

COVER

Unravelling Kano's phone snatching menace

Morning, afternoon or night, looming fear hangs around the neck of residents of Kano city, especially those that use commercial tricycles to move around the city or even take a short walk from one place to the other. The harbingers of this fear are mostly teenagers, with a few of them in their early twenties, wielding local but dangerous weapons, mostly knives. *Daily Trust Saturday* takes a look at the issues and reports.

Clement A. Oloyede & Salim Umar Ibrahim (Kano)

From Bachirawa to Naibawa; Kabuga to Kofar Mata; Zoo Road to Hadejia Road; Sabon Gari to Gwale; Kofar Kudu (where the Emir's palace is located) to State Road (where the Government House is situated), almost all parts of the metropolis encounter the same problem as the phone snatchers continue to resurface in all nooks and crannies of the city.

The situation, in the past months, has grown to the level that the snatchers operate in the daytime and invade houses in various communities, a departure from their usual modus operandi of snatching phones on the main roads and in the night.

They have devised a new way of attacking people, which is to block main roads, flyovers and underpass in large numbers to launch their attacks without fear of the victims or any security personnel.

Most of the criminals, who reportedly operate under the influence of drugs, leave their victims with injuries, a situation that has led to a couple of deaths. In the past 12 months, at least five people have died following wounds inflicted on them by these young daredevils.

The situation is the same across many states in the North even though those behind the crime are called different names.

In Kano, the crop of teenagers and young male adults that have constituted themselves into thugs are feared by the residents just like those of neighbouring states like Katsina fear the bandits that terrorise them.

According to data from the state police command, at least 1,220 of these thugs (locally known as Yan Daba) have been arrested in the last eleven months (from February 19 to November 25, 2021).

While not all the arrested thugs are suspected phone snatchers, majority of them were nabbed for phone snatching and related violent crimes.

Most of them, according to police sources, have been arrested severally and at almost every time, their bails are quickly processed by politicians and community leaders.

Daily Trust Saturday had an exclusive encounter with two of the suspected phone snatchers.

Muhammadu Ahmad, 28, is a resident of Dala area of Kano metropolis, who is currently cooling off in a police net for alleged phone snatching.

His daily activities are smoking marijuana and any other substance that can make him 'high', and while under the influence of these substances, robs innocent passers-by in his neighbourhood of their phones and other valuables.

The lanky Ahmad has been in the "business" of phone snatching and sundry crimes for the past 10 years and was once convicted of the crime which led him to



■ Sharifa Shuaibu

spend one year in a correctional facility. But instead of coming out corrected, Ahmad learnt new tricks and became fiercer. Since then, he has snatched so many phones he cannot recollect the exact figure.

Though he claimed he has never killed anyone while trying to dispossess the person of his phone, he admitted that he has inflicted bodily wounds on many of his victims with his dagger.

"Whenever I snatch any phone, I sell it to phone sellers in the market. While some of them (phone sellers) know they are buying stolen phones, majority of them don't know. The money is always meagre compare to the real value of the phone, but I don't care as I just want money to buy marijuana or codeine and also to give my girlfriends," he said.

"My family doesn't know about this (phone snatching) but they know that I take drugs and they pray for me to quit. They know I am currently in police net but they don't come to visit me because they are disappointed in me," he added.

This disappointment is not unconnected with Ahmad's decision not to turn a new leaf despite several entreaties and interventions by his parents and other members of his family.

In one instance, he would have returned to prisons but for the intervention of his family members. His sister had called the police to arrest him after her phone got missing and she was not wrong as it was uncovered that Ahmad was the one that stole the phone and attempted to sell same to fund his addiction to hard drugs.

"I gave her the phone at the police station. That's how we settled and I promised them I will never do it again," he said, regretting that he reneged on the promise like he has done several other times.

He said he is mostly on the mountain top in Dala, an area notorious for drug abuse and criminalities, and it was there he links up with others to rob people either in their



■ Victim Aisha Musa

homes or on the streets.

"I started smoking when I went to Abuja to stay with my uncle. I have both western and Islamic education. Initially, my father was tired of my behaviour, then he sent me there (Abuja) to live with my uncle. It was my uncle that got me admitted into the school and I used to assist him in his business. That was where I started taking intoxicants.

"But when I returned to Kano, I linked up with my friends on mountain top (Dala)," he said.

Ahmad narrated that they move from house to house and steal whatever can fetch them money to get more intoxicants but mostly way-lay passers-by and with the aid of weapons like knife and dagger, dispossess them of their phones and in the process inflict wounds on them.

"This is the third time that I have been arrested," he said, adding that he did not turn a new leaf earlier because "At that time, we were too young with no sense of direction but by God's grace this would be the last time because now, I know I am a failure to my family and I have tarnished their image."

Unlike Ahmad, 16-year-old Usman Saidu of Jakara area of Kano metropolis admitted to have been involved in the death of at least three people, albeit in thug-related battles.

The Junior Secondary School dropout said he has attacked and snatched mobile phones from nothing less than 25 people since he started the crime three years ago.

He and his gang operate along Mandawari Road and Jakara axis where they stop passers-by and dispossess them of their phones both during the day and night time.

"We don't steal money. We are only after the phones because it is not everyone that walks around with money but almost everyone has a mobile phone. Young boys like us are our major targets because you see them with big smart phones.

"Sometimes, we operate in group because if a person sees us in group, he gets more

scared and give the phone without any struggle," he narrated.

Saidu, who said he was once arrested and bailed by his father, said his latest arrest happened just few weeks after his father died.

But before his death, Saidu's father did not know the full length of the criminalities his son is involved in as the time he had to bail him out was over a fight his son was involved in. He had no idea his 16-year-old son, who had since moved out of the house, could be involved in the killing of three rival gang members.

Like Saidu, like many other teenagers

The young Saidu, like several other teenagers in Kano, got dragged into drug abuse and other criminalities through peer pressure.

"I quit western education in JSS3 when I started smoking. How did I start? I used to follow my friend during or after school hours. We will cross the fence to a place behind our school (GSS Gwale) to smoke, especially during Sallah (prayer) break period in the school. That was how I started.

"I used to see these guys with knives where we smoke; so, I asked them how I could get one and they told me where I could buy. The first time I bought a knife was at Sharada area, in Kano," he said.

Asked how he transformed from thuggery to phone snatching, Saidu said it was also the same group of friends he smoked with that introduced him to phone snatching.

In Saidu's gory narration, a weird discovery was the fact that sometimes he stabs his victim without robbing them. He said he sometimes join in stabbing his victim for the fun of it or because he sees his group members doing the same.

Phone snatchers, internet hackers' unholy alliance

As if losing one's mobile phone and the trauma of surviving the attack are not bad enough, the phone snatchers have also begun an unholy alliance with Internet hackers to wreak more havoc on their victims.

Findings revealed that phone snatchers now sell the SIM cards from stolen phones to Internet hackers, who in turn gain access into the victims' bank accounts linked to the SIM cards and steal from their savings.

It was gathered that the hackers gain access into their victims' account by requesting for the Bank Verification Number (BVN) from the bank through the Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) which then allow them to carry out several transactions or use the SIM cards to buy huge airtime from the bank that is linked to the SIM.

Further findings revealed that some of the phone snatchers, who are 'kind', sometimes offer to sell the SIM cards to their victims before bolting with the phones.

In local parlance, this transaction is called 'Swapping'.

How phone snatching became a societal menace

Poverty, unemployment, greed or lack of contentment and lack of severe punishment to these criminals are the major contributing factors to the rise of this menace, experts, religious and community leaders opined.

"Lack of moral upbringing from the practitioners of this act is also one problem. Anybody who is observant of moral values will not engage in this kind of act," Mujtaba Ibrahim Abubakar Ramadan, the Chief Imam of Kano State Government House,

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