigerian soldier and his girlfriend were caught supplying ammunition and military uniforms to bandits in the state at a

press conference through the state governor deputy chief of staff Bashir Maru. The military arrested an army officer and his girlfriend who were engaged in assisting bandits with military uniforms and ammunition in active connivance with other saboteurs, the arrest was only possible by the military through community-driven intelligence. The development has further proved the governor earlier position that unless the fight against banditry is cleansed of bad eggs and saboteurs, we may not record the desire success in the fight. In a similar vein, the Katsina state police command paraded a Niger national Haruna Yusuf 47 and his two sons Ibrahim Haruna, 20 and Shu'aibu Haruna, 18 for alleged banditry and gun- running. Mr. Yusuf a resident of Maduru village in Mani Local Government Area of Katrina

state led a syndicate supplying arms from Niger Republic to bandits in Katsina and Zamfara states. Other suspected members paraded were Murtala Haruna, 20 described as a nephew of arms dealer, Ibrahim Dabo 19, from Natsinta village, Kandamau, of Maradi, Niger Republic, Sambo Muhammadu, 22, Jabir Adamu, 20 and Basiru Usman, 18, in Tsanni village, of Batagarawa Local Government Area of Katsina state who was described as brother of the suspected arms supplier.

Also, confessed to sourcing arms and ammunition from Niger Republic for Lawan Zayyana, Haruna Adamu, Kamaradini Ja'afaru, and Auwal Abubakar of Maduru village of Mani Local Government Area of Katsina state who supply it to bandits in the forests. Auwal Abubakar and Haruna Adamu confessed to have sold over 10,000 arms and ammunition to bandits and severally trafficked these arms and ammunition to Gurbi and Dan-Magaji areas of Zamfara state. The items recovered from the suspects include two General Purpose Machine Guns (GMPGs), one LAR rifle and 179 Anti-Aircraft (AA) ammunitions and N3-4 million CFA Franc and seven motorcycles said Katsina state Police commissioner- Sanusi Buba (Premium Times January 25, 2021).

Humanitarian Crisis

The humanitarian crisis resulted from monstrosity of armed bandits in North-western Nigeria in states of Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto has triggered large scale of displacements and population movement within the states as well as across the international border to Niger Republic. A rapid assessment conducted by (IOM, 2019) Zamfara, Katsina and Sokoto states of North-western Nigeria shows an estimated of 66,900 people have been displaced within the states and is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The State of Zamfara has the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) at 38,113. This is not surprising given that 13 out of its 14 LGAs have been affected with the ongoing criminal activity of armed bandits. Gusau, the state capital, recorded the highest number of displaced individuals at 8,420. Maru LGA came in a close second with an estimate of 5,447 displaced individuals, Bukkuyuk with an estimate of 4,215 IDPs, Anka with 3,869 and 16,162 in other LGAs. The State of Katsina has the next highest number of IDPs at 16,257. Batsari was the most affected LGA with 3,375 affected individuals, followed by Kankara with 2,375 and Dan Musa with 2,003 affected persons.

Therefore, the assessment carried out in Sokoto state recorded over 12,527 individuals as displaced within the state because of the recent hostilities perpetuated by the armed groups ravaging the zone. All the LGAs in Sokoto state bordering Zamfara state, namely: Dange Shuni, Goronyo, Rabah, Sabon Birni, Kebbe, Isa, Tangaza and Tureta LGAs were reported to have been affected by this monstrosity. The Sabon Birni LGA in Sokoto has the highest number of affected persons at 10,000, followed by Rabah with 2,300 individuals. According to reports by (IOM, 2019), 20,000 Nigerians have fled to Niger Republic from the affected states. Most have made

their way to border localities of Madarounfa, Guidan Roundji, Guidan Soro as well as to Gabi and N'Gnelwa townships in the Maradi region. Most of the IDPs that arrived in Niger reported to have taken irregular routes to enter the country.

In another ugly development, the permanent secretary special services, office of the secretary to the Government of the Federation, Dr Amina Shamaki, during security meeting by the Federal and states security administrators held in Birnin Kebbi stated that, the attacks by armed bandits in North-western Nigeria which was formerly known as one of the most peaceful zones in the country remained a source of concern to the security agencies and the general populace. Because a total number of 1,460 civilians deaths in 330 attacks were recorded within seven months in the country particularly North-western Nigeria from January to July, 2019 (Daily Trust October 26, 2019).

Finally, the unfortunate development recorded in recent times has severely disrupted means of livelihood and the distribution of essential services for people across the zone. Since 2011, nearly 200,000 people have fled their homes due violent attacks by armed bandits and remain internally displaced within the northwest region. Approximately 77,000 Nigerians have fled to neighboring countries and humanitarian efforts to respond to emergencies in Nigeria as well as crises in neighboring Sahel and Lake Chad are desperate need of basic necessities (Claire, 2021).

Armed Banditry As Statehood Challenges In North-Western Nigeria

Ungoverned Spaces in North-Western Nigeria

Forests in North-Western Nigeria have been grossly ungoverned where armed bandits plots their monstrosity in highly syndicated camps, aided by sophisticated modern weapons and their activities were mostly pronounced in states of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kebbi. They have capitalized on their mastery of the forests paths and the terrains in raiding villages and highways. In many cases, they stage attacks from their hideouts in the adjoining forests and in turn makes their way into the forests after operations. In this regards, kidnapped persons are often held hostage in the forests while negotiations for ransom or 'tactical suspense' are going on. Many kidnapping victims in such forest have been killed or rescued by the security forces while in captivity and these have become serious challenges to statehood (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014). The monstrosity was gradually gaining grounds as bandits and rustlers were busy forming criminal gangs, establishes operational bases in the forests across zone as well as devising means to intensify their activities (Rufai, 2017). Thus, information has it that some Touareg and Fulani from Niger Republic formed part of the early bandits that established criminal armed gangs in North-Western Nigeria. Membership of said gangs received training around Birnin Gwari and Dansadau forests which is very large but extended thickest that cut across the states of Kaduna, Niger, Katsina, Kebbi, Zamfara and Sokoto down to some parts of Niger Republic (Jimi, 2011).

Therefore, North-Western Nigeria has been wracked by years monstrosity of armed banditry which begun as resources-based conflict involving clashes between rival communities over land, attacks by heavily armed criminal gangs and retaliation strikes from vigilante groups. The unrest, which an expert says has been spurred by overpopulation and climate changes, has seen an estimated 8,000 people killed since 2011 and 200,000 fled their home (FRANCE24 November 6, 2020). Nigerian security forces have utilized a variety of tactics over the years to combat monstrosity of these criminal armed gangs. Initially, the Federal government embraced an aggressive approach by deploying police and military operations to the states of Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Niger and Sokoto. While the security response has pushed back attacks, destroyed some hideouts, killed and arrested hundreds of assailants, attacks have continued. In 2019, a peace deal

was secured between the bandits and the governors of Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara. The deal encompassed disarmament, the release of kidnapped civilians and pardoning for the bandits but all failed to end the bloodshed. Although the number of fatalities decreased from August to November due to reconciliation initiatives, attacks picked up again in 2020 (Claire, 2021).

A Semblance of Parallel Authority in North-Western Nigeria

Dunleavy and O'leary (1987) noted that a state may be defined by its organization and functions as an operational political entity with legally acquired authority and autonomous institutions for looking after the interests of its subjects within a unified geographical territory and outside it. Key characteristics include the recognition of its sovereignty, a formal government with legitimacy, organized and recognizable means of policing the state. However, in related to (Weber, 1991) conceptual clarification, state is a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that

maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. The state is also like human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. Thus, statehood implies the existence of one center of power and unquestionable authority. Arguably, a state ceases to exist after a credible parallel alternative exists that imposes its authority on sizeable portions of the society and denies the constituted state access to the same. In addition, Section 14 (2) (b) of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended stated that "security and welfare of people shall be the primary purpose of government". This angle of reasoning was challenged within specific situations on the premise that today armed bandits in North-Western Nigeria seems to have directly challenged Nigerian statehood.

The challenges to Nigerian statehood can be illustrated whereby armed bandits operating in the Eastern part of Sokoto state moved their monstrosity to a new height by imposing taxes on the locals and that they must pay or risk attack, barred them from their farms pending payments of the prescribed levies. It was gathered that the bandits considered the population of each community in determining the amount to they would pay. Some are asked to pay N400,000, some N700,000 while some even pay less than that and was left for them to decide how the money will be raised. In some communities, heads of households are asked to pay N2,000 each and young men that are not married to pay N1,000 each. Some communities had settled the bandits while others are working hard to raise the money, many prefer to pay and live in peace in their communities than rely on security agencies or go on exile. Findings revealed that Attalawa, Danmaliki, Adamawa, Dukkuma, Sardauna and Dangari villages were asked to pay N400,000 each, while residents of Kwatsal village billed N4 million and were said to have already paid N2 million out the money to the bandits (www.globalupfronts.com October 27, 2021).

Premium Times (November 12, 2021), barely a month after collecting N11 million as ransom for the release of 20 people kidnapped in Gatawa community of Sabon Birni Local Government Area of Sokoto state, armed bandits returned and abducted five people demanding N500,000 each as ransom for their release. They came in the early morning around 8:00am when most people were just coming out from their houses. They shot severally into the air before started taking people hostage. When they gathered a number of people, they decided to let all the women go but went away with five men. Meanwhile, bandits believed to be loyal to Bello Turji have directed residents of another community in the area Tarah to pay N7 million as its own levy. Every household has been taxed N25,000 but not enough, they decided to reaching out to people from the town who reside elsewhere, So they can realize the money on time.

Apart from imposing levies on residents who didn't flee from their villages due to incessant attacks, bandits now usurped power and have begun to appoint District Heads. They appointed 2 District Heads in Sabon Birni Local Government Area of Sokoto state. The bandit's leader also celebrated "Maulud" in Makwaruwa where he declared himself the District Head in the presence of the bonafide District Head. Similarly, in Gangara town bandits summoned a meeting which was attended by all the inhabitants and appointed Dan Kwaro as the new District Head of the town and ordered markets to reopen which were initially ordered to close by the state government. Indeed, even before the bandits appointed District Heads, for long they were in total control of Dama, Zango and Gatawa communities, they dictate daily affairs, already established their presence and strong enough to annex additional areas and impose their kind of authority. So, anybody who had traditional authority can no longer exercise that power (www.vanguardnrg.com November 15, 2021).

Although, President Buhari have ordered the military crackdown of bandits terrorizing the zone, and charged the troops to be committed in restoring peace in the country particularly states troubled by bandits. Furthermore, order them to be ruthless as humanly possible in putting down the criminality, to pursue the bandits, identify and eliminate them and not to spare any bandits who have been killing, maiming and extorting innocent citizens (Daily Trust, October 26, 2019). Meanwhile, Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed says the fact that bandits are imposing levies on communities in North-Western Nigeria does not mean they have taken control of those territories in Nigeria. Argued that imposing levies does not mean criminals are in charge, added that it takes place in many parts of the country, including in the South where touts commonly referred to as "area boys" impose levies (eflex9ja.com.ng October 29, 2021).

The above discussions indicated that armed bandits in North-Western Nigeria were controlling large portions of ungoverned forests, turned it into their operational based and in most cases operates unchallenged. These monstrous armed criminals are also imposing levies on communities, usurped power and have begun to appoint District Heads while government responses to the menace is said to be reactive. Therefore, this miserable and unfortunate situations buttress the points that armed banditry have become a serious challenges to Nigerian statehood.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasized that most parts of North-western Nigeria people are confronted with an enormous and unquantifiable monstrosities of armed bandits that involved village raids, mass abductions, involvements of elites and informants, proliferation of small and light weapons and humanitarian crisis. Over a decade, thousands of people killed, thousands kidnapped for ransom, hundreds thousand fled their homes, many boarding house schools had been shut down, houses, shops, private and public buildings burnt. Furthermore, bandits now turned forests across the zone into their operational base, imposing levies on communities, usurped power and have begun to appoint District Heads. Therefore, soft responses to this worsening atrocities of armed bandits by both Federal and affected States Governments is not only giving the bandits unhindered opportunity to raid villages, maim, kill, abduct and steal, but guaranteeing easy recruits into banditry. What we are witnessing now is only the tip of an iceberg of a devastating sequel.

Henceforth, there is need for effective control of ungoverned spaces in North-western Nigeria to prevent the establishment of operational base of armed bandits, proliferation of small and light

weapons and easy concealment of bandits. Moreover, a powerful central government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force that would provides effective preventive measure, management strategies for intelligence gathering so that security agencies could be proactive and reasonably predict potential security threats with near perfect accuracy rather than being reactive. Lastly, the protection racket in the vein of organised crime, change of orientation to reflect international standards of best practices so as to pre-empt any threat to statehood. This effort will enhance the operational capabilities of the Nigeria security agencies by identifying avenues that would enable them respond appropriately to armed bandits and other threats to statehood not only in North-Western Nigeria but to the entire Nigeria.

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