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The Nigerian Condition: Farmers, Herdsmen & Politics

Introduction

From the beginning of time, human relationships have defined cultures, societies and nations. Nigeria was carved from several cultures, people groups, languages and environmental regions. As the largest populated country in Africa, Nigeria is forecasted to have a population of over 190 million and it is often said that one out of every five Africans is a Nigerian¹.

Nigeria obtained independence from the British Colonial government in 1960. Yet, due to military exploitation, Nigeria suffered under military dictatorship for nearly 30 years, which have crippled attempts towards effective democracy and have been aggravated by cases of human rights abuses.

The Problem in Nigeria

Nigeria's fragile existence has impacted its unity internally and globally. The years have been fraught with conflicts and crises and, as such, there is limited integration and economic cooperation. These can be considered crimes against humanity, or simply a threat to human dignity.

¹ They make predictions based on last known data from 2006, see "Report 2016: National Population Estimates" which is published by Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics.

Since Nigeria's Independence, human interactions have been met with tension and conflict. Nigeria has witnessed various ethnic and sectarian crises. The problems in Nigeria are numerous ranging from: human rights abuses, land disputes, religious intolerance, political marginalization, terrorist activities, resource control, economic retardation, weak institutions, lack of patriotism. Specifically, these issues have led to increased tensions between farmers and pastoral nomadism, ethnic violence and deepened fault lines.

Nigeria has wide-ranging and devastating conflicts: Boko Haram terrorists ravaging the North Eastern areas of Nigeria trying to impose Islamic control, continued militancy in the oil region of the Niger Delta, and the Islamic Shiites in Kaduna who are refused the freedom to worship in Kaduna State. In this paper, we are focusing on the continuous armed conflicts between local farmers and Fulani herdsmen have led to countless deaths and accusations of blame from both local farmers, as well as Fulani herdsmen.

The risk of escalation is high owing to constant migration of Herdsmen moving their herds southward to graze because of desert encroachment and the depleting watering locations, such as the Lake Chad basin. We have seen how the law enforcement has been unable to protect both local farmers and the Fulani from this incessant hostility and killings.

In January 2017, the Northern Governor's Forum (NGF) of Nigeria conveyed their intention to work with appropriate stakeholders to protect Nigeria's borders and register Fulani immigrants who enter with their cattle (Durojaiye, "Fulani Herdsmen ..."). The Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics maintains immigration reports of documented persons who pass through their control posts (i.e. either one of the 114 land borders or at one of the 5 airports), but have not provided the estimates of those who are undocumented². In fact, it only reports that

² The document, "Immigration Statistics (2013-2016): August 2017 Report", is interesting as it reports that there are more coming into Nigeria than departing, that, "The Immigration Statistics from 2013 to 2016 reflected that a total of 1,822,501 persons arriving Nigeria were processed by the Immigration in 2016 as against 3,275,929 persons processed in 2015. 1,209,897 of the person were Nigerian nationals while the remaining 612,604 were Non-Nigerian. Similarly, a total of 1,659,624 persons departing Nigeria were processed by the Immigration in 2016 as against 3,600,934 persons processed in 2015. 1,181,211 of the person were Nigerian nationals while the remaining 478,413 were Non-Nigerian."

75,000 “non-Nigerians” entered in 2016 through land borders, whereas over 500,000 entered via one of the airports.

Individuals longing to contribute to their local community and the larger society are often oppressed or have their human rights abused. The limitation of state institutions and other civil society groups are failing to promote individual rights, but even understanding federal laws impede the prosperity of humanity in Nigeria. We must ask, How can individuals, who are citizens of Nigeria, flourish within the structure of their government?

Pastoralists are comprised of the majority nomadic Fulani herdsmen, who migrate along with their herds seasonally. They rarely claim national allegiance and often have no specific homeland. Yet, after the jihad led by Usman Dan Fodio in the 19th Century, they were often assimilated into Nigerian culture under the title Hausa-Fulani.

Since the jihad, these Hausa-Fulani herdsmen continued along their migration and return routes without any severe conflicts with the local farmers they came in contact with. Minor conflicts on crops destruction by the cows were settled amicably with some compensation paid. Local farmers after harvest usually allow their herds to glean the farm from the stalks of the harvested crops and thereby allow cow/goat/sheep to fertilize the land with their manure. This understanding between local farmers and the Fulani has changed in the last twenty years as several clashes have brought deaths to both sides.

Since 1999, when democracy was returned to Nigeria these crises, conflicts and events have escalated because the politicians are holding on to power. They are manipulating the laws and security forces (e.g. police, military, etc.) to maintain their control, thereby even benefitting from these terrible events. It is apparent that the herdsmen pastoralist and local farmers do not even know their rights nor the responsibilities of their actions. The constitution protects and even punishes Nigerian citizens from the Local, to the State all the way to the National level. In the midst of all these abuses, individuals and communities are victims and need their voices to be heard. There are offenders who need to be brought to justice – from the backers to the perpetrators.

For years, there has been an ongoing feud between nomadic herdsmen and local farmers, in Nigerian States like: Benue, Kaduna, Taraba, Plateau, Enugu, Ekiti, Nassarawa and Bauchi³. The local farmers have accused nomadic herdsmen of chasing them from their farmland, while nomadic Fulani herdsmen say the villagers harass and attack them. The blame and the conflicts goes on and on. These are preventable.

In an interview with the Nigerian Premium Times, Saleh Bayeri, (a Fulani who is the Interim National Secretary of Gan Allah Fulani Association) rose in defense of his people, saying the conflict in Agatu, Benue State was a reprisal attack by his people, the Fulani, against the Agatus who he accused of a killing of a prominent Fulani man. In the interview Bayeri inferred that, "The [recent] bloody conflict in Benue was a reprisal attack by his people [Fulani] ... the Agatu [farmers]", who he infers were the aggressors (Mayah, "EXCLUSIVE..."). The fighting destroyed property and killed hundreds in the farming community.

Where there is law and order every one is protected. The law protects every citizen and each foreigner in Nigeria. Nigeria's Constitution of 1999 generally promises equality for each citizen. In Chapter Two, this is detailed by by stating,

The State social order is founded on ideals of Freedom, Equality and Justice. In furtherance of the social order: every citizen shall have equality of rights, obligations and opportunities before the law; the sanctity of the human person shall be recognized and human dignity shall be maintained and enhanced (Nigerian Const. amend. ch.2, art. 17, 1-2a.-b.).

For the nomadic Fulani pastoralist herdsmen whose cows are stolen, there is a law that prosecutes those perpetrators⁴. For farmers whose lands were intruded and crops destroyed,

³ This BBC article by Martin Patience is concise and informative on the subject of the herdsmen versus farmer, see article at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37021044>

⁴ This article sheds light on a significant development (see <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/08/no-identity-number-no-passport-2018-nis-boss/>), but there were other voices who condemned the plan as a diversion for other perpetrators (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/221804-pan-yoruba-group-afenifere-condemns-northern-governors-plan-fulani-herdsmen.html>)

there are laws that punish the offenders (Unah, “Herders vs. Farmers...”). Anytime a crime is committed against another person, the perpetrators must be held accountable. There is no justification for any individual or group of individuals to travel outside their home to attack anyone. Reprisal attacks should not have a place in a modern civilization where democracy is upheld as a standard. The rule of law must support and guide the process towards resolving conflicts.

Hope in Nigeria

The land that lies within Nigeria’s borders is full of resources and riches that can develop individuals and prosper the entire nation ... and beyond. Each region has recorded some measure of economic growth through businesses and industries, but the majority of the population is involved in the informal sector—such as petty trading, farming and pastoralism.

Underlying the pessimism there is hope. Nigeria has abundant human and natural resources that can create wealth for the masses. Nigeria needs to have a group of committed Nigerians and other nationalities that will join forces, resources, in order to give voices to the oppressed and minority groups in Nigeria regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender, creed, and social orientations.

There needs to be a vision that will create a community where rule of law guides every facet of societal interactions in Nigeria. One that promotes religious freedom, human dignity, rights to live, and the protection of the vulnerable against ethnic/religious persecution or government interference.

The goal should be to build coalitions with other organizations across issues that affect the vulnerable in Nigeria. Create awareness on the underreported crimes committed against those oppressed and minority groups in Nigeria. Provide accurate statistic on killings, persecutions, fault lines and other drivers of violence in Nigeria.

The frustration here is that many individuals are not aware of their rights stated in the constitution and many more don’t understand the ability to bear arms nor the penalties of

using such arms to kill Nigerian citizens. Compounding the issue of rights and penalties there are preconceived notions that all Fulani are militants and that they rate the same as Boko Haram.

The failure of government and by extension, law enforcement and security agents, have allowed these conflicts to continue. There should be a forum in which to address these concerns and hold the Nigerian government accountable. Furthermore, there must exist a situation that promotes accurate reporting and addresses the legal implications of the conflicts, which include property and life, in order to promote the progress towards reconciliation.

Additionally, there must be opportunities for the voices that provide advocacy for the oppressed and minority groups in Nigeria to be heard. These voices should promote fact and data collection by working with concerned institutions and organizations to provide information for Nigerian policy makers and the international community - with the aim of ending the hostilities. By giving a voice to individuals, public opinion will improve and there will be influence over policy enforcement, thereby improving and developing Nigeria's political and social systems. These voices should be networked and in collaboration with organizations and institutions to provide legal, social, physical and mental resources for victims.

Individuals and civil society organizations should have the ability to seek justice and compensation for victims by bringing their cases to the Federal Government of Nigeria, the ECOWAS court and the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

When a government does not enforce the existing laws or refuses to prosecute the perpetrators, they send a message to the victims that they are unprotected and that criminals go away unpunished. What would Nigeria become if the Nigerian government prosecuted those perpetrators who are arrested by law enforcement.

Yet, before that becomes a reality, there must be a drive to educate local communities and encourage the enforcement of laws. Additionally, attention is needed to address border security, which allows foreign mercenaries the freedom to roam. Porous borders affect law

enforcement agents who must impede Illegal arms into Nigeria. We must not be afraid to ask critical questions and promote justice for the victims and the perpetrators of violence.

Recently, Mallam Nasir El Rufai, the Governor of Kaduna State, has made statements to the media that should lead to the arrest of violent herdsmen⁵. Yet, the response of the government and those who have been affected is negligible. Overall, the humanitarian crisis has been poorly managed as victims have lost their source of income, their family homes, the lives of loved ones, children who are out of school, and many who are internally displaced.

Hospitals and public health clinics in these communities have been ruined and numerous religious worship centers destroyed. These persistent clashes between local farmers and pastoralist herdsmen in the various States across Nigeria have led to anti-grazing law bills.

Conclusion

Nigerian States like Ekiti, Benue and Taraba have passed the anti-grazing bill. These legal developments point to the fact that farm incursion by the nomadic Fulani herdsmen is a vitally relevant issue. The north-central region of Nigeria is where the conflict is worst, is also the food basket of Nigeria. There is a threat that a famine will develop as a result of farmers whose lands have been seized, destroyed or unable to return to farming.

The inability to handle such conflicts, migration and the subsequent human plight will begin to devastate Nigeria and, in turn, the African continent. If the conflicts between farmers and pastoralists continue, it could lead to Nigeria's collapse and, by implication Africa, too.

The world has had enough of the crises in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and migration issues in Europe. If the Boko Haram attacks, Delta oil crises, Biafra secession and Fulani/Farmers conflict

⁵ To his benefit, Governor El-Rufai listed his three steps to stabilize security in Southern Kaduna: (1) Restore peace and normalcy through enhanced security, (2) Prosecute all those involved ("No peace without justice") (3) Peace building – bring communities together.
<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nwest/221231-el-rufai-outlines-3-steps-permanently-end-southern-kaduna-violence.html>

are allowed to grow, there will be a massive domino effect stemming from Nigeria and spilling into the international community.

If 190 million people are in conflict, turmoil could run beyond Africa and into Europe. There is a significant diaspora community of Nigerians across Europe that could be affected and the potential impact could be enormous if this rising catastrophe is not tackled.

What can we do to address these existing conflicts and impending crisis?

1. Individuals and organizations that are working to ensure international norms on human rights protection is kept by all parties.
 2. There must be prosecution of those bearers of illegal weapons
 3. Prosecution of those who kill and/or destroy other's lives and/or property.
 4. Establishment of Middle Belt Commission/Envoy that will rehabilitate the brutalized citizens across the divides.
 5. Embolden the International community to prevail on Nigeria's National, State and Local Governments to uphold human rights obligations.
 6. Individuals and organizations working towards:
 - Building coalitions with organizations across issues that affect vulnerable Nigerians
 - Creating awareness on under-reported crimes committed against disadvantaged groups.
 - Providing accurate statistics on killings, persecutions, fault lines and other drivers of violence in Nigeria.
 - Advocating for religious freedom, human dignity, rights to life, and the protection against ethnic/ religious persecution or government interference.
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