

Infiltration of Herdsmen Brand Terror in Bayelsa, Nigeria: Assessing Government Policies

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Abstract: While traditionally concentrated in central and northern Nigeria, reports of attacks and terror activities attributed to herdsmen have emerged in Bayelsa State in recent times. This is concerning given the state's geographical location, economic contribution to the country, and history of violence. Consequently, it represents the raging spread of terror and exposes the inadequate responses of the government, prompting the question, 'How do government policies impact the crisis?'. Gurr's relative deprivation theory was utilised to provide insight into how the frustrations of individuals—farmers and herders—developed from perceived feelings of deprivation about the other party, provoking social and group action. Employing qualitative content analysis, the study relied heavily on reputable secondary sources to detect trends and patterns of policy formulation and implementation and their effect on the crisis. The study explored government strategies from 2014 on both federal and state levels and concluded that deep-seated corruption, weak institutions, ethnic intolerance, and negligence have impeded the implementation of necessary strategies, thereby exacerbating the crisis. Hence, the paper recommended the implementation of anti-corruption measures, the establishment of local and community channels for dialogue and mediation, and nationwide sensitisation regarding respect for human lives, property, and rights.

Keywords: herdsmen, terror, government, policies.

Introduction

Bayelsa, a state in the heart of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, plagued from its inception with untold violence that has left deep scars on its people, is once again gripped with new anxieties. From inter-communal and intra-communal clashes, cult rivalries, sea piracy, and political unrest to rampant armed robberies and destructive military invasions caused by militant group activities, the oil-rich state has encountered more than its fair share of violence (Nimizigha, Sapele, & Akinrolabu, 2019). Today, a new dimension of trouble brews in what appears to be a seemingly 'safer' environment in the state, threatening to ignite long-lasting tensions.

The Fulani-Herders and Farmers conflict, albeit not distinctive to Nigeria, has progressed beyond skirmishes over grazing rights and has evolved into a full-blown war on terror. Having deep historical roots as well as complex economic, political, religious, and cultural factors (Enor, Magor, & Ekpo, 2019), this conflict has escalated, leading to violent attacks on communities, widespread displacement, loss of lives and property, and political instability in the region (Ode, 2021).

While most documented clashes between Fulani terrorist herders and farmers during the early 2010s were isolated to the Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria, particularly Kaduna and Plateau, the crisis has quickly spread to other regions. Desertification, drought, loss of grazing reserves, rural banditry, and cattle rustling have caused a tremendous increase in the migration of Fulani-Herders to the South. As such, it is unsurprising that these violent activities have penetrated the region. Reports from Duruon (2016) and Omilusi (2016) indicated rising tensions and incidents in states like Adamawa, Niger, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, and even further south in Benue, Taraba, Kogi, Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia, Anambra, Imo, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Edo, and even Rivers State.

However, in 2017, the activities of Fulani herders expanded beyond the states, adding Bayelsa State to the statistics. During this time frame, although there were no officially reported fatalities, protests erupted due to the hostile and invasive behaviours associated with herders. This quickly changed in the 2020s, with recorded casualties among locals—farmers and fishermen—highlighting the conflict’s evolving geographical reach.

This is concerning as it not only exposes the uncontrolled and rapid spread of the herdsman brand of terror but also raises questions about the role of the government and its policies in this crisis. Hence, Iheanacho (2017) has disputed the effectiveness of government interventions and policies in curtailing this crisis as the conflict persists and violence continues. Inadequate land management policies, lack of proper grazing regulation, political interests, and mismanagement of resources have been identified as contributors to the perpetuation of this violence (MajeKodunmi, Akintola, Idahosa, Ikubanni, & Aidonojie, 2022).

Why is the Herdsmen Terror in Bayelsa concerning?

The Fulani herder-related violence spreading uncontrollably in the country has sown disruptive seeds in the oil-rich state, with the results being roadblocks, protests, and a loss of confidence in the government by the locals. So far, the mediative actions of the government and other stakeholders have pacified the people. Still, without substantive results, a forceful and ‘self-help’ response from Bayelsans, a people accustomed to violence and home to several militant and cult sects, could further exacerbate the conflict, creating a breeding ground for regional insecurity.

Moreover, a crisis in Bayelsa will tremendously impact the already crumbling economy of the country. Given the state's strategic location in the Niger Delta—in between Rivers State and Delta State, both oil-rich states—and its high oil reserves, a war on terror crisis could cripple the economy further. Insecurity directly damages an economy, and the early 2000s activities of militants in the Niger Delta bear witness to this. A 2011 World Bank report stated that Nigeria's oil production decreased by 25% between 2006 and 2009, resulting in an over \$100 billion loss in oil revenue. (Odalonu & Obani, 2018)

Therefore, assessing the Nigerian government's policies on farmer-herder conflict over the past decade to identify areas for reform is imperative to developing informed strategies and interventions that promote peace and stability between herdsman and farmers, not only in Bayelsa but throughout Nigeria.

Methodology

This study leveraged qualitative content analysis of secondary data retrieved from reputable reports, journals, newspapers, and documents focused on government strategies—federal and state—to mitigate the herdsmen violence. The goal was to uncover the lapses, if any, in the formulation and implementation of these policies.

Deconstructing the Herdsmen-Farmers Relationship in Nigeria

The complex and unfolding interactions between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria have garnered considerable attention and research due to their tumultuous nature. Both are vital to the country's agricultural sector and have served the nation and its people for decades. Nonetheless, their constant struggle for natural resources essential to their trade has resulted in detrimental ramifications for the nation's economy, security, environment, and people.

The herdsman occupation is dominated by the Fulani tribe in Nigeria, and for decades, if not centuries, their activities have taken the form of nomadism as compared to their farmer counterparts, whose occupations are sedentary (Iheanacho, 2017). This transhumance nature of herdsmen, combined with climate change and the desertification of northern Nigeria, has caused their increased migration to the South (Nwakanma and Boroh, 2019), exposing them to distinct ethnicities and cultures that are not as receptive due to political and religious histories. Perhaps a dive into the country's historical events would explicate this convoluted relationship. Myriad accounts of the origin of this complex relationship have been put forth by scholars, shedding light on the interconnectedness of pre-colonial roots, religious fears, tribalism and ethnic intolerance, environmental factors, and government responses.

Historical and Environmental Factors

Azarya (1996) suggests that the conflict between herders and farmers can be traced to Usman Dan Fodio and his Jihadist objectives in the 1800s. Usman Dan Fodio, an Islamic revivalist, founded the Islamic caliphate of Sokoto, the ancestral homeland of the Fulani tribe (Chukwuma, 2020). It is argued that this religious expansionist history of the Fulani people has created distrust and religious tensions amongst them and the non-Muslim people of the middle belt and southern Nigeria. The rejection of former President Buhari's regime's Ruga policy by Nigerians due to fear of Islamisation of the country further solidifies this viewpoint.

The 1960s and 1970s represent the post-colonial but pre-crude oil boom in Nigeria when agriculture powered the country's economy. During this period, the International Crisis Group (2017) reports that 415 grazing reserves (the burti system) were created by the northern regional government; however, due to improper documentation and government implementation, only 114 of them were properly demarcated. Subsequently, these were lost as they lacked legislative backing for sole usage in tandem with 'rapid population growth and the associated demand for farmland' (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 4). Nwakanma and Boroh (2019, p. 32) add that "industrialization, urbanization, climate change, expansion of farms...has blocked many traditional grazing routes used by herders."

Adelehin (2018) indicates that a major driver of this conflict is environmental changes, that is, drought, desertification, and climate change in Northern Nigeria (cited in Nwakanma and Boroh, 2019). Northern Nigeria is composed of arid and semi-arid land. However, this has worsened in the past few decades, with reports of fewer rainy days and parts of the arid region exhibiting desert-like conditions. The Food and Agriculture Organisation cited in International Crisis Group (2017) estimates that about 50%-75% of land in Jigawa, Bauchi, Katsina, Kano, Sokoto, Gombe,

Yobe, Zamfara, Borno, and Kebbi is experiencing desertification. This phenomenon has pushed herdsmen transhumant activities further into the southern region in search of resources.

The loss of grazing reserves and climate changes can be categorized as struggles over land use, leading Ezemenaka and Ekamaoko (2018, p. 39) to assert that "the root cause of conflict between Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria is the natural tension between herdsmen struggling to find rich pastures to graze their cattle and farmers struggling to convert and maintain productive farmland without the interruption and destruction that can be caused by migratory grazing."

Ethnic Sentiments

Nigeria has a carious history of tribalism and ethnic intolerance; therefore, it is unsurprising that the farmer-herder conflict has been tremendously impacted by these phenomena. Ethnic cleansing accusations reverberate from both Fulani herders and agrarian communities. In Adamawa, the Jonde Jam Fulani Youth Association of Nigeria (JAFUYAN) attributed the November 2017 killings of Fulani in Numan, Adamawa, as "the latest in a coordinated agenda to wipe out our people systematically through ethnic cleansing", and in Benue, His Royal Majesty James Ortese Ayatse, the Tiv customary ruler, stated that the January 2018 attacks were "well planned... nothing short of ethnic cleansing and genocide against the Tiv nation" (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 14).

The case of Nigeria's ethnic intolerance is like that of a minefield waiting to be detonated. The International Crisis Group (2018, p. 14) reported that Southeast separatist supporters use the violence to justify their resolve that Nigeria is "a fraudulent arrangement for extending Fulani dominance to all other groups" whereas some Fulanis, even among the elites, like Professor Umar Mohammed Labdo, argue that "a large chunk of what is today's North Central or what some people prefer to call the Middle Belt today were actually territories belonging to the Sokoto caliphate". These swirling sentiments and the government and security agents' mediocre responses foster hopelessness and disunity, triggering a strong sense of self-help and self-preservation.

Security Issues and Self-Help Problems

The widespread insecurity in the North, attributed to Boko Haram and other extremist groups, has contributed enormously to the current state of the herdsmen-farmers conflict. Coupled with cattle rustling and rural banditry, herdsmen have picked up arms to protect themselves and their cattle. Reports from the International Crisis Group (2017) indicated that cattle rustlers operate in ten states, including the Federal Capital Territory of the country, Abuja, resulting in an estimated 64,750 cattle thefts and 2,991 herdsmen deaths in 2013 alone. Allegations of cattle rustling are at the core of some herder-farmer conflicts, according to Nwosu (2017), cited in Nwakanma and Boroh (2019). Herdsmen commonly use these claims to justify their attacks on settled communities, suggesting that the affected communities steal their cattle and kill their colleagues and children. Poor responses from security agencies have evoked sentiments of helplessness and segregation.

Farmers and herders lament the government's lack of response and indifference to their appeals for justice for past crimes and warnings of potential attacks. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) has expressed firm opinions and resolve on this issue. The Chairman, Mr. Mohammed Abdullahi maintained that the failure of the government to protect them has prompted their self-help ventures (Nwosu, 2017; cited in Nwakanma and Boroh (2019). For instance, the International Crisis Group (2018) reported that the 2017 attack on nearby Bachama villages in Adamawa State was a reprisal for the murder of over 55 Fulani by 'Bachama youth militias in Numan' in November 2017. JAFUYAN promised retribution and acted after

expressing dissatisfaction with the results of an inquiry panel tasked with investigating the killings. Okorie (2016, n.p., cited in Chinwokwu, 2017) emphasized that:

"...in May, this year, Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria said openly that the reason for killing over 1,000 people in Benue state was the killing of over 800 cattle by Tiv youths. In other words, Miyetti Allah boldly told Nigerians that its members (herdsmen) killed over 1,000 Agatu people in Benue state because their cows were killed."

These dangerous self-help ventures have resulted in the proliferation of several armed herder militia groups within the Fulani-Herdsmen community, trapping them in a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation, raising the question of victims or terrorists.

Terror

The issue of whether herdsmen's activities are acts of terrorism, criminality, or genocide is a controversial topic in not just Nigeria but in the research field in general. Despite the 2015 Global Terrorism Index ranking them the fourth largest terrorist group in Nigeria, representatives of the former President Buhari regime have insisted that the armed herder group be referred to as, 'criminal gangs'. Consequently, the activities of the group, have been argued by some to be acts of genocide or religious cleansing geared toward 'Christian' farmers. Additionally, Moritz and Mbacke (2022) have echoed 'the dangers of the one-sided story' perpetuated in the media and scholarly field against pastoralists in their entirety. Although this research is not focused on semantics, it is still essential to conceptualise terror and terrorism within the purview of this study.

The Merriam-Webster's dictionary (ND) defines terror as "a state of intense or overwhelming fear." It describes it further as "violence or the threat of violence used as a weapon of intimidation or coercion." Garrison (2004) perceives terror as a tool that involves using force or violence against a particular group of people, with the main objective of instilling fear to effect change.

On the other hand, terrorism, as defined by the Global Terrorism Index (2015), is "the systematic threat or use of violence, by non-state actors, whether for or in opposition to established practice and authority, with the intention of communicating a political, religious, or ideological message to a group larger than the victim group, by generating fear and so altering (or attempting to alter) the behaviour of the larger group." Wells (1996, p. 454) cited in Garrison (2004), describes terrorism as the 'strategy of employing violence or the threat of violence to escalate people's fears in order to achieve or keep political power. Terrorism consists of random violent acts on persons or property in order to frighten or coerce a large number of people.' Consequently, the United Nations (1999) characterises terrorism as any 'act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act'

From the foregoing, a strong argument for categorising herdsmen's violent activities in Nigeria as terrorism can be deduced as these descriptors, 'systematic', 'non-state actors' who employ 'threats' and 'use violence to intimidate a particular group of people' portray their activities. Notwithstanding, counterarguments to this deduction can potentially be drawn by suggesting that these groups mainly retaliate when confronted as well as have no desire to obtain political power. This, however, is improbable given the 2018 and 2024 communicate by the group, the Fulani Nationality Movement (FUNAM), threatening Jihad in the country if there is a pushback against the cattle colony. Additionally, their routine and systematic deadly attacks on civilian and Christian farmer-dominated communities strongly suggest religious and ideological motives.

Irrespective of any viewpoint, these violent and self-help ventures perpetuate terror—violent acts of threat to instil fear or intimidation. Hence, this undisputable premise necessitated the description of 'brand of terror,' in this study, especially for the specific herdsman activities in Bayelsa State. These incidents, despite appearing to be random and haphazard attacks, instil fear and are used to intimidate the local farmers.

Impact Toll of Herdsmen Brand of Terror in Nigeria

While most of the research on the cause of these violent attacks has depicted the Fulani-herder community in its entirety as violent, evil terrorists, it is pertinent to acknowledge that the conflict with the farmers is bilateral, with both sides experiencing casualties. Ezemenaka and Ekamaoko (2018) reported the death of over 96 herdsman and 53,991 cattle on the 1st and 7th of January 2002, in Mambilla, Plateau. The Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), cited in the International Crisis Group (2018), reported that from 2011 to 2015, bandits, cattle rustlers, and other criminals killed 1,135 people (Fulani and herders included) in Zamfara State alone. Additionally, MACBAN alleged that the government has not made any arrests in connection with the murder of approximately 1,000 Fulani herders, including women and children, and the massacre and theft of supposedly two million cattle between June 2017 and January 2018.

Notwithstanding, ignoring the presence of several Fulani militant groups is equally misleading; these distinct groups, not representative of all Fulani and herdsman, have caused untold loss, with the number of deaths caused by their attacks outweighing those by any terrorist or militant group, including the notorious Boko Haram (Kazeem, 2017; cited in Akpor-Robaro & Lanre-Babalola, 2018).

According to Sunday (2016) and Ndukwe (2016), both cited in Chinwokwu (2017), data from 2010 to 2013 linked these groups to the tragic loss of around 80 lives, with the figure increasing drastically to a staggering 1229 deaths in 2014 alone, garnering global attention, with the Global Terrorism Index (2015) ranking them as the fourth deadliest terrorist group globally. Subsequently, in 2016, Dickson et al. (cited in Akpor-Robaro & Lanre-Babalola, 2018) noted that by 2015, the number of killings had doubled compared to 2014. Bazan (2020), in his report, "Fulani Militias' Terror: Compilation of News (2017–2020)", stated that "the Global Terrorist Index 2019 published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, indicates that the primary driver of the increase in terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa was a rise in terrorist activity in Nigeria attributed, not to Boko Haram, ISWAP, or Ansaru, but to Fulani extremists: in 2018, Fulani extremists were responsible for the majority of terror-related deaths in Nigeria (1,158 fatalities), with an increase by 261 and 308 per cent, respectively, from the prior year. Most Fulani attacks were armed assaults (200 out of 297 attacks) against civilians (84 per cent of the attacks)."

Table 1: Deaths from Herdsmen Terror in Nigeria, 2017-2023

S/N	YEAR	DEATHS	NOTES
1.	2023	860	Benue state recorded the highest deaths followed by Plateau and Taraba while Kano, Ebonyi, Kwara and Bayelsa recorded the least deaths.
2.	2022	579	Attacks were reported across 24 states including the FCT with Benue recording the highest fatalities followed by Enugu and Plateau while Bayelsa, Kogi and Kwara had the lowest fatalities.
3.	2021	703	Attacks were reported across 21 states. Benue, Plateau and Ebonyi had the highest in comparison to Abia, Akwa-Ibom and Rivers recording the lowest.

4.	2020	616	Attacks across 23 states with Kaduna (203), Plateau (106), and Benue (96) having the highest deaths.
5.	2019	549	Attacks across 17 states with Kaduna (160), and Benue (74) having the highest number of deaths.
6.	2018	1,882	Attacks across 18 states with Benue (532), Adamawa (300), Plateau (291), Taraba (282), and Nasarawa (243) having the highest deaths.
7.	2017	*202	

Source: Figures for 2018-2023 were retrieved from the Nigeria Watch 8th-13th Annual Reports on Violence. * The data for 2017 was retrieved from Bazan (2020).

The fluctuating trend of herdsmen terror was represented in this table, with 2018 standing out as the worst year affected. From 2018 to 2022, there was a decrease in the number of deaths; however, there was a significant increase in reported deaths in 2023. Although a contested argument, the 2018 surge has been attributed to the 2017 implementation of the anti-grazing bill in Benue. The bill presumably not only exacerbated clashes in Benue but also triggered the migration of herders to neighbouring Nasarawa, thus transferring the surging conflicts to the state. Other factors considered are the retaliatory actions in Adamawa as well as the swirling ethnic tensions in the middle belt. Even so, Bayelsa remained largely unaffected by these developments until 2022 and 2023, when it saw the lowest number of fatalities.

Herdsmen Terror in Bayelsa

Bayelsa State, created in 1996 from Rivers State and situated in the south-south region of the country, is among the youngest states in the country. Although it is the least populated state with about 2.14 million people (World Population Review, 2023), it boasts the largest concentration of the Ijaw tribe—also found in Rivers State, Delta State, Edo State, Akwa Ibom State, and Ondo State—who account for 10% of the country's population, making them the fourth largest ethnic group in the country (Alagoa, 1999). Owing to its diverse ecological landscape, forged by its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, the locals mostly engage in agricultural activities. Renowned for being the location of Nigeria's oil discovery, it possesses significant crude oil reserves, contributing enormously to Nigeria's economy. Paradoxically, these naturally given resources have taken as much as they have given, as the closeness to the Atlantic Ocean predisposes the state to high sea levels, which destroy farmlands and human habitats. Moreover, oil exploration has resulted in oil spillages, air and water pollution, deforestation, and widespread violence.

Luka (2023) has described the people of Bayelsa as tolerant and receptive owing to the large population of the Muslim-Hausa ethnic group domiciled mainly in Swali, Yenagoa. For decades, they have lived harmoniously in the state, dominating the fresh exotic fruit and vegetable market as well as the tricycle transport industry, and up until the mid-2010s, the herdsmen community in Bayelsa followed a similar path of peace. Annual extensive flooding and the limited landmass in the state attributed to its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean have altered the traditional farming methods as farmers till the soil and plant around the end of November and beginning of December just after the flood to harvest their crops in August just before the flood arrives.

Figure 1: Map of Bayelsa State



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

This frustration, in tandem with what appears to be the intentional invasion and destruction of farmlands by some cattle herders, has resulted in resistance by both farmers and fishermen. Unfortunately, this has only led to more farm invasions and occasional lethal incidents.

Table 2: Some Recorded Cases of Herdsmen Terror in Bayelsa State.

S/N	DATE	LOCATION	DEATHS	INCIDENTS
1.	Feb. 2021	Edepie Roundabout, Yenagoa		Bayelsa women protest herdsmen's invasion of farmlands (Oyadongha, Enogholase, & Aliu, 2021).
2.	Feb. 19, 2021	Otuoke community, Ogbia LGA		Mr Goodhead Nation 58 years old and his son Samuel Nation 18 years old were attacked by an unidentified Fulani herder, who used a machete to inflict severe injuries on the head and fingers of Samuel nation after accusing them of stealing his cattle (Igoni, 2021).
3.	Mar. 2022	Opuma Community, Ogbia LGA	1	Blockade of the Nembe/Ogbia Road. Aggrieved youths protested the killing of a 39-year-old woman, Waadu Alfred in the bush. She was tied to a stake, raped and had lethal machete cuts on her body (Ogunde, 2022).
4.	Mar. 14, 2023	Zarama	1	Blockade of the East/West Road at Zarama protesting the beheading of 49-year-old Alexander Diri while in the forest (Igoni, 2023).
5.	Mar. 20, 2023	Okordia, Yenagoa	2	The murder of 49-year-old Chief Bob Wilson and Anozia Alex. Nyekefamo Jimiro hospitalised due to gunshot wounds. Reason: the deceased stopped herdsmen from grazing on farmlands and fishing camps (Igoni, 2023).
6.	Jan. 31, 2024	Zarama		Zarama women blockaded the East/West Road protesting against herdsmen's disruptive activities on their farmlands.

Source: Compiled by the researcher using reputable news sources.

The gradual but escalating terror activities in Bayelsa are apparent in this table. It demonstrates how herdsmen's brand of terror evolved from protests against farm destruction to life-threatening assaults, rape, and eventually murder. It also depicts the evolution in the method of executing these terror activities, from machete attacks to the use of guns. Another trend is the frequency of potentially fatal and fatal attacks, increasing from one yearly in 2021 and 2022 to two in March 2023 alone. These figures, although incomparable to the violence in other states, are alarming as they represent the gradual but emboldened conduct of herdsmen in Bayelsa and the rest of Nigeria.

Theoretical Exposition

Like the frustration-aggression theory, the **relative deprivation theory** illustrates that hindrances to the achievement of one's desires or goals breed aggression. Mostly associated with Ted Gurr (1970), this theory proposes that feelings of frustration and aggression arise when individuals or groups perceive that they are being deprived of advantages in comparison to others (cited in Walker and Pettigrew, 1984). Here, the frustration does not simply develop out of lack but rather a feeling of being deprived or exploited when compared with the situations of others. Individuals who experience relative deprivation may feel unfairly treated, resentful, or frustrated as a result of perceived differences between their own and the positions of those they consider to be similar or comparable (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984). Gurr argued that relative deprivation can be a strong catalyst for social unrest and group action as it encourages people to find ways to balance seemingly unfair circumstances (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984). The theory hypothesizes that these comparisons of circumstances and outcomes are made in social categories that include class, ethnicity, gender, status, religion, or race.

This framework is suited for this study, as it addresses the deprived sentiments of both herdsmen and farmers who perceive government actions and policies as favouring the other. On one hand, the herdsmen experience frustration due to the depletion of their lands and grazing routes. They feel unfairly treated, as they perceive government actions as biased since they have done little to nothing to retrieve grazing land from the *burti* system encroached on by farmers. Additionally, they have been forced to protect themselves from cattle rustlers and violence geared towards herders, considering they construe law enforcement to be in favour of the farmers. On the other hand, farmers feel deprived of their security, safety, and privacy. They perceive government actions and policies as biased and tilted toward the 'Muslim Fulanis'. Given the pattern of herdsmen attacks aimed at majority Christian farmers in the North and Middle Belt, it is a widespread notion, although not proven, that the extremist herders, in collaboration with the Northern leaders, plot to Islamize the country. These feelings from both parties foster resentment and religious and ethnic intolerance, thereby exacerbating the crisis further. As Gurr postulated, the country has seen a rise in group action and social unrest, as evident in the proliferation of extremist herdsmen groups and local and state vigilante groups. This dynamic has resulted in a cycle of violence and retaliation, with each side feeling justified in their actions. The lack of effective government intervention has only fuelled the tensions between these groups, making resolution even more challenging.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES AND POLICIES

In the past decade, the Nigerian government supposedly initiated several policy measures and interventions to mitigate herdsmen conflicts, thereby promoting coexistence between pastoralists and farming communities; however, this devastating crisis has lingered, calling for an analysis of these 'responses'.

Political Responses of the National Government

1. In April 2014, the administration of former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan created the political committee on grazing reserves. Headed by the Governor of Benue State, Gabriel Suswan, to develop strategies to end the farmer-herder conflict, the committee resolved to recover and improve grazing routes encroached on by farmers. They recommended that the Central Bank of Nigeria allocate N100 billion to the 36 states of the federation to construct ranches for livestock. In 2015, President Jonathan lost his re-election, impeding the implementation of the resolution, but it was not before the National Executive Council (NEC) approved these recommendations and the central bank released the N100 billion to the state governments. Despite this, the state governments failed to construct the ranches. A committee was set up by the House of Representatives on January 19, 2017, to investigate accusations of embezzlement, but it never published its findings (International Crisis Group, 2017).
2. In 2015, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (FMARD) recommended 'short-, medium-, and long-term strategies, including the development of grazing reserves and stock routes' on the directive of former President Buhari. This led to the announcement of mapping grazing routes in all 36 states; however, it was resisted by the Middlebelt and Southern states, which perceived it as biased and favourable to the Fulani. The following year, Agriculture Minister Audu Ogbeh stated that a bill to prohibit open grazing was being sent to the National Assembly, adding that the "government had ordered fast-growing grass" from Brazil to cultivate "massive hectares of grasses", ready for use "within the next three months" (International Crisis Group, 2017). It is 2024, and the bill, routes, and grass have not been realised.
3. In 2018, President Buhari's regime proposed the RUGA Settlement Scheme. It aimed to establish graze reserves called "RUGA settlements" in twelve (12) frontline states. These settlements would be furnished with veterinary clinics, water points, and schools, potentially reducing the need for traditional grazing methods as well as fostering improved and increased productivity in the livestock sector (The Vanguard, 2018). Dissatisfaction, opposition, and contentions on land rights, perceived ethnic biases, and environmental sustainability resulted in its suspension in 2019.
4. In 2019, the same administration introduced the ten-year National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) 2019–2028. In what appeared to be the most comprehensive plan to curb the crisis, the plan aimed to mitigate the whirling violence, improve livestock production, and foster economic growth. This plan, similar to the RUGA settlement, proposed the establishment of ranches, also known as graze reserves, in seven (7) cooperative frontline states—Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Taraba, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Zamfara. These ranches would provide essential amenities like veterinary clinics, water points, and access to markets. The NLTP also advocated for the planting of drought-resistant fodder crops to decrease reliance on grazing wild vegetation. Another key strategy in the NLTP was the importance of building dialogue and establishing effective communication channels between herders and farmers to address grievances and prevent further conflict. Like the RUGA policy, some states, especially the southern states, have expressed their reservations, as a major concern surrounding the NLTP was the process of allocating land for ranches. Constitutionally, the federal government lacks the authority to allocate land, as this power is reserved for the states. Unlike the North and Middle Belt, the southern states had no graze reserves or routes in the colonial or post-colonial era. This policy, if not implemented appropriately, may result in the disenfranchisement of indigenous communities.

A review of these strategies revealed the familiar and consistent carious nature of the federal and state governments and their institutions. Embezzlement of funds, unfulfilled promises, ethnic tensions, weak governance, and institutional deficiencies continue to constitute the core of their actions. Lack of trust between the tiers of government, greed, and propaganda impede any chance of progress towards reconciliation and long-lasting peace.

Political Responses of the State Governments

The recurring response from state governments has been the implementation of a ban on open grazing and the establishment of ranches. In 2016, the Ekiti State government, a frontline state, enacted the Anti-Open Grazing Law. Benue State, Edo State, and Taraba State subsequently followed in 2017. The laws basically revolve around the prohibition of grazing on any land not designated by the government as a grazing reserve, the prohibition of arms bearing, whether licensed or not, by any herdsman and the inspection of livestock by veterinarians at state entry points. These laws aimed to prevent further destruction of farms, prevent farmer-herder clashes, optimise land use, and prevent the spread of diseases. In May 2021, after a Governor's forum, 17 governors from southern states collectively resolved to ban open grazing of cattle. As of 2022, 13 Nigerian states, including Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa, had enacted similar laws (Hufschmidt & Ume, 2023).

The Bayelsa State Government, in 2016, under the administration of the former governor of Bayelsa State, Governor Seriake Dickson, banned open grazing and restricted herdsmen activities—'grazing, ranching and slaughtering'—in the state to the Bayelsa Palms located in the state's capital constituting 1,200 hectares of land. (Utebor, 2017). Likewise, he announced that armed cattle herders would be persecuted constitutionally. His successor, Senator Douye Diri after his inauguration, reiterated this ban by promoting further herder sensitization and erecting no grazing signs. In 2018, some herders within and outside the capital city infringed on this ban. Vanguard News (2018) reported that a spokesperson for cattle dealers in the Bayelsa Palms indicated that lawbreakers were non-members.

In 2021, the governor granted executive affirmation of the 'Livestock Breeding, Rearing and Marketing Regulation Law 2021'. This law states that,

"...any herdsman found with arms, whether licenced or not, should be arrested...no person shall breed, rear, or trade-in livestock in any part of the state except in other places as may be designated and approved by the state government...prohibits movement of cattle on foot from other parts of the country into the state, inspection of livestock, and certification by veterinary doctors at entry points into the state, among other things (The Daily Trust, 2021)."

Since the enactment of the law, there have been more daring herdsmen cases. The government has also set up implementation and mediation mechanisms at the local government levels, yet these have not hindered the destruction of farms in the state.

The effectiveness of the anti-open grazing laws is a topic of controversy as state governments have been accused of providing political solutions for a multifaceted crisis. The trend analysis of the number of attacks and deaths in 2018 after their enactment proved that it only exacerbated the crisis. Benue and Taraba suffered more deaths than they had in the previous years before the ban. In Bayelsa State, for instance, murders did not occur until 2022 and 2023, after the implementation of the law. Fulani umbrella groups and other observers have argued that these laws are discriminatory and inconsiderate of the livelihoods of the herders. In certain states, the laws were enacted without the proper consultation of necessary stakeholders and provided limited time for

adaptation. Additionally, the methods of enforcement are questionable, considering herders have consistently infringed on this ban with minimal repercussions.

Conclusion

The state of Nigeria can be likened to a cluster bomb, with Bayelsa State possessing the characteristics that could potentially be the flash point needed to cause an explosion. Government efforts and strategies need a more nuanced approach devoid of personal, ethnic, and religious agendas. While self-help and self-preservation may have exacerbated this crisis, deeper issues like entrenched corruption, negligence, power struggles driven by ethnic intolerance, and weak institutions are the sparks keeping the flames burning. With the rising numbers and fuelled hatred, it is imperative for the government to address the root causes of conflict in Bayelsa State and work collaboratively with necessary stakeholders towards sustainable peacebuilding efforts. Without comprehensive and inclusive solutions, the cycle of violence and instability will continue to plague the country.

Recommendations

1. To attain success in the NLTP, the government must put strong anti-corruption measures in place to deter embezzlement of funds.
2. Establish channels for farmer-herder dialogue, especially on the local government and community levels.
3. Local governments and community leaders must be at the core of conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding programs within their constituents, with both farmers and herders adequately represented.
4. Routine sensitization on respect for human life, rights, and property should be conducted in communities to promote peaceful coexistence.
5. Create unity campaigns at the local, state, and federal levels to discourage the perception of ethnic cleansing, its accompanying fears, and violent actions.
6. Improve securitization and trust in law enforcement by channelling resources into police reforms that prioritise training in rapid response times, enhanced communication systems, and improved mobility. Additionally, community policing boards constituting representatives from herder and farmer communities should be established to provide unbiased and adequate information on policing strategies.

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