

Crime: Kano Residents Take On Phone Thieves



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Sat, 16 Aug 2025 6:24:04 WAT



It appears that a solution is beginning to emerge to address the problem of phone snatching that has plagued Kano for some time. Some residents have started overcoming fear and are confronting armed phone-snatching thieves, apprehending some of them with a bit of beatings before handing them over to security authorities.

Even this past week, residents of Kofar Ruwa in Dala Local Government Area attacked a young man involved in phone snatching, beat him severely to a stupor and handed him over to the police.

The young man had been terrorising residents of the area, to the extent that people began sharing complaints about him on Facebook to alert security officials.

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In Kano, fear and frustration have reached a tipping point as mobile phone theft became an urban scourge, forcing residents to physically confront snatchers, arresting and delivering them to security operatives. This grassroots uprising is in response to a wave of violent robberies gripping the city on a daily basis.

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In recent months, vehicle traffic areas, especially at hotspots like Kofar Dan'Agundi, Katsina Road, Gadan Kaya, France Road and Sabon Gari have witnessed armed youths disguising as tricycle riders or water sellers violently attacking commuters and other road users.

Weekend Trust reports that apart from nefarious activities during the day, criminals also attack homes at night, stabbing victims while snatching phones.

In Sheka Quarters, at least five deaths were reported in June alone. One victim, Yazid Haruwa, was stabbed to death in bed in June 11, while a student, Buhari Imam, was killed a day later in a similar manner.

Fed up with an alleged inaction of conventional security agents, vigilante groups and residents began fighting back. In Sheka, community members apprehended two suspects and handed them over to the police. In Gwale, indignant passersby set a suspected snatcher's tricycle ablaze.

Although the action has led to the cancellation of public transport routes and mass arrests, residents said it was necessary to reclaim their safety.

Recently, angry youths burnt down a tricycle belonging to suspected phone snatchers in the Sharada area of Kano metropolis.

The suspected thieves were said to have entered a private school, Al-Abbas College, pretending to seek admission for their wards but eventually stole the school proprietor's phone and ran away.

One of the staff members of the school, Sunusi Hamisu, said the two youths came to the school allegedly seeking for admission for two pupils they said recently relocated from Kaduna.

"I was the one who took them to the office of the headmistress, who referred them to the proprietor's office. The proprietor was explaining the registration form and school fees to them; when he turned to pick the form for them, his phone fell and they picked it and left immediately.

"Having realised that his phone was no longer there, he chased them, shouted that they were thieves and collected the phone back. They had already switched it off, removed its cover and the SIM cards.

"They had already entered the tricycle that parked outside waiting for them. People eventually chased them but the driver ran away, leaving the two suspected thieves, who were arrested," he narrated.

Hamisu said the arrested suspects were later handed over to the Sharada Divisional Police Station while the tricycle was taken to the school.

He added that furious youths mobilised themselves and threatened to break the school gate if the tricycle was not given to them to be set ablaze.

"We were left with no option but to allow them take it outside, where they burnt it by the roadside," he added.

Another eyewitness, Abdullahi Musa, said the suspected thieves were seriously beaten before they were handed over to the police.

“We in Kano have resolved that any phone snatchers’ tricycle arrested will be burnt immediately. That is the only way to tackle them. Enough is enough,” Musa said.

Abba Mahmoud Gwammaja, a victim at Kofar Dan’Agundi, recalled how a knife was held at his throat inside a tricycle, adding, “They threatened to stab me.”

Also, Hauwa Salisu Ahmad, who lost her brother during a Ramadan attack said, “We thought they were heading to prayer when they surrounded and threatened us with locally made weapons. They stabbed our brother and he died. I could not stand to pray anymore.” Similarly, some angry youths arrested phone snatchers in the Tarauni neighborhood inside a commercial tricycle while they were attempting to snatch phones. However, they ran out of luck as the youths fearlessly confronted them, caught them and gave them a thorough beating. Some even attempted to burn the tricycle, but swift intervention by security officials saved the situation as they took the thieves away from the possible mob action.

A similar incident occurred last week on Sultan Road in Nasarawa, where youths clashed with phone snatchers on motorcycles. The thieves were beaten badly, injured and then handed over to the authorities.

A resident, Nura Fagge, expressed satisfaction with how people are now confronting phone snatchers despite the threats they pose with weapons.

Nura Fagge, who had previously been a victim of phone snatching while returning from Kaduna at night between a motor park known as Tashar Rami in Naibawa and Sa’adatu Rimi College of Education, said the assailants were two men with knives who demanded his phone and he handed it over without resistance. However, he noted that if it had been only one person, he wouldn’t have surrendered his expensive device; he would have fought them instead.

“I gave them the phone because there were two of them and both had long sharpened knives. Even if I attacked one, the other could have possibly stabbed me. Honestly, I thought of attacking one and shouting for help, but it was dark, and there were no signs of people around. Truly, this attitude of daring the thieves as promoted by Operation Kukan Kura is encouraging and gives me the hope that this menace would soon end,” he said.

Another resident from Darmanawa, Abdullahi Hamza, said phone snatching was becoming a major problem in the area because many of the criminals come from the Sheka neighborhood. He, however, added that due to patrols initiated by local vigilantes, there has been some sanity.

He explained that their approach is simple: anyone caught is given a serious beating until he is severely injured and handed over to security authorities.

In recent days, reports of phone snatching and gang fights, locally referred to as Fadan Daba, have increased in the state. As a result, the Kano State police command launched “Operation Kukan Kura” to address the problem.

A prominent businessman and chairman of the Kano Eminent Persons Group, Alhaji Mukhtari Gashash, said Kano is a commercial city and allowing phone snatchers to do as they please scares off customers and traders, including international buyers to the commercial city. This, he said, was dangerous for the city’s image and economy.

He stressed the need for citizens to overcome fear and confront phone snatchers and street gangs to restore peace and boost commercial activities.

Gashash cited Lagos as an example, where residents often use car tyres to punish thieves with jungle justice. According to him, once a thief is caught, a tyre is placed around his neck and set on fire. He claimed that such acts had made phone snatching less common in Lagos.

However, the spokesperson for the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) in Kano, SC Ibrahim Idris Abdullahi, cautioned against people taking the law into their hands. He appreciated the cooperation of the public but emphasised the need to always hand suspects over to security forces.

He said, “Recently, along Kano Line, some people caught a young man with a knife snatching phones and handed him over to our personnel. After investigation, we confirmed his crime and took him to court.”

The police public relations officer in Kano, SP Abdullahi Haruna Kiyawa, noted that “Operation Kukan Kura” was initiated to fight crime and control phone snatching and gang violence in Kano. He said the campaign was succeeding because the public is actively helping by capturing and handing over criminals or providing intelligence information.

“The success we recorded in Sheka, where we apprehended a notorious gang member, is a proof of the support we are getting. Also, the young man caught in Kofar Ruwa, who had been reported over 32 times, is now in our custody; thanks to the help of the public,” Kiyawa said.

He added that the commissioner of police in the state, Ibrahim Adamu Bakori, was introducing new strategies, including community meetings and ongoing police training across the state to promptly address security threats.

Commenting on the issue, a security expert, Awwalu Durumin Iya said the public’s involvement, through the ‘new operation’, would assist security agencies in effectively carrying out their duties. He noted that officers could not work alone -they need the support of citizens, especially in sharing critical information. He added that overcoming fear would always motivate security officers and discourage criminals from acting with impunity.

Meanwhile, the Kano State Government is working to strengthen its Neighborhood Watch Corps to help fight against criminal activities, especially phone snatching and gang violence.

The Commissioner for Internal Security and Special Services, AVM Ibrahim Umar (retd), emphasized that residents must overcome fear and confront these criminals, while also supporting security agencies to successfully eliminate the security threat.

According to him, part of the state’s strategy is seeking public support and assisting security agencies.

Phone sellers at the Farm Centre market have also called on the Kano State House of Assembly to pass a law prescribing stiff penalties for anyone caught selling stolen phones. They believe this would protect the integrity of legitimate phone dealers.

One member of the phone sellers’ association who wished to remain anonymous said the group was already in discussion with lawmakers to ensure that the law is passed, which would clean up the phone business and curb the sale of stolen devices in the market.

He added that once the law is passed, those who buy stolen phones would be forced out of business, leaving phone snatchers with no market to sell their loot anywhere in Kano.

The Kano commandant of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Shafi’u Abdulmumini, assured that the command had deployed special patrol squad and increased surveillance at flashpoints.

He also said 44 offices and outposts of the command were on ground and always ready for action, adding that arrests were being made on a daily basis and suspects subsequently handed over to the court after investigations.

“The police are mandated to lead in the fight, but by law, we are also on it.”