

# Nigeria: A country on tenterhooks

In the past one year, Nigeria has looked like a country on the edge of a precipice, ready to keel over and break into a second civil war. No country has ever survived two civil wars, many of Nigeria's leaders have kept warning. However, despite all the warnings, many Nigerians seem to have ignored these as the drums of war are sounding and getting louder by the day. But many continue to believe the country would still pull through as it had done in the past.

Since President Muhammadu Buhari's second four-year term began in 2019, the country has been embroiled in crises in such a dimension that had never been witnessed in the country's sixty years of independence! In that stretch of time since his assumption of duty, problems have so beset the country that it sometimes looks as if it would go out of sync, and all hell would break loose and plunge the country into the abyss.

One obvious source of tension in the country is the clashes between Fulani herders and farmers, which predates Buhari's administration that began in 2015. However, the violence and killings resulting from these have become so frequent under his watch that many people today think the marauders have felt more emboldened by his government. Buhari is a Fulani from Nigeria's north-western State of Katsina. The president has been widely accused of keeping mum because those doing the killings are people from his own Fulani stock, and as long as they have the upper hand, he allegedly seems not to care, thus making the attackers get more violent and brazen.

At the beginning of these clashes, it was mostly restricted to the northern and middle belt parts of the country. However, in recent months it has become a festering sore across the country. It has spread its tentacles to the southeastern part,

as well as the Southwest, arguably the most egalitarian part of the country, leading to hue and cry around the country.

Not less alarmed by the attacks of the Fulani herders was the country's leading writer and Nobel Laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, whose home was allegedly attacked by the marauders. The renowned writer is widely known to have his private home surrounded by a vast forest which was said to have been invaded by herders who shepherded their flock to feed there. The media widely reported in February that he was attacked, and this led to an uproar in the Southern part of the country. Many rose up to [call for an open declaration of war](#) against the herders for their temerity.

The Nobel laureate who faulted the police report that the herders did not trespass on his home area warned that security agencies need to be more proactive and neutral in dealing with such matters.

Soyinka has not been alone in the fight against herders getting bolder. Two governors from the same opposition party have also been at daggers drawn over the issue of herders. Governor Bala Mohammed of Bauchi State in the Northwest of the country has been at war with his Benue State counterpart Samuel Ortom whose state is in the North-central of the country. The state is regarded as one of the food baskets of the country. Farmers there have been under serious attacks by the herders in recent years, and many lives have been lost to the clashes, forcing the state to pass a law against open grazing. The passage of the law has led to serious verbal war across the country. For instance, Mohammed, who is of Fulani stock has openly come out to criticise his colleague for signing the legislation into law. He went ahead to defend herders carrying AK-47 riffles because, according to him, "The federal and state governments have failed to protect them", hence the need for them to carry firearms.

This has been thoroughly condemned across the country, leading

to governors and several opinion leaders calling for the governor's arrest for supporting killer herdsmen. In Nigeria, a governor cannot be arrested because he has immunity! But does this immunity cover what has been described as incitement and support of open killing by herdsmen?

### **Kidnappers' haven**

In today's Nigeria, the Northwest is regarded as the headquarters of kidnappers. In the last few months, many kidnappings and payments of ransom have been witnessed. This has made many to wonder whether this has not been turned into an industry and a lucrative business for some government officials who oftentimes broker the release of the victims away from the klieg lights.

School children are the main targets now as kidnappers often invade boarding schools and herd students into waiting vehicles and sometimes motorcycles to later demand ransom in return for their release. Kidnapping is a venality with a ripple effect. The Northern part of the country is known for its lukewarm attitude to western education, and these incessant kidnappings and payments of ransom have dampened the spirit of many parents in sending their wards to school. The UN has often said that Nigeria has one of the largest populations of out-of-school children, the majority of whom are in this area!

Although the government has not come out to say it paid a ransom for the release of any of these school children, the general belief out there is that a ransom was paid. Many have faulted this as giving the bandits the boldness to continue in their nefarious activities.

[The Halogeen Group, in its 2020 report, recently released reports that there were 262 terrorist attacks in the country in 2020.](#) Out of these, 4323 lives were lost, while only 35 arrests were made. In the same year, there were 416 cases of

banditry and 2861 lives lost, but only 83 arrests. There were 74 herdsmen attacks, 306 lives lost, but only 15 arrests. In the same year, there were 295 kidnappings, 186 deaths and 167 arrests. The figures are scary, and the government seems helpless.

### **Journalists as the fall guy**

How the bandits should be treated has also led to disagreements in the media as some prominent northerners are of the opinion that they should not be called by their names. Sheik Abubakar Gumi, a prominent Islamic scholar who has been going deep into the forest to dialogue with the bandits who have been killing, collecting ransom and kidnapping citizens, has come under severe attacks for asking that the bandits be treated with kid gloves.

The Islamic scholar in a recent television appearance had said, "You're emphasising on criminality, even the press are criminals too because they are putting oil into the fire. These people (bandits) are listening to you; you should not address them as criminals if you want them to succumb. Youths are ready to put down their weapons; now you are calling them criminals. How do you want them to cooperate? So, you have to show them they are Nigerians, that they should not hurt children, be law-abiding. This is the language we want to hear; the press should assist us in getting the boys.

He continued: "You see when we talk to them with nice words, they are ready to listen to us put down their weapons but when the language is about criminality, killing them, then this is what we will keep having."

Speaking in the same vein, a prominent Nigerian journalist and media entrepreneur, Kadaria Ahmed, recently in a widely circulated message which she titled "My message to Nigerian media" appealed to journalists not to set the country on fire with their reports. According to her, "Let me begin with a

question, what exactly will we gain if Nigeria descends into war? How does it advance us, if our fellow citizens turn on each other and begin large-scale ethnic killings against each other? Let me even assume that a few of us don't believe in one Nigeria anymore and want to see it broken into its constituent parts. How does enabling ethnic strife help to achieve this objective in a way that guarantees the outcome you want?"

In the long epistle, she made allusion to the role played by the media in stoking the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and warned journalists to be wary of those she called "extremists and the bloodthirsty" individuals, who through "ethnic profiling", have allegedly fueled attacks on certain ethnic groups. She warned that some journalists might "end up before an international court" for allegedly fueling ethnic killings through profiling of the Hausa-Fulani people as kidnappers, bandits and armed robbers terrorising people of the region.

This jeremiad of hers did not go down well with many of her colleagues who dismissed and accused her of leaving the substance to chase the shadow. Ahmed, not to be forgotten, is a Fulani herself, and many see her "appeal" as subtle support of her stock because they are now at the receiving end. Many asked where she was when the herders, most of whom are Fulani, were killing, kidnapping and raping people across Southern Nigeria!

Another senior journalist Dr Festus Adedayo took exception to Ms Ahmed's treatise and accused her of exhibiting "a very uncritical mind that is everything but the hallmark of good journalism. If you remove her byline from it, you would imagine that a Federal Government demagogue had penned that piece. It brimmed with cants, assumptions, sophistries and ill-logics that can only be provoked by a poisoned mind. If you were not in Nigeria and not abreast of the narratives of the cow that has engaged the polity in the last five years or

so, you would think that Nigerian journalists were in combat of strife and hatred against Nigeria.”

Such has been how divided the country has been under the watch of President Buhari. This has made many to wonder how he intends to stitch the leaking edges together without it descending into chaos that would wreak terrible instability across the country, the sub-region and, in fact, the entire Africa! What many are crying for is a president that would lead from the front. Buhari’s background as a military general had been bandied in the media as a plus for the country because before his coming to power, the country had been under serious attacks from Boko Haram and other terrorist groups. However, his past six years have not justified the confidence reposed in him. The country has become more divided than ever before under his government.

Will he be able to save the country from falling apart? That is the question on everyone’s mind.