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“Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt”

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Rep. James P. McGovern and Rep. Randy M. Hultgren for inviting Crisis Group to testify today on Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt. Crisis Group has been producing reports on Nigeria since 2006, most recently focusing on the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east, but also periodically writing about the country’s other security challenges. Our latest publication is *Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict* (19 September 2017), which like all our reports is available for free on our website.

### **Nigeria’s Spreading Farmer-Herder Conflicts**

Violent conflicts between pastoralists and sedentary agrarian communities in Nigeria’s central and southern zones have escalated in recent years and are spreading southward, threatening the country’s security and stability. Some 2,500 people reportedly died in these clashes in 2016, and they are becoming as dangerous as the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east. Yet to date, the federal and state level responses have been poor. President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration and affected state governments need to work together, taking immediate steps to shore up security for herders and farmers, strengthening conflict-resolution mechanisms and initiating longer-term efforts to reform livestock management practices, address negative environmental trends and curb cross-border movements of both cattle rustlers and armed herders.

#### *A. Drivers of violence*

Historically, relations between herders and sedentary farming communities have been relatively harmonious. By and large, they lived in a peaceful, symbiotic relationship: herders’ cattle would fertilise the farmers’ land in exchange for grazing rights. But tensions have grown over the past decade, with increasingly violent flare-ups spreading throughout central and southern states; incidents have occurred in at least 22 of the country’s 36 states.

Contrary to many simplistic media accounts, the sources of the conflicts are complex and multifaceted, and are not primarily religious in nature. These causes include drought and desertification; loss of grazing reserves; changing livelihood practices; rural banditry and cattle rustling; conflicts in the North, such as the Boko Haram insurgency; the erosion of traditional authority and conflict mediation mechanisms; as well as leaders playing the communal card.

#### Drought, desertification and loss of grazing land

Nigeria’s far north is arid and semi-arid, and becoming dryer. Since the 1950s, over 350,000 sq km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions, a phenomenon progressing southward at the rate of 0.6km per year. These environmental changes have

wrecked agriculture and human livelihoods, forcing millions of pastoralists and others to migrate south, in search of productive land. Over the last two decades, however, as available pastures shrank, northern herders have been staying in the central zone longer. More recently, some have chosen to graze their herds there permanently. This has triggered increasing disputes over land and water use with growing populations of sedentary crop farmers.

At the same time, much grazing land set aside by the government in the 1960s has been taken by small scale settlers and private commercial interests. This also is forcing herders to seek pasture elsewhere.

Last, but not least, crop farmers, with federal government help, have expanded into previously uncultivated land. Water pumps have helped farmers exploit wetlands (river valleys and flood plains) for dry season irrigated agriculture. Herders lost access to these grass-abundant wetlands, which they had previously used with little risk of livestock straying into farms. In this changed environment, relations became more competitive and confrontational, especially in the absence of negotiations between farmers and herders to ensure access to grazing grounds and livestock routes.

#### Rural Banditry, Cattle Rustling and Escalating Conflict in the North

Rural banditry and conflict also are driving herders south. Over the last decade, cattle rustling has grown in scale and organisation in several northern states where large bandit groups operate with mounting audacity. One report estimated that in 2013 more than 64,000 cattle were stolen and almost 3,000 herders killed in states across the north-central zone. Vigilante groups formed to combat bandits have triggered retaliatory violence. Elsewhere, vigilantes have turned into predators themselves, extorting cash and cattle from herders for “protection”. Conflict has grown more deadly by the ready availability of small arms and light weapons that have proliferated in West Africa.

The Boko Haram insurgency, in Nigeria’s north east (and spreading from there into the entire Lake Chad basin) is another major threat to herders. According to the local cattle breeders’ association, the group has stolen more than one million cattle in Nigeria’s northeastern Borno state alone. Unable to safely graze their cattle in the north east, herders have moved farther south, further increasing competition for land in the country’s Middle Belt.

#### Erosion of Traditional Mechanisms

All this conflict is occurring as traditional authority wanes. Customarily disputes over wandering stock or damaged crops typically were resolved by village chiefs and herders’ leaders. This system started crumbling in the 1970s, undermined by the involvement of the police and courts. Furthermore, local political leaders have tended to favour farmers over itinerant herders, who may not be around at election time. Consequently, herders feel increasingly marginalised and are largely distrustful of local political leaders as conflict mediators. Furthermore, over time, both herders and farmers have lost confidence in the ability of authorities to mediate and conciliate. Aggrieved parties have turned to violence to seek redress or revenge.

## Playing the Communal Card

In Nigeria region, ethnicity and religion are important sources of identity. Ethnicity, which is often linked to a specific faith, is particularly important because some communities have rights as indigenes of particular states that more recent immigrants, “setters”, do not. Nigerian herders are mostly Fulani (also known as Fulbe and Peul), a primarily Muslim people estimated to number some 20-25 million, scattered through much of West Africa. The south’s majority Christian communities resent the influx of herders, portrayed in some narratives as an “Islamisation force”.

The conflicts have spawned dangerous political and religious conspiracy theories. One is that herder attacks are part of a longer-term Fulani plot to displace indigenous populations and seize their lands. In March 2016, the prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, Dr Samuel Uche, said: “We are aware there is a game plan to Islamize Nigeria, and they are using the Fulani herdsman to initiate it”. In the south east, Biafra separatist groups describe the attacks as part of a northern plot to overwhelm the peoples of the south and forcefully convert. Some southerners accuse President Buhari, who has a pastoral Fulani background, of deliberately failing to stop herder aggression. These charges are not supported by any solid evidence, but they are aggravating inter-faith distrust and undermining the country’s fragile unity.

### *B. Insufficient Responses*

The federal and local governments have, over the years, explored various responses, but with little if any positive effect.

In 2014, then-President Goodluck Jonathan’s administration allocated \$317 million to recover and improve grazing routes lost to farmer encroachment, but to little effect. It appears that most of the money has been misappropriated. A proposal by current President Buhari to formulate a comprehensive livestock development plan has been stymied by opposition from southern politicians who feel it favoured herders. The parliament introduced three bills to address the conflicts’ root causes, but all languished, in part due to disputes about federal versus states jurisdiction.

The federal police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps are spread too thin and lack adequate equipment. Herders say they sometimes have to seek revenge because security forces take no action against attackers who kill them and steal their cattle. Farmers say the agencies’ failure to respond promptly to distress calls and punish aggressors emboldens the herders. Often, the country’s dysfunctional law enforcement and criminal justice system fails to arrest or prosecute any perpetrators of violence. Moreover, authorities have generally treated these crimes as political rather than criminal acts, arguing that punishing suspects could spark further violence.

State governments have pursued different policies. Several have established state and local peace commissions or committees to promote herder-farmer dialogue and resolve conflicts. Others, have passed laws regulating grazing. Herders, who consider these regulations restrictive, often fail to comply.

In several instances authorities occasionally have expelled herder groups from specific areas, following local protests. More troubling still, the governor of Abia state, Okezie Ikpeazu, revived a local vigilante outfit popularly known as the Bakassi Boys. The Cross River state government also said it would set up a 3,000-member “Homeland Security Service”.

These measures may have reduced clashes in some area, but in others they have made the situation worse. The expulsion of herder groups has only deepened their resentment. If vigilante groups attack herders in the south, herders might take revenge against southerners residing in the north, thereby further widening the conflict.

### *Five Steps to Help Address the Conflict*

1. **Improve Security for Herders and Farmers:** At a minimum, the federal government and its security agencies should intensify operations against cattle rustlers, improving systems to track livestock movement and trade, arresting individuals who carry illegal firearms and prosecuting suspected assailants. It should deploy more and better-equipped police units in rural and forested areas where bandits are based. Police should also do more to stop attacks on farming communities, particularly in badly affected southern Kaduna and Benue states. To make operations more efficient, they should invest more in community liaison mechanism to upgrade intelligence gathering, early warning and rapid response.

2. **Support Community-based Conflict Resolution:** Wherever possible, state and local governments should support or establish local and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. Forums that allow various constituencies – farmers, pastoralists, community vigilantes and state security agencies – to monitor, identify, discuss and manage potential threats can be particularly helpful. These also can be used to help farmers and pastoralists explore mutually beneficial ways to coexist.

3. **Establish Grazing Reserves and Encourage Ranching:** The federal government, working with state governments, should officially document existing grazing reserves that have not been over-run by human settlements and follow through on its plan to establish new grazing reserves in the ten northern states. In the longer term, because of limited land and growing populations, it will be necessary to shift many herders from open grazing to ranching. However, states should encourage a phased transition to ranching, rather than prohibiting open grazing as some have done. Furthermore, federal and state governments also need to work out alternative plans for the large numbers of herders who may lose their livelihoods in the transition from open grazing to ranching.

4. **Combat Desertification:** The Nigerian government and donors should support efforts to prevent desertification and restore environmentally degraded lands. In the same spirit, the federal government should develop strategies for mitigating the impact of climate change, managing environmentally-induced migration, preventing conflicts over use of land and other natural resources – and implement them.

5. **Strengthen Regional Cooperation:** States throughout the Sahel should work together to manage human and cattle movements across borders and to fight illicit arms trafficking.