

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt**

**December 17, 2020
2172 Rayburn House Office Building**

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I appreciate the opportunity to provide this written statement to this honorable Committee. I am also grateful that you deemed it expedient to deliberate on challenges facing my country, especially in the Middle Belt. I am an Igbo man from South East, Nigeria where I had my early education. I went to Law School in Lagos in South West, Nigeria and I have spent the greater part of my professional life in Abuja in North Central, Nigeria. I am Catholic. It is really convenient for me to reduce the challenges in Middle Belt of Nigeria to a simple tag line of 'religious violence' or 'ethnic war' but it is not. It is something much more insidious. It is about a country that has lost its soul. A country disfigured by years of crass misrule with a focus on power, money, and horrid disdain for the welfare of the people; numbed by relentless violence that is inflamed by uncontained criminality, religious extremism, and abject poverty; and destroyed by distrust, suspicion, and fractured social, ethnic and religious relationships. The Middle Belt of Nigeria is a victim of bad governance, weak institutions, and poverty, and the situation there is much more complex than violence between religious groups.

Context

An estimated 60,000 people have been killed as a result of farmer-herder related violence in Nigeria since 2001;¹ with more deaths attributed to this in 2016 than to Boko Haram.² The violent clashes between herders and farmers is not unique to Nigeria in the West Africa region. In Nigeria, however, this issue intersects with and is conflated by pre-existing tensions in already very fragile

¹ <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-pastoralists-battleground-terrorism/>

² <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/252-herders-against-farmers-nigerias-expanding-deadly-conflict>

States. For instance, many of the herders in Nigeria are Fulani³ and Muslim nomadic pastoralists, whereas the farmers are mainly Christian, so conflicts can easily be miscategorized and oversimplified as religious contestations. Added to this is also the indigene-settler⁴ related conflicts prevalent in many States and intrinsically tied to access to scarce resources and political opportunities.

While the violence is spreading to communities across the country, the theatre of action remains fiercest in Nigeria's volatile Middle Belt region, which includes Benue, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba and Nasarawa States and the North Western States of Zamfara and Katsina. The significant escalation is said to be due to rising levels of criminality, banditry, climate change and desertification. Estimates suggest that in Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara states, 50-75 percent of the land area is becoming desert land.⁵ Aggravating factors have included the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs), poor security responses by the Nigerian Government and the failure of justice mechanisms to ensure accountability for crimes committed.

The economic condition in the region is also quite severe. According to the National Human Development Report (2018, p21-23),⁶ the three States of the valley exhibit a high incidence of deprivation as measured by the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) – measure of acute poverty - with Taraba State being the worst at MPI 0.448

In 2018, following the rising level of violence and insecurity, the Federal Government of Nigeria set up The Technical Sub-Committee (TSC) of the National Economic Council (NEC) to ascertain the root causes of the conflicts between farmers and herdsman across seven (7) frontline States that have been worse hit by the crises and proffer lasting solutions that would help end the attacks. The States include Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, Nasarawa and Zamfara. In Zamfara, for instance, violence and killings has been a result of the conflict between Hausa and Fulani communities⁷ around access to land, unresolved criminality and state absence in addressing these issues.

³ While not all herdsman are Fulani and not all Fulani are herdsman, the narrative of this conflict has centered on Fulani herdsman. The resultant effect has been the identity politics involved and the vilifying of the entire Fulani race

⁴ The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides for the rights of citizens and recognizes indigenship. In effect, the population of every state in Nigeria is divided into indigenes and settlers. State and local governments grant indigenes preferential access over settlers to land, education, public infrastructure, and government jobs. Local Governments in Nigeria are responsible for issuing indigeneship certificates.

⁵ <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/jasem/article/view/193361>

⁶ http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr_2018_nigeria_finalfinalx3.pdf

⁷ These are majorly Muslims, but their common religion has not helped in the crisis. This conflict has had spillover effect in neighboring states

A summary of the findings from the work of the committee supports earlier research reports on the main drivers of the conflict. Some of the identified drivers of conflicts include⁸:

- (a) *Dwindling pasture and fodder resources because of climate change*: Climate change has increased the contestation for scarce resources. Increasing population growth, reduction in natural resources due to climate change and the increased competition for access to these dwindling resources have all contributed to increased violence. The semi-temperate climate of the region is found conducive by itinerant pastoralists from the northern region of the country and other Sahelian countries, who have increasingly moved southwards due to desertification.
- (b) *Influx of foreign pastoralists due to porous borders and the subsequent encroachment into croplands by pastoralists*. This has also heightened tensions. With porous borders, these foreigners are not properly documented and there is difficulty in tracking their activities. In instances where they are involved in confrontations with local communities, the absence of adequate documentation makes accountability difficult.
- (c) *Poor handling of land cases by traditional rulers and courts*, leading many to resort to self-help and violence. Local mediation processes are now weakened by distrust and politics.
- (d) *Absence of effective government policies for inclusive economic and political opportunities* has been a major factor. Sadly, government at both the federal and state levels over the years has been incompetent in their efforts to address the crisis. There is no effective developmental framework that addresses issues of desertification, access to resources and economic opportunities. If anything, governments in the region and at the federal level are much more focused on politics and access to power. Current leadership in most of the Middle Belt State are perceived to have taken sides and sold deeply into the ethnic or religious dominance agenda. At the federal level, in keeping with President Buhari's lackluster approach to governance, nothing concrete has come from the presidency. With the asymmetrical nature of the violence and the sophistication of the attacks, there is a tendency to feel that government silence or tepid action favors one side.
- (e) *Antagonistic narratives and poor media coverage*. Information and news coming out of Middle Belt often lacks balance and is presented in a way that promotes black and white narratives. While it is difficult to present a holistic narrative of a historical conflict like this, the default mode of sensationalizing, demonization and promotion of a single narrative harms the chances for reconciliation. While acknowledging that the indigenous communities are most times at the receiving end, they are not pacifist either and have been implicated in attacks and killings. Bringing a nuanced narrative that allocates

⁸ Centre for Democracy and Development did an extensive analysis of the drivers of conflict. We have incorporated some of their analysis in this text.

responsibilities objectively is relevant in ensuring accountability and triggering reconciliation.

- (f) *Proliferation of arms.* Despite attempts by government to contain the conflict, as well as protect communities from deadly attacks and other forms of banditry, the proliferation of SALWs through external and local sources is yet to be controlled. Though the report of the presidential committee on SALWs and the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), which was the product of a nation-wide survey on SALWs in Nigeria, provided key pathways on how to deal with the challenge of SALWs proliferation, nothing has been done towards the implementation of its recommendations. According to SBM report, “The number of small arms in circulation in Nigeria, in the hands of civilian non-state actors is estimated at 6,145,000, while the armed forces and law enforcement collectively account for 586,600 firearms.”⁹
- (g) *Lack of capacity within the Nigerian Police to prevent violence, stop violence, or ensure accountability for violence.* In the face of a policing deficit in terms of community-level protection of people and their livelihoods, vigilantes and other forms of community security structures have emerged as alternative means of security. Despite a series of pronouncements on the overhaul of the police, not much has been achieved as evident in the reality that it has been quite challenging for a combined team of the police and military to deal with armed bandits and other forms of criminality that are holding the rural communities siege. The rise of unregulated vigilante groups is not without its own set of challenges. Without effective policing, self-help and retaliatory attacks perpetuate and widen the cycle of violence.
- (h) *Loss of trust between communities and security agencies due to historic grievances and unresolved cases of abuse against communities.* Unresolved grievances causing the incessant clashes include incursions into farmlands and destruction of crops by cattle, cattle rustling and killings, contamination of water sources by livestock, and land grabbing. Herders have accused farmers and urban dwellers of encroachment into old grazing routes and stealing or killing of their cattle, while farming communities report pollution of communities’ water sources, incursion of pastoralists and their herds into farmlands, destruction of crops, and sexual harassment of women in isolated areas.
- (i) *Lack of initiative and political will by successive government to take drastic action to address underlining drivers of conflicts.* Though the launch of the NLTP represents a flagship initiative of the Federal Government towards addressing the current conflict between farmers and herders, the controversy that was generated as a result of the design

⁹See Guardian news on this report: <https://guardian.ng/news/how-proliferation-of-small-arms-is-enhancing-violence-in-nigeria-says-report/>

and implementation of the “RUGA policy¹⁰” by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, without the approval of the presidency, revealed a sheer lack of coordination among and within the government, which in turn impacted negatively on the image of the government, particularly at the federal level.

- (j) *Illiteracy, unemployment, and poverty.* With a bulging youth population mostly without education and survival skills, criminality becomes a readily available and attractive option in the region for those starved of opportunity. Desertification is reducing access to land and water severely limiting subsistence farming, which is the mainstay of the region’s economy. Social services to ameliorate poverty is ineffectively run leaving out many deserving families. Violence has also increased the number of internally displaced persons, denying them access to their lands and by extension their means of livelihood.

Religion and ethnicity are also factors. Over the years, politicians across the aisle have consistently used religion and ethnicity as a tool of mobilization for political power. Often times, these narratives paint the other as the enemy and the reason for underdevelopment in communities. This toxic manipulation has destroyed longstanding relationships across communities and hampered the capacity of communities to engage in peaceful dialogue and resolve issues amicably. The structure of government has also exacerbated these tensions. The character of our politics which places ethnic and religious affinity over competence in many cases have caused communities to reasonably believe that government is against them when they are not represented in power. Currently, about 90 percent of Nigeria’s security architecture is firmly under the control of individuals who either speak the same local language with the President or adhere to the same faith. The current Nigerian President is a Muslim. This kind of exclusivity creates the perception of an “in-group” of those in power and “out-group” of those not belonging to these same linguistic or religious groups. It also sustains the perception of state-sponsored or -condoned harm against ethnicities and religious groups that are not in power, like the situation we currently have in the Middle Belt.

It is useful to note that from the TSCs report, when it came to the issue of perception on why the conflict persists, ethnic and religious identity issues were more prevalent in Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna Plateau and Taraba States. In other States, such as Zamfara, there were stronger views with regards foreign herders as the main culprits and cattle rustlers. These findings reinforce the complex nature of the drivers of conflict and the need to look beyond just the surface to understand the nuanced triggers.

Interventions:

Over the years, the Federal Government created commissions to investigate and find comprehensive solutions for the farmer-herder crises. However, the failure of successive

¹⁰ This was a controversial rural grazing area settlement scheme unilaterally developed by the federal government without consultation that grants access to land to herders in a move seen by many as ethnic domination and land grab.

administrations to implement any of the recommendations by the panels of inquiry set up to investigate previous crises only exacerbated the conflict. The government has instituted Special Task Forces and military deployments around the country, but these have been undermined by the lack of early warning or rapid response mechanisms. Killings have continued unabated despite these deployments.

Other interventions so far have been ad hoc and have been initiated by civil society groups, many of them faith-based, working across communal divides. These include the Interfaith Mediation Center, Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Catholic Church and Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN). The state-level governments have also established peace agencies, such as the Plateau Peace and Reconciliation Committee and the Plateau Peace Building Agency and the Kaduna Peace Commission. These continue to host dialogues but some of these agencies lack the necessary resources to function.

In 2019, the Federal Government established the National Livestock Transformation plan with six key pillars, which include: economic development and investment, conflict resolution, justice and peace, humanitarian relief and early recovery for IDPs, human capital development and cross-cutting issues such as gender, youth, research and information, and strategic communication. Implementation, however, has been very slow.

Looking Ahead:

Addressing the Middle Belt challenge will require both fundamental and symbolic actions. These will include the following:

- (a) We must resist the temptation to frame these conflicts in the simplistic terms of religious and ethnic strife. While they both play a role, understanding the other fundamental drivers around access to food and land, criminality and fractured social structures will be critical in designing a comprehensive solution.
- (b) We must locate the blame squarely where it should be. The government's inability to spur economic development, gain the trust of citizens and ensure accountability for criminality has been at the heart of this conflict. There must be local and international pressure on the government to do the right thing. In instances where the government willfully fails in this duty, there has to be consequences. If we do not hold people in position of authority personally responsible for not containing this violence or inflaming it in some instances, there will be no incentive for good behavior.
- (c) The ultimate players here are citizens and governments. Engagements should focus on enhancing holistic responses and amplifying victims' voices to ensure accountability and stability. Nigeria must be deliberate and consistent in the way it manages victims of these violence. There must be no doubt that the government is focused on the welfare of victims and committed to the punishment of perpetrators.
- (d) There must be a greater push for accountability, including the prosecution of individuals and entities involved in the conflict. A different kind of policing is needed. One that

emphasizes intelligence and prevention of crime over knee-jerk reaction. This will require ultimately a reform of the security sector to prioritize the welfare and training of personnel; proper insulation from politics; and effective operational guidelines and deployment.

- (e) Donors should continue to channel support to community-based projects around peace building and lesson learning across communities especially in areas where there has been some recorded progress in peaceful co-existence.