

Bandits 'occupy' Kaduna-Abuja Road, operate for 4 days

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The risk of commuting on the Abuja-Kaduna Highway escalated in the past few days as armed men spent the better part of the week terrorising road users, a development that scared away a lot of people from the road.

For four consecutive days, bandits launched daring attacks on the Kaduna-Abuja Highway and the Kaduna-Birnin Gwari Road, killing three people and abducting dozens of persons between Sunday and Wednesday.

The highway links many travellers to and from Abuja and the southern part of the country with states in the North West and other parts of the North.

While the road is essential for travellers to or from Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano and Jigawa, it also serves as an alternate route for travellers to or from Plateau, Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe and Borno States.

In the face of the renewed attacks, President Buhari yesterday directed the nation's security chiefs to eliminate the threats of bandits and kidnappers along the 200-kilometre road in particular and other places across the country.

Daily Trust reports that after Sunday's attack along the Kaduna-Abuja Highway, which claimed the life of a former governorship aspirant in Zamfara State, Sagir Hamidu, bandits had killed a soldier and a commercial driver along the Kaduna-Birnin Gwari Road on Tuesday.

Hours after the states' Commissioner of Police, Mudassiru Abdullahi and the Kaduna State Commissioner of Internal Security and Home Affairs, Samuel Aruwan, visited the scene of the Sunday's attack on Monday, the bandits returned to the highway unchallenged and abducted more people.

On Tuesday, the bandits launched another attack on the road but were engaged by some police officers in a shootout.

A video in circulation also showed scenes from the fourth attack on the road, which was said to have occurred on Wednesday afternoon.

Security agents and the Kaduna State Ministry of Internal Security and Home Affairs, however, only confirmed Sunday's attack.

Eyewitnesses confirmed to our correspondents that the bandits had also burnt a military vehicle and absconded with a military rifle after the attack along the Kaduna-Birnin Gwari Road on Tuesday.

The source told our correspondent that the ambush took place at a place called Masallaci, close to Buruku town, in Chikun LGA.

A community leader, Mohammad Umaru who was in the convoy of commercial vehicles said the attackers did not pay attention to the travellers as they made it



■ From left: President Muhammadu Buhari flanked by Vice President Yemi Osinbajo (left); National Security Adviser (NSA), Babangana Monguno (3rd left) and Service Chiefs, during the security meeting at the Presidential Villa Abuja yesterday

clear they were after the security men. "People had to abandon their cars and fled on foot because there were many travellers in about 30 vehicles," he said.

Members of the Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), told Daily Trust that the bandits had broken a convoy of about 30 vehicles being escorted by soldiers to Birnin Gwari.

At the Mando motor park, Daily Trust gathered from the Chairman of the Bus section of the park, Suleiman Gora, that one of their drivers had been abducted along the Kaduna-Abuja Road on Monday while another was killed along the Birnin Gwari Road on Tuesday.

Another driver at the Kawo motor park also said a driver from the park had been abducted during Sunday's attack along the Kaduna-Abuja Road.

Police kill bandit ringleader who led Sunday's attack

Security sources told Daily Trust that a bandit ringleader who allegedly led Sunday's attack along the Kaduna-Abuja Road was killed in an encounter with the police.

Our correspondent gathered from sources that security agents had laid an ambush on five bandits around Kaduna South Local Government Area where the bandits had gone to buy alcohol and pentazocine, an opioid pain medication.

A motorcycle and a rifle, said to belong to the ring leader, called Yellow Baba Arusa, were recovered. Massive deployment of soldiers to Kaduna-Abuja road

However, in the aftermath of the recent hostilities, commercial drivers plying the Kaduna-Abuja Road told Daily Trust that there is massive deployment of military personnel to the road as at Thursday.

Daily Trust however gathered that no such deployment has been made to the Kaduna-Birnin Gwari Road where residents and security personnel are attacked and killed almost on daily basis.

A driver from the Kawo motor park who conveyed passengers to Abuja on Thursday confirmed to Daily Trust that armed soldiers have been stationed along the road to compliment police officers.

He said despite the attacks since Sunday, he has continued to ply the road, conveying passengers on daily basis.

"Driving is what I do for a living to feed my family and since the attack on Sunday, I have been plying the road, all we do is to pray

before leaving our homes," he said.

Another driver at the Mando Park who conveys passengers to Lagos confirmed the deployment of military personnel saying despite that, very few vehicles had plied the road on Thursday.

"There was an attack on that road on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday but I can't say there was any attack on Wednesday because I ply the road daily and so do my colleagues," he said.

Eight victims escaped in Niger

Eight of the victims abducted on Abuja-Kaduna Expressway during the Sunday attack have regained their freedom on Wednesday.

A member of the vigilante in the state had told Daily Trust of the victims' escape on Wednesday but gave no further details.

But the Police Public Relations Officer in the state, DSP Wasiu Abiodun said police operatives attached to Sarkin-Pawa Division while on patrol and clearance operation along Lukuma/Shafe Road of Sarkin Pawa rescued eight persons from Mangoro forest who were abandoned by their captors.

Abiodun said preliminary investigation revealed that the victims took off from Kankia town, Katsina State on Sunday heading to Abuja and were among the victims of kidnapping incident on the same date along Kaduna/Abuja Expressway. He said seven of the rescued victims are from Kankia LGA of Katsina State while one is from Ikara LGA of Kaduna State.

More Niger communities ransacked

Concerns continue to rise in Niger State as armed gangs extended their killing spree to more communities in Munya Local Government Area.

A local vigilante who spoke in confidence from the area said the attacks took place in Luwi, Kamace and Ikwa communities on Wednesday, though the Niger State Police Command said it had no record of the latest incidents.

"They have been operating since Wednesday morning. They kidnapped people and took 13 new motorcycles away, belonging to the villagers. But for now, we cannot give the exact number of people kidnapped until when the situation calms down and people start returning home," the vigilante said.

He said while residents fled their homes, the bandits were taking possession of the villages, from their base in a forest between Niger and Kaduna States.

"People have fled Luwi. Bandits operated in the village freely; they

cook food, slaughtered chickens and other livestock belonging to the villagers. And they were in the village until night unchallenged," he said.

Bandits set farmlands on fire over residents' failure to pay imposed levies in Zamfara

Meanwhile, in Zamfara State, suspected armed bandits are burning unharvested crops on farmlands over the failure of residents to pay imposed 'harvest levies', residents in the affected communities told Daily Trust.

Some residents in Magami, a community located just 50km south of Gusau, the state capital, told our correspondent that a maize plantation belonging to one Alhaji Dankoli was burnt by the armed criminals.

"They have asked residents in several communities in the district to pay levies and warned of possible consequences for not doing so. They have instituted themselves as lords here. We are completely under siege," a resident identified as Aliyu said.

In the same vein, Kanoma Birni, a community in the Maru Local Government Area of the state was slammed with N8 million levy before farmers could be allowed to have access to their farmlands.

The residents are calculating to see if it is worth paying because they know very well that the imposed levies will not be waived completely. They will see if they can pay something out of it for them to harvest their crops.

Despite the disruption of telecommunications services in Zamfara State, armed bandits are still attacking communities, kidnapping people slamming 'harvest levies' on farmers, Daily Trust has learnt.

Motorists have stopped plying the 50km Gusau - Magami Road since the brutal killing of seven policemen two weeks ago, citing safety concerns. They said the presence of the security operatives had helped in a great way in stabilising the horrific security situation in the area.

"No one is coming or going out of Magami now for fear of the unknown. Several villages in the district are literally being controlled by the armed criminals," a resident Aliyu Usman said.

"People have kowtowed to the demands of the armed bandits with many of the residents negotiating with criminals on how they can be allowed to harvest their farm produce. Millions of naira have been paid to the bandits as a

precondition for scooping harvest from farmlands"

He said in many parts of the state, crops are rotting away on the farmlands as farmers are scared away by the armed criminals.

"Those who have paid levies can go for harvest but if a farmer refuses to oblige to their demands then he won't be allowed on to his farmlands"

"Some farmers are parting with what they harvested directly offering it to the armed criminals if they don't have money to pay for the harvest. Some will calculate to understand if the total harvest is worth what the criminals demand from them. If it is not, they abandon everything," he said.

Daily Trust gathered that several farmers who attempted to defy armed men's 'order' have been killed or kidnapped in the last 7 weeks. However, the state Commissioner of Security and Home Affairs, DIG Ibrahim Mamman Tsafe (retd) said he wasn't aware of burning farmlands but is aware that residents are being intimidated for not paying levies to the armed criminals.

He said the state government is taking steps to address the challenge adding that the measures adopted by authorities in the state are paying because the armed criminals were pushed to the brink of submission.

Buhari gives marching orders

Addressing State House reporters at the end of the National Security Council (NSC) meeting presided over by President Buhari at the Presidential Villa, Abuja, yesterday, the Minister of Interior, Rauf Aregbesola, said the president had ordered the armed forces and other security agencies not to rest on their oars, notwithstanding the progress and efforts being made to eliminate insurgency, banditry, kidnapping for ransom, and all the other criminalities.

"The president said that we are not yet where we should be. That Nigerians deserve to live in peace. And that until we achieved that we will not rest."

"The police and other security agencies had been mobilised to intensify surveillance, patrol in pursuit of the criminals. And it's not only about Abuja, Kaduna, Yes, Abuja-Kaduna belt was discussed specifically, but we appreciated the fact that we are in the season of festivity. So all agencies committed to providing security for Nigeria and the maintenance of law and order, have been ordered to improve on their activities, intensify surveillance and minimise, if not eliminate totally any threat to law and order anywhere in Nigeria."

Asked if the military or the police would take the lead, he said: "Police, as I said, is the lead agency on internal security. So whatever I've said about maintenance of Law and Order will start with the police and then extend to all the other security agencies, certainly."

He said with the new presidential order, "There will be an improved response to all forms of criminality in any part of Nigeria."

Photo: Felix Onigbinde