

The Menace of Arms Proliferation and Banditry in Nigeria: Implication for Human Security Policy

By

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Abstract

Since the turn of the millennium, arms proliferation and banditry have become an intractable threat to some African states. In Nigeria, for instance, due to the easy availability of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in the society, the level of criminality and general insecurity have increased tremendously. Over the years, the activities of these arms-bearing non-state actors have resulted in the wanton destruction of lives and properties, as well as in the social displacement of millions of persons, families and communities across the federation. The major thrust of this paper, therefore, is to examine the nexus between arms proliferation and banditry in Nigeria, especially as it affects human security in the country. Using the Situation Action Theory as a premise, the paper traces the root cause of the menace in the society to the socio-ecological setting; which is further reinforced and validated by an individual sense of judgment and morality. The study adopts the descriptive and analytical method of inquiry to interrogate the phenomena; and concludes by advocating for a multifaceted approach in tackling the hydra-headed problem, especially the adoption of tangible socio-political policies that can combat the phenomena and mitigate its impact on human security in Nigeria.

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, the illegal trafficking and proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) has become a global scourge with huge socio-economic and physical impact in the lives of so many individuals, communities and countries around the world. A recent Report from the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA, 2022) states that there are approximately over one

billion illegal arms in circulation around the globe; and about 70% of it are in the hands of non-state actors like terrorists, bandits, cultists, insurgents as well as other criminal groups.

According to Lumpe (2000), arms production and trafficking is a multi-billion dollar business worldwide; and it involves a variety of political and business actors (including arm dealers, mercenaries, and government agents, etc) across the globe; whose major goal is to gain power and profit. Ironically, majority of the illegal weapons that usually find their way into the hands of unauthorized persons (like political thugs, militants, bandits, terrorists and other criminal groups), particularly in third world countries, are mostly produced or smuggled from other parts of the world.

Over the years, the problem of arms proliferation and misuse has transcended beyond national boundaries; and has become an instrument of violence, banditry, terrorism and criminality, especially in conflict-prone zones of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle-East. In Nigeria, for instance, SALWs are no longer the exclusive preserve of security agencies, rather they have fallen into the hands of civilians and combatant non-state actors like bandits, terrorists, insurgents and religious extremists (Ibrahim, 2018).

Furthermore, the excessive and uncontrolled accumulation of illegal weapons in the society, particularly in Nigeria's north-western, north-eastern and north-central zones, has led to the emergence of various armed groups and criminal gangs (like ethnic militias, drug traffickers, illegal miners and jihadists etc) whose activities cut across national and international borders. In this vein, Dokubo (2003) avers that the continued proliferation of small arms in Nigeria is not only capable of undermining the political authority of the Nigerian state, but it can also impinged on its ability to guarantee law, order, peace and security within the federation.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugee (UNHCR, 2016), arms trafficking and proliferation is a major driving force behind most refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) cases in northern Nigeria; and over 1.2 million people are directly and indirectly affected by this phenomenon. As articulated by

Aliyu (2021), in the last decade or so, majority of persons, families or groups that found themselves in IDP or refugee camps across the country are mostly victims of bandits or terrorists attack from within or outside their respective communities.

Another major factor that has increased the incidents of banditry and illegal possession of firearms in Nigeria is the ever complex relationship between nomadic herders and sedentary farmers over the ownership and control of farmland and water sources. This frosty relationship is occasioned by the adverse effects of desertification, drought, climate change and population growth, which has made many herders to migrate from their original abode in neighboring countries into the north-west, north-east and north-central zones of Nigeria for greener pasture.

Therefore, one of the greatest threats to many families, communities and local government areas in Nigeria today is the frequent kidnapping and indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians (mostly farmers, women and school children) by arms-bearing individuals and groups masquerading as bandits all over the country. For instance, since December 2020, Ojewale and Balogun (2022) affirm that over 1,000 students have been abducted from their various homes, schools and communities at mid-night by unknown gunmen; and many only regained their freedom after ransom have been paid by either their families or the government. Unfortunately, majority of these atrocities are mostly perpetrated with the aid of illicit guns and ammunitions circulating illegally in the society.

Definition of Terms

Small Arms: These are weapons designed for personal use; and they include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles, sub-machine guns, assault rifles and light machine guns. However, in this paper both “small arms” and “light weapons” are conflated into one and used interchangeably for academic expediency.

Arms Proliferation: This is defined as the sudden increase in the number of arms and weapons in the society beyond those needed for legitimate national security purpose, especially those in the hands of non-state actors.

Banditry: This is a type of organized crime committed by outlaws typically involving the threat or use of violence in the perpetration of such crime as thievery, extortion, robbery, cattle-rustling, rape, kidnapping, and murder, acting either in groups or as a lone ranger.

Conflict: Is a clash, struggle or disagreement between two or more opposing individuals or groups arising out of differences in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests and sometimes perceptions. It could result into heated arguments, physical assault, violence and loss of peace or even death.

Human Security: Is a comprehensive, preventive-oriented and people-centered concept of security which seeks to address a broad range of threats faced by individuals and communities within a given state. Indeed, it is a new paradigm in international security which shifts the emphasis of security from state to human individuals.

Theoretical Framework

In the last few years, unrestrained violence perpetrated by bandits and terror gangs against innocent citizens across the federation has continued to escalate despite government's efforts to curtail the menace. Until recently, many writers and commentators have erroneously attributed the source of the current imbroglio in arms proliferation and banditry in Nigeria to mainly ethno-religious factors; but, however, unfolding events in the country have shown that it is more or less an issue of weak governance and lack of institutional capacity which has cascaded into an endemic socio-economic and security crisis (Stohi, 2005).

Therefore, in interrogating these phenomena, this paper adopts the Situational Action Theory as its theoretical framework. This theory was first developed by the Swedish-born criminologist, Per-Olof Helge Wikstrom (2004); and it attempts to explain the motive behind every action, especially crime, by incorporating ecological, sociological, criminological and behavioural sciences. The theory views crime as an action that violates not only the law, but should also be seen as a product of the interplay between an individual's exposure to criminogenic settings and his/her innate propensity for morality and decency.

According to Akinyetun (2022), Situational Action Theory posits that crime is motivated by an individual's sense of morality and the prevailing situation or environment in which he/she finds himself/herself. In other words, an act of crime or any other social vices is a product of choice made after considering various alternative scenarios and stimuli presented by a particular situation. Therefore, crime could be committed when it is perceived as a worthwhile venture or a suitable alternative within the prevailing situation, especially when there is an absence of a moral guardian or civil authority to compel otherwise.

Furthermore, the theory argues that people's propensity to commit a crime varies, just as the environment also differs significantly. Therefore, the socio-cultural setting in which an individual finds himself determines whether or not he/she will get himself/herself involved in crime. For example, as explained by Abdulrasheed (2020), an individual who is struggling with multi-dimensional poverty (but finds himself in an environment without guardianship) and is presented with certain escape options to survival is most likely to settle for the latter alternative even if it will lead him/her to criminal vices.

Nevertheless, when applied to the issue of arms proliferation and banditry in Nigeria, this theory further expounds on the interaction between an individual, the setting, the situation and the action. Therefore, from Wikstrom postulation, we can assume that in any society characterized by criminogenic inducements, individuals are more susceptible to crime than in other places. Consequently, the increase in demand for firearms and the attendant bandit activities that ensued from it could be attributed to the interactions and responses among people who are victims of adverse socio-economic conditions in the society seeking for an escape route to exit poverty.

Major Causes of Arms Proliferation and Banditry in Nigeria

The demand for small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Nigeria is a consequence of weak governance, lack of institutional security framework and a high level of poverty-induced criminality within the society. In reality, SALWs is no respecter of national boundaries because once acquired and deployed in conflict situation, its impact is felt not only in the battlefield; but can sometimes

resonate in the comfort of people's homes, workplaces, playgrounds and worship centers.

Therefore, one of the major causes of arms proliferation in Nigeria is the porosity of our extensive land and sea borders within the West African region. Nigeria, for instance, has about 770 kilometers of shared land borders with Benin Republic, around 1,550 kilometers with Niger republic, 1,700 kilometers with Cameroon and 90 kilometers with Chad, respectively (Olori, 2004). Unfortunately, because of the unwholesome practices of our security agencies at the border posts, many of these illicit arms and ammunitions are smuggled daily into the country through illegal routes without any form of interception whatsoever.

Another salient factor that has contributed to arms proliferation and illegal trafficking in Nigeria is the high level of profiteering that arms dealers enjoys from the illicit trade. For instance, some middle-men involved in arms trafficking could make as high as 200 percent profit from a single sale of an average AK 47 assault rifle. Thus, because of the high patronage and huge profit made from the black market sale of these weapons, many people (especially bandits and terrorists) often scramble daily to join the lucrative trade.

Furthermore, local production of illegal arms and ammunition also account for the high volume of firearms in Nigeria. Initially, majority of these locally fabricated arms were mostly used for hunting and ceremonial functions in the villages and towns. However, with the astronomical increase in the exchange rate of the US dollar, many arms dealers began to patronize local manufacturers of firearms to augment the shortfall in foreign importation. Consequently, today, as reported by the Guardian (2020), over 40 percent of illegal arms in circulation are made by local blacksmith in Aba, Akwa, Bida, Nnewi and other parts of the country.

Also, the sudden influx of foreign nationals from war-torn countries in Africa, mostly Libya, Mali, Somalia and Sudan, has contributed to the high level of illegal arms and ammunitions circulating in Nigeria today. Over the years, majority of these illegal aliens, often disguising as traders, religious clerics and herdsmen, have infiltrated into our various communities with all manner of sophisticated weapons which they have consistently used to cause mayhem and

atrocities. Sadly enough, these illegal aliens are sometimes aided and abated by some unscrupulous Nigerian security agents.

Impact on Human Security

In recent times, human security has become a major policy issue and concern in many countries, especially those in Sub-Sahara Africa. In Nigeria, according to a recent CARE Report (2023), the human security situation in the country is getting worse by the day, due largely to a variety of socio-political and economic factors. The Report further affirms that currently over 25 million people in Nigeria are likely to face terror, fear and violence in the next 10 years if the federal government does not take proactive and pragmatic policy actions to stem the tide.

As stated by Patel (2020), security is not only a yardstick of measuring a modern state, but it is also the very bedrock of development in any society; as no meaningful economic venture or political activity can take place in an atmosphere of violence, criminality and instability. Therefore, in Nigeria, today, the human security situation have been impacted significantly by violent religious conflicts, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east; armed banditry in the north-west; perennial farmers-herders clashes in the north-central zones, as well as other social vices perpetrated by criminal gangs in other parts of the country with the aid of illegal arms and ammunitions (Brenner, 2021).

Furthermore, the easy access to and misuse of firearms in many villages and towns in Nigeria have adversely affected the agro-allied sub-sector of the nation's economy. Most times, bandits and terrorists often kidnap, rob and assassinate innocent farmers and herders in the hinterland who refuses to pay sundry taxes and levies forcefully imposed on them. In the long run, the unlawful possession of firearms by these criminals and other non-state actors within the country has further exacerbated the distrust and animosity that the people have towards the government for their inability to secure their lives and properties (Robinson, 2000).

Another negative impact of arms proliferation and banditry in Nigeria is the agony suffered by many innocent women and children caught in the crossfire of communal clashes and inter-cult rivalry in the various communities. In recent times, women and school children have become the major targets and casualties

in the unending crisis, as many have been kidnapped, tortured and gang-raped at gun-point. Therefore, as noted by Amnesty International (2018), even after the cessation of hostilities, in some places, many women and children are still afraid to return to their respective homes and communities for fear of becoming victim of reprisal attacks.

In recent times, also, due to the easy availability and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in the country, especially in the north-west zone, bandits and terrorists have taken over artisanal mining activities in some states of the federation, particularly Zamfara, Kebbi and Sokoto. Consequently, in the course of the ensuing bloodbath between rival gangs over the control of these illegal mining pits, thousands of innocent lives and properties have wasted needlessly. In the long run, the proliferation of illegal arms and banditry in the country have not only inflicted pain, fear and tears in the society, it has also engendered an atmosphere of insecurity in the entire nation.

Ironically, as a result of Nigeria's complex socio-cultural diversity as a nation, most individuals, families and communities in the country are intricately interconnected in one way or the other. Therefore, any physical disruption in her socio-economic activity often reverberates in almost every household within the federation. That is why Olutosin, et al (2020) asserts that a single gun-shot fired in the most remote village in one part of the country may directly or indirectly affect the physical security of other Nigerians living far away from the original scene of the action.

Past Policy Measures at Combating both Phenomena

According to the Chuma-Okoro (2019), one of the earliest measures taken by the Nigerian state to curb the illegal importation, proliferation and misuse of arms and ammunitions in the society was the promulgation of the Firearms Act of 1959. For many years, this Act was the main legal instrument regulating the possession and use of firearms in Nigeria, until it was reviewed in 2001 by the National Assembly.

In subsequent years, the Federal Government had on different occasions set up several Presidential Committees on the Illicit Trafficking, Proliferation and Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs); but over the years the

findings of these Committees has never been published, neither has the government released any White Paper on its recommendations. Therefore, for many years, the country lacked any concrete public policy as regards the regulation and control of arms possession, except for some occasional intervention measures whenever and wherever there are crisis in any community.

However, this attitude was to change in 2009, when the Federal Government made some tremendous effort to mop-up the volume of illicit arms circulating in the hands of non-state actors through the Amnesty Program. Consequently, many Niger-Delta militants willingly surrendered their weapons in exchange for educational scholarships, vocational skill acquisition and job opportunities in the oil industry. This gesture helped a lot in demilitarizing the creeks and waterways of illegal arms and ammunitions. Ironically, this same offer has been given to the bandits and terrorists operating in northern Nigeria, but only very few of them took advantage of the government's peace deal.

At the international level, the fight against the proliferation of SALWs has been a key agenda of the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) quest to maintain peace and security within the region. To underscore their collective resolve in tackling this menace, ECOWAS member-states in October, 1998, signed a 10-year Moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacturing of SALWs which eventually came into effect on 31st October, 2018.

Consequently, in line with Article 24 of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the Nigerian government in May 2021 established the National Center for the Control of Small Arms and Lights Weapons (NCCSALW) to help coordinate efforts and strategies aimed at combating the menace in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the functions and responsibilities of this new agency seemed to be overlapping with that of other existing security agencies in the country.

Conclusion

Indeed, the proliferation of SALWs and the activities of bandits in Nigeria have continued to pose a major threat to the peace, human security and economic prosperity of the country. As noted by Soatan (2017), although SALWs on their

own are not necessarily the cause of the conflicts and violent acts in which they are often used; but the mere presence of these illegal weapons in the hands of unauthorized persons and criminally-minded non-state actors creates fear, terror, anxiety and a sense of insecurity in the minds of individuals, families and communities.

Thus, in the last few years, banditry and kidnapping has become a favourable pastime and appealing illegal method of earning quick income and gaining criminal notoriety in conflict zones within Nigeria, especially in the northern part of the country; where weak governance structure, youth unemployment, poverty, social inequality and religious extremism have left many youths with little or no options for alternative source of livelihood, other than criminality and other forms of social vices to survive.

Consequently, in the course of the ensuing bloodbath between these two groups, which often involves the use of illicit firearms, thousands of innocent lives and properties have wasted unnecessarily. However, in the long run, the greatest net loser in this unending crisis is the Nigerian state; because over time the proliferation of illegal arms and acts of banditry in the country has not only brought untold hardship to the citizenry, but it has also instigated mayhem and insecurity in the impacted communities.

Recommendations:

Arms proliferation and banditry are very complex phenomena that require a multi-dimensional and multi-institutional approach in interrogating and combating. Consequently, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

- ❖ There should be an immediate and effective youth employment drive across the federation. This can be accomplished through the agro-allied and vocational skill acquisition schemes that will help divert the energies of the youths towards productive ventures, especially in the agricultural sub-sector.
- ❖ There should be closer cooperation and synergy between and amongst the security agencies (especially the customs and immigration services) of member-states within the ECOWAS sub-region. This will help stem the tide of illegal smuggling of arms and ammunitions into the region.

- ❖ Government should invest more in modern surveillance equipment and technological devices at the border-post to enhance security check on all goods and persons entering and going out of the various posts in the country.
- ❖ There should be a complete overhaul of our security agencies in order to transform them into a modern, discipline and professional security forces. This can be achieved by instilling in the officers the importance of protecting Nigeria's national interest at all times.
- ❖ Government needs to be more assertive and decisive in dealing with issues of criminality, impunity and infringement against the law that has plagued the polity for too long, especially on matters relating to illegal possession of firearms.

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