

Bandits stranded, make peace with communities

By Abdulaziz Abdulaziz

As the dry season sets in and clearing the bushes that serve as hideouts to bandits terrorising communities in parts of the North commenced, many of the assailants have begun peace moves with local communities to avert counter offensive against them, an investigation by *Daily Trust* reveals.

The gunmen had been particularly ravenous since the start of the rainy season some six months ago, launching ceaseless attacks on farming communities in parts of Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states.

The attacks made a lot of farmers to abandon their farmlands, even as the gang leaders imposed levies in form of labour and cash on those allowed to access their farms.

The sacking of the farming communities has taken a toll on food production in the region with experts warning of food shortage and possible famine. With thousands of farmers unable to farm or harvest their produce, food price is on uphill journey despite the harvest season.

In their latest, "Hunger Hotspots" outlook, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations and the World Food Programme have projected that about 13.6 million Nigerians face food insecurity. The figures were 48% higher than the same period last year.

"The situation remains extremely concerning in the conflict-affected areas of northern Nigeria," the report added.

The bandits' olive branch

But in what appears a sudden shift, the bandits have begun to down their arms as they make peace with communities and order the chased away farmers back to their fields.

Daily Trust had penultimate Friday reported how a dreaded warlord, Ali Kachalla, made peace with the Dansadau Emirate in Zamfara State, promising to end hostilities around the area after a long siege. The Wazirin Dansadau, Alhaji Mustapha Umar, who confirmed the peace pact with Kachalla, said the warlord had agreed to cease hostilities in the communities and that had eventually paved the way for farmers to harvest their farm produce and for travellers to ply the dreaded Gusau-Magami-Dansadau Road.

"This is a clear departure from what was obtainable in the past," the traditional leader told our reporter.

"We have also warned our people to shun anything capable of derailing the peace process. We have suffered enough as a people. We are calling all the



■ A displaced family taking refuge in an abandoned cotton store in Maru LGA, Zamfara State

youths to give peace a chance so that the process will be sustained for the benefit of all," he said.

Umar explained that they had informed the state government about the process and called on authorities to organise a tour to the emirate to see things for themselves and plan on how to provide social amenities to the communities.

Not long after the meeting in Dansadau, another bandits' kingpin operating around Dangulbi, Kachalla Ali, had also convened a meeting where he directed villagers to harvest their drying farm produce and entertain no more fear.

"Ali is under Halilu Sububu and it was with Halilu's blessings that he initiated the process and declared peace in the area," a source familiar with what transpired told our reporter.

In both cases, like in other similar talks ongoing, the olive branch was extended by the bandits, *Daily Trust* gathered.

"Everyone was surprised when the bandit sent two of his men to the town and requested for a meeting with the community leaders. The meeting was held on Wednesday, November 17. He told the attendees his mind, that there will be no more hostilities; that farmers should be allowed to access their farms and Fulani should also have access to markets and anywhere they wished to go," a resident of the area told *Daily Trust*.

It was gathered that after the meeting on Wednesday, Kachalla organised a patrol team the next day, which he sent out to ensure enforcement of his orders, especially around the oft-attacked Dansadau-Magami Road.

According to the source, when the team uncovered that some bandits had attacked a resident and seized his motorcycle, the culprit was tracked down and the motorcycle retrieved for the victim while the bandit was taken away by the patrollers.

In the same fashion, the kingpin in Dangulbi area, Ali,

promised residents that there would be no more attacks or robbery in the area, said a source with knowledge of what happened in the village.

"He told everyone to go about his business and proclaimed complete stop to cases of motorcycle theft by bandits," he said.

Daily Trust reports that there are hundreds of bandits' groups with no central authority. It is therefore not certain whether all of them would cease fire.

Why they are making overtures

While no reason was given for the armistice in Dansadau at the time, it generated curiosity as to what could make the ferocious gunmen to silence their guns even when there was no gunmen amnesty anymore.

Fresh facts uncovered by *Daily Trust* show that the bandits are initiating the peace talks as a self-preservation measure.

It was learnt that with the passing of the shrubby rainy season, the bandits begin to reconsider their stance as the setting in dry season render them and their animals vulnerable to hunger and possibilities of attacks.

"They get relaxed and are more comfortable during the rains because the trees and other shrubs give them comfortable cover from the surveillance of security agents. The green pasture also means that their cattle will be in no need of food," said a security source in Gusau, the Zamfara State capital.

"Also because there are many seasonal streams in these areas, the criminals get fortified by them as their hideouts become harder to reach, while their livestock also need not to suffer in getting water. So it serves them very well," he said.

However, according to him, with the change in weather, the bandits are now out in the open and fear a fresh onslaught against them by security forces and the volunteer force, yan sa-

kai.

They also fear, he said, that with green pasture drying off in the forests, they would have to bring their herds around farmlands to graze on stalks left behind by farmers.

"If they did not initiate this process they know they cannot have peace themselves in a very short time," the source further disclosed. He however said the bandits were not repenting by this action.

"They just want to show the people and the government that they are now changed so that no action would be taken on them. It's just deceit."

But another source familiar with the activities of the bandits said the new peace move could be a tactic developed at a "general meeting" the bandits called where they spent days discussing over issues relating to their operations.

"It is possible they planned this decoy at that meeting because it appears they are doing that almost everywhere, especially up in the North between Zamfara and Sokoto," he said.

Many killed in NAF airstrikes in Zamfara, Kaduna

Meanwhile, just as the bandits fear the clearing up of the forests would expose them to more attacks, the Nigerian Air Force has upped its operations around bandits' camps in different locations, *Daily Trust* gathered.

Two air interdictions carried out on bandits' locations around Dumburum and Jaja forests in Zamfara in the past three days were said to be successful.

An attack, which occurred in the area on Saturday, targeting a convoy of motorcycles succeeded in neutralising 12 gunmen, it was gathered.

"Seven motorcycles carrying two persons each were bombed, only one of the motorcycle escaped the attack," said one intelligence source briefed about the operation.

In another attack on Monday, targeting a camp of bandits

led by a set of twins, popularly known as Tawaye, was bombed by another airstrike. Two twin brothers and unspecified number of their fighters died in the attack, *Daily Trust* gathered.

Their camp is said to be located in Dumburum Forest near the camp of the notorious bandit, Dankarami.

In another operation, the online platform with links to Nigerian military, PRNigeria, reported that airstrikes around Rijana, Kaduna State, have consumed many bandits.

The strikes, it was reported, destroyed an armoury and a building occupied by a kidnapping kingpin, Ali Kwaja.

"Bandits often use the enclaves as their staging points to carry out attacks on travellers and commuters on the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway," the platform reported.

There was no official confirmation of the number of bandits killed around Rijana.

However, local authorities in the area confirmed that there was an "ongoing operation by the military but we don't know if some of the bandits have been killed."

Fresh emissary visits warlord, Turji

Disturbed by incessant attacks around Shinkafi general area, especially targeting travellers plying the road linking Gusau to Sabon Birni in Sokoto State via Shinkafi, a fresh emissary has been dispatched to meet with the bandits' warlord, Turji.

Turji had in early November turned back a delegation from Shinkafi who had reportedly went to appeal to him to embrace peace.

A resident of Shinkafi, Alhaji Ali Mammam, said there had been incessant attacks on the major road as the bandits went wild since the airstrike, which killed parents and other family members of Turji's associate, Dan Bokkolo, last month.

The attacks have been on for days, with a resident telling *Daily Trust* that the gunmen were carrying out sometimes up to three attacks daily.

He said residents of the area however felt relieved after deployment of more troops on Monday.

Daily Trust learnt that the delegation left Shinkafi Monday afternoon for the rendezvous. The outcome of their mission is however unknown as of the time of filing this report.

"Among the delegation are people from Halilu's camp. It appears Halilu is now amenable to dialogue and seems to be working with some officials to bring around others to pipe down," said a security source in Gusau.

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