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Article

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ARMED BANDITRY IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

Banditry has become a challenge and threat to national security. The level at which bandits operate within the landscape of Northern Nigeria has led to violent crimes such as kidnapping, raping, maiming, killing and destruction of properties and farmlands. It has also brought disruptions of socio- economic activities and uncertainty, a situation that has become worrisome to the government and the citizenry. This paper therefore examines the causes and implications of banditry in the Northern region, which has emerged as a threat to national security. The paper adopted descriptive methodse, with the use of secondary source of data while the Situational Action Theory (SAT) was employed as a theoretical framework. This paper posited that the factors which drive the accelerating banditry in Northern Nigeria are high level of unemployment with its attendant poverty, a weak security system and arms proliferation . The paper concludes by recommending a combination of strengthened security measures, economic empowerment, border control, efficient disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program, community- base moral and civic education to mitigate the phenomenon.

Keywords: Armed Banditry, National Security, Conflict Drivers, Poverty, Violence, Northern Nigeria.

Introduction

In Nigeria, banditry has emerged as a contemporary threat to national security. This threat which has enveloped the Northwest and North central region of Nigeria has become worrisome to national security experts and the public at large. Bandits engages in widespread attacks, kidnapping, killing, destruction of properties, looting, and disrupting of farm activities, which have affected the nation's agricultural output. The activities of these bandits have displaced thousands of people, communities and creating a growing number of

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widows, widowers and orphans, who now reside in internally displaced persons' (IDP) camp. The Northern Regions of Nigeria encompasses seven states namely Kano, Jigawa, Katsina, Kaduna, Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi. Five of these states, which are Katsina, Kaduna, Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi have been mostly affected by this scourge of banditry. Of these five states, Kaduna, Katsina and Zamfara have been the most critical. It is however, pertinent to note that the incidences of banditry are not limited to Northwest Nigeria. In fact, it is also prevalent in some parts of North-central region, in states like Niger, Nasarawa, Benue and Plateau which are equally regarded as hotbeds (Kuna & Jibrin 2016).

Scholars like Gaye (2018), Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016), Suleiman (2017) and Mustapha (2019) have advanced several factors as the cause and prevalence of banditry in Nigeria. Some of the factors they argued include the fragility of Nigerian state, weak state institutions, especially the security agencies, availability of grossly ungoverned spaces, porosity of Nigeria's borders with its neighboring countries, arms proliferation, weak leadership, corruption, unemployment and mass poverty. There is no gainsaying the fact that banditry poses a serious challenge not only to the security of Northwest states but to the country at large in view of its ever increasing impacts and implications. The level at which bandits operate within the northwest region calls for attention from both the states and the Federal governments, more especially, since the latter controls the state security apparatuses. Against this backdrop of the upsurge in incidences of banditry in recent times, this paper examines the phenomenon of banditry; its cause and implications to the security of the Northern Regions and Nigeria at large. For the purpose of analytical progression, this paper is divided into five sections apart from the introductory section which is considered the first, the second section deals with the conceptual clarifications while the third section extensively discusses the causes of banditry. The fourth discusses its implications to Nigeria national security. The fifth section enlightens on ways to prevent and checkmate the activities of bandits while the last section is the conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptualizing Banditry

Conceptually, banditry is a derivation of the term bandit meaning an unlawful armed group terrorizing people and confiscating their properties. Banditry also leads to the existence of constant fear of attack, which takes away human dignity and people's ability to organize, seek and engage in livelihood. By so doing the bandits have trampled on the people's fundamentals human rights and economic development within the region. It involves the use of force and threat to that effect to intimidate a person or group with the intent to rob or kill (Tahir and Usman 2021). Banditry stands against the government, which affects the life of citizens since the government exists for the betterment of the citizens. However, where the term banditry is connected to the rural areas, it then implies a group of rural outlaws involved in illicit activities such as raiding of villages, kidnappings and cattle rustling for primitive accumulation of wealth. Thus, bandits are gang groups terrorizing and dispossessing local people or travelers of their valuable items or properties such as merchandise, money, cattle, camel, and sheep, among others. They operate within and along rural borders with the assistance of their local collaborators including in some cases, state agents deployed to work for the safety and security of the people (Abdullahi, 2019).

Banditry can be classified in different types such as social banditry which (Warto, 2011) argued is a criminal act committed either by the residents of a village or people in the low economic and social strata in order to fulfill their desire needs. In this sense, (Rife 2011) opines that social banditry flaunts authority, lives with reckless abandon and champions the

causes of the masses against elite oppression. It could however be argued that instead of championing the causes of the poor, men are more likely to turn to banditry out of desperation and hard economic realities than vague notion of righting a wrong. Consequently, (Sullivan 2022) observed that contemporary banditry has changed in scope, nature and extent from historic antecedents. He maintains that modern day bandits are criminally inclined insurgents and conventional terrorists. He argued plausibly that these groups are a cog in the wheel of democratic governance and free market economy. To Sullivan (1998), bandits are 'gangs, criminal enterprises, insurgents or warlords who dominate social life and erode the bonds of effective security and the rule of law'. In congruent to this assertions, (Williams 1998) conceived bandits as transnational gangs and criminals who extend their reach and influence by co-opting individuals and organizations through bribery, coercion and intimidation; they do so in order to facilitate, enhance or protect their own activities. Thus banditry in the context of this paper is defined as the criminal action of groups or individuals, disrupting and infringing on peoples fundamental human right and inflicting pain on them such as killing, kidnappings, reaping and disrupting the economic activities of the region or state.

Causes of Banditry in Northern Nigeria

Several interrelated factors account for the rise and persistence of banditry in Northern Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, widespread poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education weaken the socialization processes that would typically discourage crime. The Northern Region of Nigeria has the highest poverty rate in the country, with a percentage of the population, particularly the youths lacking access to gainful employment. This lead the Young people, particularly in rural areas, to have a propensity toward banditry as a rational means of survival, driven by economic desperation. (Mikail, Ayuba, Zubairu and Bala 2025) agreed that economic hardship pushes individuals toward criminal livelihood such as banditry. Youth unemployment is especially high, and for many young men, therefore banditry is a rational mean of survival. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the poverty index in the northern Nigeria stood at 65% (NBS 2024 report). The anxiety from Nigerian graduates which often turn to frustration, and then to aggression on the government is what has fueled the emergence of most of these bandit attacks and security threats in the country (Suleiman, 2017; Mustapha, 2019) The lack of alternative livelihoods pushes individuals toward criminal activities like cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and armed robbery. Northern Nigeria, particularly the rural areas suffers from extreme poverty, with limited access to basic services like electricity, clean water, education, healthcare and employment opportunities.

In Northern Nigeria, the lack of government presence, ineffective law enforcement, and porous borders create a " criminogenic environment, " where crime can flourish with minimal resistance. Bandits operate in remote areas where state control is weak, and communities under-policed. In the case of Northern Nigeria, individuals who might not inherently be inclined toward criminality are pushed into banditry due to the combination of socio-economic hardship and the availability of opportunities for illegal gain (such as cattle rustling, kidnapping, and ransom activities). The weak legal framework and socio-economic conditions provide situational contexts that make banditry a feasible option for many. Again, inadequate security in many parts of Northern Nigeria, especially in rural and remote areas and the government's inability to provide security agents and law enforcement allows banditry to flourish. Where and when security agents are available, the vastness of the

region, coupled with difficult terrain makes it difficult to police. There has also being allegations of corruption in the form of bribery and collusion with criminals and poor discipline within the police and military. All these makes it challenging for security forces to maintain control. There is no gain saying the fact that weak security system complements the alarming rate of banditry in the northwest region of Nigeria. Also the influx of small arms and light weapons, facilitated by porous borders with neighboring countries like Niger, Mail, Chad, and Cameroon, lead to the presence of transnational criminals network and inflow of weapons to the bandit group thereby equipping them with firearms and enhancing their capability to carry out sophisticated and violent operation, making it difficult for local security to fight them.

Northern Nigeria has been severely impacted by climate change, particularly desertification, shrinking water resources, and declining agricultural yields. The loss of fertile land and pasture due to desertification has heightened competition for scarce resources, particularly between farming and herding communities. This competition often turns violent, with bandit groups taking advantage of the situation to escalate conflicts and loot resources. This clashes often evolved into violent banditry. There is also the ethnic and religious tension between the predominantly Muslim fulnia herders and the Christian farming communities, exacerbated by competition for land resources. This too contributes to the violence in Northern Nigeria, which create volatile environment where banditry thrives. In the past, Northern Nigeria relied heavily on traditional rulers and local leaders to mediate conflict and maintain order. Unfortunately the authorities of traditional rulers have been dismissed in the face of modern governance structures thereby weakening the traditional conflict resolution mechanism and thus allowing banditry to thrive. Banditry has further eroded community structures, as people lose faith in both traditional and formal governance systems. Communities that once relied on collective security and mutual support have been destabilized, leaving them vulnerable to bandit attacks.

Moreover Some politicians in Northern Nigeria have been accused of using armed groups, including bandits, for political purposes which makes them to enjoy a degree of immunity from prosecution. They are hired to intimidate opponents and suppress voters turnout in certain areas. This politicization of crime has further entrenched banditry, as armed groups are often left unchecked once they have served their political purpose and even rewarded in exchange for political favors, making it difficult to dismantle bandit network. The failure of Nigeria government disarmament and reintegration programmed where former bandits are supposed to be given opportunity to disarm and be reintegrated into society is also a causative factor in the escalation of banditry in Northern Nigeria. The program have been poorly funded and poorly managed, leading to lack of sustainable livelihood for former bandits. Without meaningful economic opportunities or rehabilitation, many disarmed bandits return or join other violent groups thereby bringing with them experiences in violent conflict and criminality. This further strengthens bandit networks and make them more difficult to dismantle. The rise of armed banditry in Northern Nigeria, this driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. These causes are interconnected, creating a fertile ground for banditry to thrive.

Implications of Banditry for National Security in Nigeria

The rise of banditry in Northern Nigeria has severe implications for the country's national security. These implications are far-reaching, affecting the socio-political stability, economic development, and overall security architecture of Nigeria. Banditry has weakened the

legitimacy and authority of the Nigerian state, most especially in areas where the presence of government no longer exists. This gives bandits absolute control over the areas creating “ungoverned spaces” where state institutions have little or no influence. Furthermore, this undermines the rule of law and reduces the population’s trust in the government to provide security and basic services. In so doing the people may turn to self defense group, vigilantes or even negotiate with bandit for protection. This breakdown in trust between the government and citizens weakens national cohesion and can lead to instability. The increase of violence and insecurity particularly in the Northwest and North central region of Nigeria, where armed groups engage in attack on communities including killing, kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling, has created climate of fear, leading to the displacement of thousands of people and the abandonment of entire village. Banditry has caused large-scale displacement of people, as thousands flee their homes to escape violence. This has led to a growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are in dire need of food, shelter, and medical care. Nigeria’s North-central and North-west zones are afflicted with a multi-dimensional crisis. Long-standing tensions between ethnic and religious groups often result in attacks and banditry. These attacks involve kidnapping and grand larceny along major highways by criminal groups. During the past years, the crisis accelerated and has resulted in widespread displacement across the North-central and North-west regions (IOM UN MIGRATION 2024 report). Their operation are been carried out due to the availability of sophisticated arms and light weapons, thereby increasing deadly attack on Communities. The proliferation of arms also poses a broader threat to national security, as these weapons can find their way into other criminal networks or insurgent groups and thereby exacerbating Nigeria's security challenges.

Again, banditry has significantly disrupted agricultural activities, which is the main source of livelihood for many people in Northern Nigeria. Farmers are often forced to abandon their lands due to the constant threat of attack, cattle rustling, or extortion by bandits. Northern Nigeria plays a vital role in the country’s agricultural output and the disruption of this role caused by banditry has ripple effects on national food supply generating hyper inflation and causing hunger in the land. This disruption of agricultural activities contributes to food insecurity and worsens poverty in affected regions, further stalling economic development and exacerbating inequality. With a lot of security crisis in Nigeria, such as Boko Haram insurgency, militancy in the Niger Delta, and separatist movements in the Southeast (unknown gunmen), with other criminal activities, the issue of banditry further strains the security forces, making it difficult for them to effectively address the wide array of security challenges across the country. The inability to respond to all these threats simultaneously has left some areas vulnerable and allowed banditry to persist. Banditry has created opportunities for collaboration with terrorist organizations like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which provide them with logistics support, intelligence, and act as intermediaries in arm trafficking which poses a significant threat to national security, as it enables the expansion of terrorist activities into new areas. Banditry has fostered the growth of a criminal economy that includes kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, illegal mining, and arms smuggling. These activities are lucrative and have attracted a wide range of actors, from local criminals to international syndicates. The entrenchment of this criminal economy makes it difficult to combat banditry, as it becomes intertwined with local economies and corrupt officials. Northern Nigeria shares borders with several countries, including Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Due to lack of border

control or checks, bandits move freely across them, complicating efforts to combat the problem.

Education in the country has recently come under significant threat due to increased number of mass kidnappings of students from schools. This is a new strategy adopted by terrorists and bandits groups. Kidnappings in Schools have become a great disincentive for both parents and students alike, for enrolling in schools, opting to stay at home in order to ensure their safety. Today, Nigeria has one of world's highest numbers of out-of-school children, 17.8million, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). A wave of school kidnappings has worsened the situation, with some state governments closing some schools in their states until security is guaranteed. The most affected region is the northern Nigeria with the statistics of 15.23million(UNICEF 2023)

Prevention and Checkmating the Activities of Bandits in Northern Nigeria using Situational Actions Theory (SAT)

According to SAT, an individual's propensity to commit crime is influenced by their moral values and self-control, which can be shaped through targeted interventions like investing in education, particularly moral and civic education. This can play a crucial role in shaping values that reject crime. Civic education is the act of teaching the younger ones how to be law abiding citizens, and responsible individuals in the society. Schools and community-based programs should teach conflict resolution, the importance of the rule of law, and the social costs of crime. Early interventions, such as educational campaigns in vulnerable communities, can deter young people from joining bandit groups or any form of criminal groups. There should be a provision for job creation, vocational training and entrepreneurship support which play a role in reducing individual, especially the youths, propensity to engage in crime. This economic empowerment will strengthen individuals' moral resistance to being recruited into bandit groups by offering alternative livelihoods. SAT suggests that criminal behavior can be altered by reshaping individuals' moral frameworks and providing them with new opportunities. Offering fully funded and active rehabilitation programs that include psychological counseling, skills training, and social reintegration can help former bandits reintegrate into society as law-abiding citizens. These programs should emphasize personal development and help change their perception of crime.

SAT emphasizes the importance of altering environments that foster crime, thus reducing the opportunities for banditry to occur. Banditry thrives in environments where law enforcement is weak or absent. SAT suggests that strengthening formal control mechanisms (like police presence) can reduce the opportunities for crime. This can be done by deploying more security forces in bandit-prone areas, improving police-community relations, and during trust between the police and community. Local security groups, if properly trained and monitored, can assist in intelligence gathering and rapid response to threats. To disrupt the logistics of armed banditry, there is need for stricter controls over arms proliferation, better border management to prevent arms smuggling, and targeting of criminal networks that supply bandits. De-escalating the arms race in Northern Nigeria will make it harder for bandits to sustain violent activities. SAT indicates that improving the environment reduces the likelihood of crime. Developing rural infrastructure, improving access to schools and healthcare, and providing basic services in vulnerable areas can make communities less prone to the influence of bandit groups. With greater state presence and development, these areas will be less attractive to criminal elements.

The moral context shapes the values and behaviors of individuals and communities. In the case of Northern Nigeria, where socio-economic and cultural factors contribute to banditry, strengthening the moral framework of communities is essential. Engaging communities in dialogues and peace-building initiatives can help reinforce social norms that reject crime and violence. Traditional and religious leaders play a critical role in shaping moral values and should be actively involved in peace efforts. SAT suggests that reinforcing positive moral contexts such as cooperation, mutual respect, and social responsibility can reduce the likelihood of criminal actions. Many bandit groups exploit existing ethnic and religious divisions. SAT emphasizes the role of collective moral guidance in crime prevention. Initiatives that promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogue, encourage cooperation between herders and farmers, and promote equitable access to resources will reduce conflicts that bandits exploit. This can be done through land reforms, conflict mediation, and joint community development projects. Public awareness campaigns highlighting the consequences of banditry on communities, families, and the nation as a whole can shape public opinion against criminal behavior. These campaigns should involve civil society, media, religious institutions, and educational organizations to spread messages about the negative impact of crime on both individuals and society. The state's ability to enforce laws and provide services significantly influences the broader environment in which crimes occur. SAT points out that weak governance creates "criminogenic environments" where crime flourishes. Corruption in law enforcement and governance fuels criminal activities by providing bandits with the opportunity to operate unchecked. Strengthening anti-corruption measures within the security sector and public administration will reduce impunity for bandit activities. When government institutions are effective and transparent, it deters individuals from engaging in criminal behavior because they know that consequences will follow. SAT emphasizes the need for an effective criminal justice system that enforces consequences for criminal actions. A judicial system that swiftly and fairly prosecutes bandits sends a strong message that crime will not be tolerated. Special courts or task forces dedicated to handling banditry cases may help expedite the prosecution process and ensure that justice is served.

Conclusion

Nations can only thrive and develop when the citizens interact in a socio-economic environment and governing entities that are peaceful, coercive, mutual and secure. The rise of banditry in Northern Nigeria poses significant challenges to national security, socio-economic development, and the cohesion of affected communities. Using Situational Action Theory (SAT) as a framework, we can better understand how individual propensities and "criminogenic environments" converge to fueling crime. Weak governance, economic deprivation, and societal conflicts create environments conducive to banditry, while individual moral values and motivations shape the propensity to engage in criminal behavior. By addressing both the individual and environmental factors that contribute to banditry, Nigeria can mitigate this threat and restore security in the region.

Recommendations

In order to effectively deal with the menace of banditry in northwest region and Nigeria at large, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Enhance the capacity of the Nigerian police and military through better training, improved equipments, and effective intelligence gathering. Community policing

- initiatives should be prioritized to build trust and ensure that local knowledge is incorporated into security strategies.
- ii. Address the economic drivers of banditry by investing in job creation, particularly for youth, and revitalizing agriculture. Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and providing access to vocational training which will reduce the appeal of banditry as a livelihood.
 - iii. Strengthening governance at both the local and national levels . This includes enforcing anti-corruption measures in law enforcement and public administration, ensuring accountability, and delivering basic services to rural and underserved areas.
 - iv. Security reform must prioritize community based policing, improving intelligence gathering, and independent oversight mechanism. Establishing transparent monitoring framework will enhance trust between citizens and the state.
 - v. Disrupting the bandit economy such as regulating cattle markets, introducing digital livestock identification system and restricting ransom payments through financial monitoring. Cracking down on illicit financial flow will weaken the economic foundation of banditry.
 - vi. DDR initiative must shift from top -down government intervention to community owned framework that involve traditional ruler, youth group, and victim of violence. Reintegration should be tied to community acceptance and behavioral change rather than mere weapon surrender.
 - vii. There should be sustainable livelihood programs linked to Agriculture, Agro-processing and renewable energy that employ both ex-bandit and vulnerable youths will create inclusive economic opportunities and reduce incentives for violence.
 - viii. Localized communication strategies in various indigenous language should be developed, using radio, drama and respected cleric as messengers.

Through these comprehensive measures, Nigeria can begin to address the root causes of banditry and restore peace and security to affected regions.

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