

Artisanal Gold Mining and Violent Conflict in Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Artisanal gold mining has existed in the northwest of Nigeria since 2010. This reared its ugly head with the high prices of gold in the world market, and lack of means of livelihood due to extreme poverty in Zamfara. Artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASM) is a poverty-driven activity that provides an important source of livelihood for rural communities. As the price of gold has been increasing, the number of artisanal gold miners has risen to between 10 and 15 million people worldwide, producing from 500 to 800 tonnes of gold/a and emitting as much as 800-1000 tonnes/a of mercury (Hg). This illegal gold mining brought devastating lead poisoning and other pollution on children, women as well as adult males. The pervasive armed banditry and its associated threats to human security in the North-West region of Nigeria, particularly, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Sokoto and Niger States, have become a subject of national security and public concern. Considering this, the peace dialogue initiated by the affected States Governments are a step in the right direction in mitigating the threat of banditry in the North West region of Nigeria. Banditry is a failure of the state to fulfil its primary purpose of providing security as well as alleviating the masses poverty and suffering. If the masses in the northwest of Nigeria are well catered for most of them would not be in this illegal business as well as banditry.*

Keywords: *Banditry, artisanal gold mining, illegal, contamination, environment, pollution, mercury.*

Introduction

Artisanal gold mining is small-scale, subsistence mining that occurs mostly in poor, rural communities. In the Nigerian villages, people use crude, rudimentary processes to extract gold from ore, including grinding and heating the rock. In some cases, flour-grinding machines are used. These activities contaminate the air and soil with large amounts of lead and mercury, both of which cause neurological problems in children.

Northern Nigeria has been in the news for wrong reasons; if it is not Boko Haram attacks, it is Fulani Herdsmen-Farmers crisis or Banditry. Northwest is gradually becoming another major regional theatre of violence, much like the Northeast where Boko Haram terrorists have wreaked havoc in the past ten years. A problem, which initially appeared as localized disputes between herders and farmers over access to land, has morphed into an intractable crisis posing a major

threat to national and regional security. The level of rural banditry escalated between 2014 and 2019 attracting a lot of attention, while assuming increased political undertones in the run-up to the 2019 Nigerian elections.

According to BBC News (14 April 2019), there's growing concern in northern Nigeria over the level of banditry and kidnapping in the state of Zamfara. Between January and April 2019, several operations by the Nigerian Army, such as Operation Harbin *Kunama*, Operation *Diran Mikiya*, and Operation *Puff Adder*, were carried out in the bid to tackle banditry in the Northwest. The Government of Zamfara alone has spent over N17 billion funding military and security operations in the state (Abubakar Balarabe Mahmoud, 2019).

'The tragedy in Zamfara State is not only a resource curse but a wakeup call,' writes Uche Igwe. Illegal minerals mining in Nigeria's Zamfara State sheds light on the problems posed by extractive industries in developing countries. While the revenue potential is huge, federal oversight has been weak and international support is ambiguous. More transparency is urgently needed so that the mistakes made in the Niger Delta are not repeated in Zamfara. The discovery of natural resources worldwide ought to be a blessing. This is because when such natural resources are exploited, it is expected to bring in revenue to contribute to the development of local communities. However, in these communities in developing countries, the reverse is usually the case (Pambazuka News, 2010).

Zamfara gold miners war of ex-generals and politicians is a threat to stability and development. More than 5,000 people have been killed in five years. Then the Federal Government suddenly woke up to ban illegal mining in the North, a crime ignored for several decades because of the privileged persons involved. Although Zamfara gold should provide development opportunities, but renewed gold interest in the state represents a real threat to stability in a still vulnerable North-West ravaged by conflicts. Mining has begun, but the gold is nurturing old resentments among local communities and contributing to border tensions with neighbouring tribes. Now that gold reserves are confirmed in the North-West, this would exacerbate deep-rooted conflict dynamics there. An upsurge in fighting since the start of 2010, including the emergence of bandits and the resumption of armed

groups' mining of gold, has further complicated stability in the North-West, which is the new focus for gold exploration. New gold reserves are also creating new centres of power and question the North-West's traditional economic hub and political influence (Vanguard, 17 April 2019).

The Zamfara gold remains a major obstacle to peace and a driver of the black-market economy in the state. It provides a significant source of income to armed actors, from the North-West who kill and sexually abuse civilians with impunity; and several of these armed groups trade gold for weapons and ammunition. While progress has been made on reducing armed groups' profits from conflict minerals in the North-West, gold continues to finance armed groups in the region (Vanguard, 17 April 2019).

ABUJA (Reuters) - Nigeria has suspended mining in the restive north western state of Zamfara, a presidential aide and the police chief said on Sunday, amid concerns that illegal miners were connected to a surge in banditry. The suspension underscores the breakdown of security in a part of the country where the military, police and state security forces have been deployed in recent weeks to tackle criminal gangs behind a spate of killings and kidnappings. Nigeria has largely untapped deposits of minerals including gold, tin, and zinc. Some 80 percent of mining in Nigeria is carried out on an artisanal basis and gold in Zamfara is routinely smuggled out of the country illegally to neighbouring Niger and Togo. Zamfara is the state worst hit by the uptick of violence that has killed dozens of people since the start of the year. The surge began last year, when it prompted the deployment of the air force and 1,000 security personnel to the state.

The bandits raze markets and homes and kill villagers indiscriminately. Zamfara is rich in gold. Unfortunately, mining gold in Zamfara is unstructured, largely informal, and illegal. Artisans, most of whom are unskilled, oversee the extraction, purification, and commercialisation of the gold on a small-scale region (Vanguard, 17 April 2019).

Banditry is on the increase in northern Nigeria. This is a region with many security problems, chief among them Boko Haram's insurgency. In the north-central region, herdsmen militancy has become a key security concern. Northwest Nigeria, which used to be the bastion of security and stability, has been hit hard by rural banditry (Okoli, 2019).

Banditry has plagued the northwest for years, particularly around Zamfara state and neighbouring Kaduna state, although the recent spate of kidnappings and killings in the northwest has put the region in the public eye (World News, April 7, 2019).

Nigeria is blessed with many commercial deposits of solid minerals, from tantalite to barite, limestone, bitumen, and kaolin, to gold, and topaz. The quantity of

the deposits in more than 500 locations across nine states in Nigeria suggests that the solid mineral sector, if well harnessed, will compete with the oil and gas sector in Nigeria.

However, most of the mining in Nigeria up until the present is carried out illegally. Illegal mining is a great menace in many of our communities. Indeed, the gold deposits in Zamfara State and the tantalite deposits in Kogi State have all been mined illegally. It is usually done by a 'cartel' that just shows up in these communities and begins to cart away the minerals in collaboration with ignorant and vulnerable community members (Pambazuka News, 2010).

The question now is, what is the federal government doing to quell or even to control this on-going conflict. Every eye is on the Niger Delta crude oil and it is not time to add gold, kaolin and topaz to resources that can boost the country's economy? I never knew that we have such things in the north and nobody is driving towards adding them to oil and gas to boost our economy; something is wrong with this entity called Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Security means safety, as well as the measures taken to be safe or protected. To provide adequate security for the parade, town officials often hire extra guards. In the words of Omoyibo and Akpomera (2013), security is a concept that is prior to the state, and the state exists to provide that concept. Also, in the words of Thomas (1996), security is the prime responsibility of the state. The State of insecurity in Nigeria is becoming worrisome and disturbing considering the high rate of killings, bombing, kidnapping, conflicts, wars, and clashes etc which innocent people fall to the guns of criminals in the country today. In the past recent months, no week passes without report of unknown gunmen taking human lives in the streets of northern Nigeria and north-east.

Although Zamfara gold should provide development opportunities, but renewed gold interest in the state represents a real threat to stability in a still vulnerable North-West ravaged by conflicts. Mining has begun, but the gold is nurturing old resentments among local communities and contributing to border tensions with neighbouring tribes. Now that gold reserves are confirmed in the North-West, this would exacerbate deep-rooted conflict dynamics there. An upsurge in fighting since the start of 2010, including the emergence of bandits and the resumption of armed groups' mining of gold, has further complicated stability in the North-West, which is the new focus for gold exploration. New gold reserves are also creating new centres of power and question the North-West's traditional economic hub and political influence. Preventive action is needed to turn a real threat to stability and to a genuine development opportunity.

Zamfara State is mostly surrounded by forests (with little or no government presence) from where bandits launch their attacks on outlying towns, highways, and villages. The Rugu, Kamara, Kunduma, and Sububu forests have become major hideouts for criminals. Worse still, with a fragile state system and waning public confidence in police and state security institutions, the allegiance of defenceless rural communities is gradually shifting toward informal, armed groups and local vigilantes. There are widespread allegations of corruption against state security operatives, police, judges, village heads, and even some vigilante groups. The public institutions responsible for offering protection and delivering justice are unable to bring bandits to justice due to inadequate resources and widespread extortion. The bandits are so brazen that they notify villages ahead of attacks and impose illegal tolls on farmers seeking to gain access to their farms. The irony is that despite enormous amounts being invested in military and security operations, the security situation seems to be deteriorating.

However, the armed bandits seem to be expanding the scope of their operations beyond Zamfara and into the neighbouring states. On April 11, 2019, the Governor of Katsina state, Aminu Bello Masari, spoke of how bandits were taking over parts of the state, killing people and destroying property with impunity.

The North is now the epicentre and theatre of violence. From Boko Haram ISWAP led by Albarnawi, Boko Haram led by Shekau and Ansaru insurgency, to farmers/herders conflict, banditry, kidnappings, ethno-religious conflicts, cattle rustling, etc we are confronted with a crisis that is unparalleled in our history. The death spiral appears unstoppable. Increasingly, it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish us from our enemies. There was no shortage of early warning signs and as a matter of fact, our Philosophers such as the late Sa'adu Zungur of blessed memory had warned that this dystopian era was fast approaching but we ignored all. We are now paying for our collective negligence. Of the 19 northern states and the FCT, only Kwara state and the FCT are relatively peaceful or have the lowest rate of insecurity but all the other 18 states are inflamed by one form of violence or the other. Now the question that we all must answer is how did we get here and what must we do to defeat the radical evil of violence before it swallows us up? I must say that one mistake we are all guilty of is to fold our arms and wait on governments at all levels to solve this problem for us; said by Yakubu Dogara, 11 February 2020.

The Zamfara gold remains a major obstacle to peace and a driver of the black-market economy in the state. It provides a significant source of income to armed actors, from the North-West who kill and sexually abuse civilians with impunity; and several of these armed groups trade gold for weapons and ammunition. While progress has been made on reducing armed

groups' profits from conflict minerals in the North-West, gold continues to finance armed groups in the region.

New security policies, thinking and strategies need to be developed; corruption has to be stopped by all means; the government and the people need to develop trust and work together to resolve the insecurity situation for Nigeria to move forward. Insecurity in the country is no longer talked about as a thing that occurs at night. Now, even in broad day light, crimes are committed, killings are perpetrated. Most killings are done in broad day light with the assailants proving difficult to be found. The entire scenario has become a game of shooting at each other without missing. If nothing is done to bring the life-threatening situation in the country under control, it will give room to anarchy. In the light of the above, this paper is trying to see how these issues raised should be addressed for peace to reign in the northwest Nigeria so that the wanton destruction of lives and livestock is reduced drastically if not stopped entirely.

Theoretical Framework

The question is why is there so much insecurity in our societies today? What are their causes, solutions etc? To answer these questions, the researcher used frustration-aggression theory to explain the causes of insecurity in Nigeria. Frustration is the condition which exists when a goal-response suffers interference such as unemployment, poverty, corruption, weak judiciary system etc. While aggression could be regarded as an act whose goal-response is injury to an organism the theory believed that social movements occur for example the formation of ethnic militias in the country to fight the federal, state and local government due to their failures to oblige the social contract obligation. As a result, their frustration leads to collective and often lead to aggressive behaviour. Frustration has a variety of sources and can take two forms. First, it can be absolute, which happens when people do not have enough to survive, and second, it can be relative, which happen when people have enough to survive but have less than those around them. This explained the true situation of the Nigerian society today. The gap between those "who have and have not" are getting wide and wider day by day.

Frustration is the feeling of irritation and annoyance when something blocks you from achieving a goal. In the previous scenario, your goal of turning in your research paper on time is being hindered by the printer's malfunction. The frustration-aggression theory largely implies that aggression is often a result of frustration. This theory was proposed by psychologists Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mower, and Sears in their 1939 book *Frustration and Aggression* (<http://rint.rechten.rug.nl/rth/dennen/a-fat.htm>).

The researcher adopted this frustration-aggression theory to explain the causes of violence and insecurity we are witnessing in the northwest. This became apparent when the source of the frustration cannot be challenged, the aggression gets displaced onto innocent targets as currently is being done by the Boko-Haram sect. However, while violence and other related terrorist activities are condemnable in any society and must be fought at all cost, government must address these causes of insecurity or else whatever the success achieved, it is going to be a mirage.

Thematic Explanation of the Causes of Insecurity in Northwest Nigeria

Banditry violence has affected populations living in Nigeria's Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina states in the northwest. About 21 million people living in these states have been exposed to insecurity from activities of bandits. Unconnected to the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, the banditry violence began as a farmer/herder conflict in 2011 and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence, and killings. The violence has affected about 35 out of 92 local government areas in the 4 states. The discovery of gold mines and the activities of illegal miners competing for the control of gold reserves have served to further intensify the existence and activities of armed groups in the northwest. By March 2020, more than 210,000 people have been internally displaced. More than 35,000 refugees have crossed communal borders to Maradi in Niger Republic by the beginning of March 2020. These refugees are hosted in Madaou in Tahoua region, Dan Dadij Makaou, Garin Kaka and Guidan Roudji.

The question now is, what drives or the causes of this banditry? Crime thrives in contexts where there's little deterrence. In most of Nigeria's rural communities, there are many opportunities for criminal activity. For one thing, some of these communities are in remote areas where there is little or no government presence. More importantly, households are in some cases separated by and interspersed with forest areas. This renders them vulnerable to banditry.

This situation is made worse by the absence of effective community policing mechanisms capable of addressing the hinterlands' peculiar security challenges. In effect, the incidence and prevalence of rural banditry in northwest Nigeria raises a fundamental question about the government's ability to govern effectively. The state security machinery has so far failed to tackle the scourge of banditry and the artisanal gold mining in this locale. This failure stems from a lack of political will and operational challenges.

Essentially, the prevailing socio-existential conditions in north-western Nigeria have complicated the security situation. The rural pastoral sector is not well

regulated. Illicit artisanal mining and the proliferation of arms in the region are also veritable factors.

Geography plays a role, too. North-western Nigeria's forestlands are vast, rugged and hazardous. They are also grossly under-policed. Some of the forests run alongside the diverse porous borderlines on the region's frontiers. Borders are poorly delineated, under-policed and thus not well governed. The consequence of this is an abundance of nefarious activity, often facilitated by criminal syndicates.

Rural banditry in north-western Nigeria also derives impetus from the poorly governed mining and small arms sector. Bandits have been drawn to the region by illicit and artisanal mining in states like Zamfara where bandits have been raiding mining sites for gold and cash.

Another school of thought associates the growing insecurity with state failure due to corruption, the collapse of institutions of governance, de-industrialization, growing poverty, and a culture of impunity that pervades state and local governance in Zamfara state. Still on the issue of insecurity, some observers explain the instability in Nigeria's Northwest in terms of porous borders and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Mohammed J. Kuna & Jibrin Ibrahim, Ed, 2015). They argue that arms have found their way into the region from the Maghreb following uprisings in North Africa and countries of the Sahel, including post-Ghaddafi Libya.

Protagonists of a natural resource curse trace the conflict to competition over "gold deposits," pitching those engaged in illicit gold mining against local communities, as well as certain big-time mine owners believed to have strong links with government (Igwe, 2010). Yet, there are those who believe the conflict is spiritual, and the problem facing the region is the result of a "test from God" (www.thecable.ng/i-know-what-to-do-buhari-reassures-nigerians). While some of the narratives may or may not be true, the responsibility of securing the lives and properties of the citizens remains that of the government.

Environmental and Health Implications of Artisanal Gold Mining

In March 2010, the humanitarian organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) discovered an unprecedented epidemic of lead poisoning in remote villages of Zamfara State, Nigeria (MSF 2010b, 2010c). The first set of children brought to MSF clinics with convulsions and high fevers were treated for severe malaria and meningitis. As patients failed to recover, blood samples sent to German laboratory (Labor Lademannbogen MVZ GmbH, Hamburg, Germany) confirmed lead poisoning (Greig et al. 2014). The source of lead contamination was prolific artisanal gold mining in response to high gold prices in 2009 – 2010.

The environmental implications of illegal mining are quite diverse. The first is that it destroys farmland and distorts the livelihood of agrarian communities. The trenches dug for these mining activities are abandoned after the mining is over. They therefore become death traps and easy entry points for devastating gully erosions. As was in the case of the communities in Zamfara State, many of these mines are contaminated with impurities. In this case, gold ash was intermingled with deposits of lead. In a few cases, some of the impurities are even radioactive in nature. Ignorant community members therefore go to these mines and meet contaminants.

An eyewitness account stated that reports of vomiting and stomach pain among children in Zamfara State began to come in a year ago. As is usual in most communities, deaths are attributed to one spirit or another. The death toll continued to rise until the blood samples of patients were taken abroad for adequate tests. Experts reported that lead poisoning as in the case of Zamfara can persist in the environment for up to 15 years. There are also other long-term health problems such as permanent learning and behavioural problems and brain damage. Lead for instance is known to bio-accumulate and propagate within the ecosystem, giving rise to cancer causing cells popularly called oncogenes.

Gold mining and processing have been the main sources of heavy metal contamination in the environment. During the processing of the ores for gold, poisonous substances such as oxides and sulphides of heavy metal pollutants are released into the environment, and these affect the populace in those communities in Zamfara and neighbouring communities.

No single event illustrates this more than the tragic events of 5 June 2010 in Zamfara State in north-western Nigeria. It was supposed to be the World Environmental Day celebration on 5 June 2010 but the inhabitants of gold-bearing communities Anka and Bukkuyum and local governments in Zamfara State had a different fate in stock for them. About 335 suspected cases of strange ailments were reported in several hospitals in the locality. It turned out that 163 lives were lost out of which 111 of them were children between the ages of five to ten years old. Further investigations conducted by Doctors Without Borders, a French aid agency, led to the discovery of an epidemic due to lead poisoning. The epidemic wrought havoc among the communities involved in small-scale mining. Several questions remain unanswered as one examines what appears to have been an avoidable tragedy (Pambazuka News, 2010).

From the death toll in Zamfara State, it was apparent that women and children were the worst-hit by the side effects of small-scale mining. Indeed, more than 60 per cent of illegal miners in Nigeria are women. When they

meet contaminants, the whole family is affected. In the case of children, many drop out of school in pursuit of the token pay they receive when they engage in mining. They therefore become victims of child labour and are sometimes forced into premature family life and may be victims of HIV/AIDS. Child prostitution can also occur in artisanal and small-scale mining communities, where virginity is held in high esteem and where fears of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases also exist (www.eli.org).

Since 2010 ongoing, there has been widespread acute lead poisoning in Zamfara state has killed at least four hundred (400) children. Considered the worst outbreak of lead poisoning in modern history, more than 3,500 affected children require urgent, life-saving treatment. Less than half are receiving such treatment. Among adults there are high rates of infertility and miscarriage.

The most common effects of mercury exposure are mental retardation, delayed development, seizures, and vision and hearing loss, with the cardiovascular and central nervous systems the most vulnerable (United Nations Environment Programme, Mercury: Time to Act (2013). Many of these same effects occur with lead poisoning, in addition to nerve damage, reproductive problems, liver and kidney damage, and muscle coordination. For both mercury and lead poisoning, the health effects are more pronounced in young children. Extreme exposure can lead to coma or even death. For women, exposure to mercury positively correlates with an increase in malformations and miscarriages during pregnancy (Gerhard, et al, 1998). Many women have also reported menstrual cycle disorders (A Right to Health Issue (2011).

Other serious health and safety concerns for women living and working in artisanal mining communities include violence and threats to sexual and reproductive health from prostitution and sexual violence (Hinton, et al). Illicit trade in drugs and prostitution, and the violence that often accompanies it, may be more prevalent in communities established as part of a gold rush than in more well established communities that have a stronger government presence, family ties, and social cohesion. Nevertheless, violence against women in artisanal mining communities has been documented on a global scale. Along with such violence, the sex trade in artisanal mining communities leads to a high rate of infection with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Zamfara is a mineral-rich state, with significant deposits of gold. The acute lead poisoning in Zamfara is a result of artisanal gold mining; small-scale mining done with rudimentary tools. Miners crush and grind ore to extract gold, and in the process release dust that is highly contaminated with lead. Children in affected areas are exposed to this dust when they are labouring in the processing site, when their relatives return home

covered with dust on their clothes and hands, and when the processing occurs in their home. Children are also exposed to this highly toxic lead in contaminated water and food sources. Testing showed that the level of lead in her home is 23,000 parts per million, while the safe level of lead is below 400 parts per million (Human Rights Watch). Artisanal gold mining is not only in Zamfara, Nigeria, but other countries but more in African sub-region. The Table 1. below show the regions most impacted by the Artisanal Small-Scale Gold Mining (ASGM).

Pure Earth (2017) has found 132 ASGM sites that cause mercury contamination, affecting more than 3.5 million people, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia. Pure Earth (2017) has identified 69 countries as major sources of mercury pollution from ASGM activities in 2011 and estimated the corresponding population at risk (Global Trends in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining, 2017 (ASM)).

Table 1. Regions Most Impacted By Mercury Pollution From Asgm

| REGION | NUMBER OF SITES | ESTIMATED IMPACTED POPULATION |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| AFRICA | 75 | 2,401,200 |
| SOUTHEAST ASIA | 37 | 907,300 |
| SOUTHAMERICA | 19 | 195,000 |
| CENTRAL AMERICA | 1 | 3,100 |

Source: Pure Earth, 2017

Men and children work in the mines outside of Bagega; and they dig deep to find the rock and then crush these rocks to find gold ore. Inside the rocks are deposits of other metals, including lead which has poisoned many of the children in the village in Zamfara.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child also seek to protect children from work that is likely to be hazardous or harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental development. International Labour Organisation Convention No. 182, which is binding on Nigeria, prohibits the worst forms of child labour, including work in an unhealthy environment that exposes children to hazardous substances. Some workers even crush rocks in a flour grinder. The dust is highly toxic, and many adults suffer the effects of lead poisoning, ranging from swelling, dizziness and vomiting to organ failure, infertility, and death (www.hrw.org).

The use of hazardous substances for mining puts the health of miners and their communities at risk—they are exposed, for example, to mercury, zinc vapour, cyanide, or other acids (Obiri et al., 2010). This is a concern in gold mining, where mercury is frequently deployed and cyanide use is growing. Mercury can be inhaled, swallowed, or absorbed through the skin, but the health consequences are usually not immediate (Armah et al., 2016). Inhaling dust and fine particles

from blasting and drilling processes can cause respiratory diseases such as silicosis or pneumoconiosis in men and women, and in the children, who often accompany their parents (Armah et al., 2016). According to the authors, a lack of ear protection to filter noise from equipment like drills or crushers can cause temporary or permanent hearing loss and speech interference. Most OHS risks in sub Saharan Africa are borne by women, due to the division of tasks between male and female miners.

Gold Banditry and Insecurity in the North-western Nigeria.

Northern States in have become the hub of violence in Nigeria, from Maitatsine religious crises in Kano in 1980, 1983 in Maiduguri, Yola and Gombe, Fulani Herdsmen-Farmers crisis, Boko Haram Movement which started in Borno and Yobe states. Today it is banditry with its security implications in the country and our security apparatus is not doing much to quell this insecurity. The question is what is banditry?

Rural banditry refers to armed violence driven principally by the criminal intent to steal and plunder. It is motivated by the quest for economic accumulation. The victims are individuals and communities with material valuables. The most common examples of rural banditry in Nigeria are armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling, and village raids. Rural banditry in the north-western states of Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina has reached alarming heights in recent years. Bandits terrorise villages with impunity. They have settled in the Zamfara state, setting up fortified enclaves in the hinterland and on the frontiers, from where they plot and carry out their operations (Okoli, 2019).

Nigeria’s Northwest is gradually becoming another major regional theatre of violence, much like the Northeast where Boko Haram terrorists have wreaked havoc in the past ten years. A problem, which initially appeared as localized disputes between herders and farmers over access to land, has morphed into an intractable crisis posing a major threat to national and regional security. The level of rural banditry escalated between 2014 and 2019 attracting a lot of attention, while assuming increased political undertones in the run-up to the 2019 Nigerian elections (Suleiman, 2019).

Banditry violence has affected populations living in Nigeria’s Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Kebbi and Katsina states in the northwest. About 21 million people living in these states have been exposed to insecurity from activities of bandits. Unconnected to the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, the banditry violence began as a farmer/herder conflict in 2011 and intensified between 2017 to 2018 to include cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, sexual violence, and killings.

The violence has affected about 35 out of 92 local government areas in the 4 states. The discovery of gold mines and the activities of illegal miners competing for the control of gold reserves have served to further intensify the existence and activities of armed groups in the northwest. By March 2020, more than 210,000 people have been internally displaced. More than 35,000 refugees have crossed communal borders to Maradi in Niger Republic by the beginning of March 2020. These refugees are hosted in Madaou in Tahoua region, Dan Dadjji Makaou, Garin Kaka and Guidan Roudji (<https://www.acaps.org/country/nigeria/crisis>).

In Zamfara and parts of neighbouring Katsina state in the Northwest, rampaging gangs of armed bandits have engaged in violent acts, attacking, abducting, killing, and robbing villagers and travellers, and engaging in cattle rustling. Although sometimes exaggerated or underestimated by some political actors, casualty figures are quite alarming. The former Governor of Zamfara state, Abdulaziz Yari, is reported to have said that nearly five hundred villages and thirteen thousand hectares of land have been devastated, and two thousand eight hundred and thirty five people killed between 2011 and 2018. It is also estimated that there are at least ten thousand armed bandits and cattle rustlers operating out of eight major camps in Zamfara state. Also, some reports put the number of children orphaned as a result of such attacks at forty four thousand since 2010. In Anka Local Government Area of the state, over sixteen thousand people have been internally displaced (Premium Times, April 7, 2019).

Following this artisanal gold mining and its security implications in the northwest, the Nigeria government has suspended mining in the restive north-western state of Zamfara, a presidential aide and the police chief said on Sunday, amid concerns that illegal miners were connected to a surge in banditry (Reuters, World News, April 7, 2019).

The suspension underscores the breakdown of security in a part of the country where the military, police and state security forces have been deployed in recent weeks to tackle criminal gangs behind a spate of killings and kidnappings. "The federal government has ordered the suspension of all mining activities in Zamfara State with immediate effect," said presidential aide Bashir Ahmed in a tweet. Nigeria has largely untapped deposits of minerals including gold, tin, and zinc. Some 80 percent of mining in Nigeria is carried out on an artisanal basis and gold in Zamfara is routinely smuggled out of the country illegally to neighbouring Niger and Togo.

Zamfara gold miners war of ex-generals and politicians is a threat to stability and development. More than 5,000 people have been killed in five years. Then the Federal Government suddenly woke up to ban illegal mining in the North, a crime ignored for several

decades because of the privileged persons involved. Innocent civilians are dying every day, and nothing has been done to curtail the activities of these bandits.

Conclusion

Despite the chaos, which helps keep Zamfara the poorest state in the federation, Governor Abdulaziz Yari is frequently absent. He is loudly criticised for spending much of his time in the federal capital, Abuja, where he chairs the powerful Nigeria Governors' Forum. "Banditry is a failure of the state to fulfil its primary purpose of providing security," Chidi Odinkalu, of the Open Society Justice Initiative, told IRIN. "Yari should go back to Zamfara and do his job and govern his people." The state government spokesman, Dosara, insisted that Yari is "fully engaged" with the affairs of the state.

At the paramilitary Civil Defence Corps headquarters in Zurmi, a bare, solid low-rise building, the commanding officer spoke candidly about the IDP camp closure being premature. His alarming analysis was that the bandits in this region were trying to clear a corridor along the border with Sokoto State and north to Niger – which includes Aisha's village.

Banditry exists because it is profitable. From around 2011 there was a surge, which some commentators linked to increasing regional livestock prices. Rustling is now an entrenched and thriving underground business, with stolen cattle kept in the forests that dot Zamfara's border regions (including the equally troubled Binan Gwari area of Kaduna State) before being discreetly sold to meet the ever-growing demand for beef in southern cities.

"Before, it was the Fulanis that were rustling cattle, then the Hausas joined in. Now, every criminal in Nigeria has come to Zamfara," said Suleiman Abakar – a wealthy farmer, until his 60 head of cattle were stolen. "There is no other way to make money as quickly as rustling."

The breakdown of authority at the local and state levels has created the enabling environment for the emergence of a complex informal security sector in Zamfara. Competing and rival armed, and criminal gangs operate freely in the state in the name of vigilantism. Lacking in security training, the groups are accused of criminal acts ranging from violent robbery, unlawful confiscation of properties of both bandits and their victims, and human rights abuses.

Armed banditry remains a major security challenge that has created instability, hampered socio-economic development, and undermined democratic governance in the North-West region.

Unless something is urgently done to strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of state institutions and non-state actors, including traditional authorities to address issues of corruption and widespread poverty, the

security situation may likely continue to deteriorate. It is also important for the state to address the deep-rooted grievances that drive conflict in the region, as well as other neighbouring states. There are reports indicating that armed banditry has crippled the local economies of the Northwest with food production, pastoralism, and animal husbandry dropping by about fifty per cent (Suleiman, 2019).

Rural banditry by all accounts is undermining security, peace, and development in Nigeria's northwest. It is not only just the illegal gold mining business and its violence, but the health implications on the citizens especially women and children. These people are exposed to lead poison and mercury exposure. Addressing these health impacts is and will be quite expensive – current treatment for lead poisoning victims can run up to \$1500/child (Suleiman, 2019).

Recommendations

There is no doubt that a lot of measures need to be put in place to resolve insecurity in the country especially in the northern states, Nigeria. New security policies, thinking and strategies need to be developed; corruption has to be stopped by all means; the government and the people need to develop trust and work together to resolve the insecurity situation in the northwest of Nigeria to move forward. The following is therefore recommended:

1. The tragedy in Zamfara State is not only a resource curse but a wakeup call. If Nigeria must diversify her economy beyond oil, then the solid minerals sector is a beckoning alternative. The federal government should key into gold mining and processing.
2. The standard of living of the people should be improved through creation of more entrepreneurship centres in the Northwest and North-east.
3. Mass education should be introduced in the northern states in Nigeria so that abject poverty is curtailed, and this will minimise banditry and illegal mining.
4. The Nigerian judicial system should be strengthened through routine independent checking mechanism. Judges should be monitored closely while dispensing cases to ensure that laws are applied to all in a fair, reasonable, and understandable manner.
5. There is need for good governance, transparency, and accountability among our politicians so that dividends of democracy will be felt by all and sundry
6. States Government should establish or create more employment centres through the establishment of entrepreneurship skill acquisition programmes. This will make more youths to be empowered, and self-sustained.
7. School curriculum should be redesigned to include Peace and conflict resolutions studies as well as

entrepreneurship courses to be taught right from secondary schools.

8. There must be sufficient incentives for all parties involved in artisanal mining operations for a formalization approach to succeed. There is need to register and pay these illegal miners by the state government. This means that they be made to mine for the government for salaries.

9. In cooperation with International partners, the Nigerian government should expeditiously begin to, implement safer mining practices in Zamfara and her environs; and conduct environmental remediation in the affected areas of Zamfara State.

10. There is urgent need to test and treat all children at risk for lead poisoning and mercury exposure. According to Human Rights Watch, over 500 children have died in the region due to lead poisoning, seven villages in the region have been cleaned, but Bagega is still highly contaminated.

11. Most importantly, the mining sector offers an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the oil sector in our Niger Delta. A proactive approach is the way to go. We do not need another disaster to act. Nigeria cannot continue to be a poster child of the resource curse in Africa.

12. Nigeria should borrow a leaf from a leaf from a country like Botswana that became a top African economy by developing diamonds and proving that natural resources can be a blessing to citizens. Everything should not be oil and gas.

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