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Sunday Magazine

Free grazing reserve at federal cattle territory

By Itunu Ajayi | 17 July 2016
| 3:02 am



Cows in front of the office of Head of Service, Federal Secretariat, Abuja PHOTOS: ITUNU AJAYI

Authorities Helpless Over Big Men's Cows

Grazing of cattle is not a new phenomenon in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Herdsmen and their animals

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have always been in the suburbs of the capital city. There have also been clashes between them and farmers, with the latter accusing the herdsmen of cutting down crops to feed the animals.

In its Sunday, January 6, 2013 edition, The Guardian featured an exposition on a clash between herdsmen and the Gwari, who are predominately farmers. While other residents were busy with preparations to usher in year 2014, the duo engaged in a battle of titans on December 29, 2013. After the dust settled, two persons were reported dead while dozens sustained injuries. More than 1,500 others were displaced, forced to seek refuge at the University of Abuja permanent site.

The new scenario in the FCT, however, is that the herdsmen, seemingly uncomfortable in the suburbs, have moved to the city centre. And they have become more daring, since the advent of the President Buhari-led administration.



Their cattle now dot the landscape, nibbling away at lawns that cost millions of naira, and meant for beautification. Sometimes, they can be found between residential apartments, devouring crops such as maize planted by house owners as source of extra cash. They also leave behind mounds of smelly excrement.

Residents appear helpless, as any attempt to challenge the herdsmen almost certainly results in the cowboys drawing daggers, ready to slaughter anyone that dares them. Consequently, the aggrieved person makes a quick calculation between his life's worth and maize plants, and chooses to remain silent.

The Federal Capital Territory Administration (FCTA) claims it has banned grazing within the city centre. The activities of the herdsmen, however, remain unchecked. From Airport Road to the National Stadium, and to the



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National Hospital, cows can be seen in their numbers grazing unhindered. They also have grazing rights in areas around Ministers' Hill to Kubwa Expressway. Indeed, anywhere grass is available, in and around the FCT, is their grazing zone. The CBN headquarters, the Federal Secretariat, FCDA – even the premises of the Nnamdi Azikiwe Airport are all fields for grazing. The Army also seems helpless, as the premises of its Defense Headquarters are not spared. Herdsmen and their cattle stray into security zones, causing traffic gridlocks, leaving behind trails of dung.

The former Permanent Secretary of the FCTA, Engr. John Chukwu, in a statement issued September 17, 2015, warned herdsmen grazing their cattle in and around the city to desist or face the full wrath of the law. The law, sadly, is still bottling its wrath. The statement reads in part: "Considering the improper grazing of cattle in the city centre and environs, there is need to halt further public nuisance and hazards to road users."

The administration said the practice has adversely affected the environment and must not be allowed to continue, stressing that Abuja is the capital of Nigeria and the window through which the world views the country. The statement noted that Abuja city is not meant for cattle grazing because there are designated areas for such activities in the Abuja Master Plan.

Though Chukwu's threat was not the first, he gave a directive to the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), to ensure full compliance. But close to a year, since the directive was issued, the agency still has its arms folded. Its excuse is that non-availability of mobile courts has prevented it from performing its statutory functions. Part of the agency's mandate is: control stray animals within the Territory, in line with the AEPB Act of 1997.

AEPB's Acting Director, Mrs. Omolola Olanipekun, was "not on seat" when The Guardian visited the office. She did not pick her calls or respond to text messages.

A source at the agency, however, said the environmental watchdog is handicapped, as cattle arrested in the past

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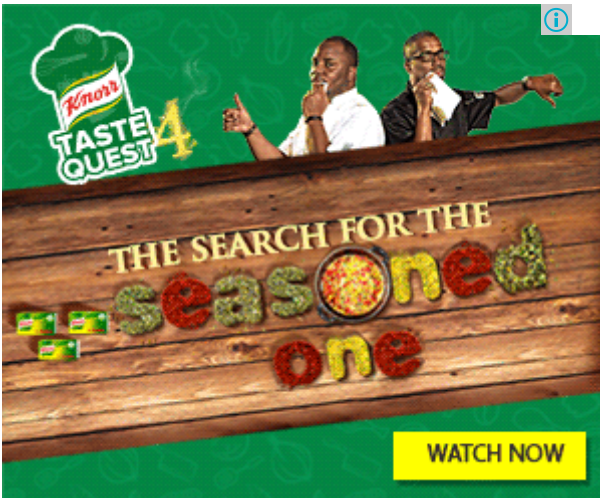


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were bailed by some big men in town. The source said staff of the agency are constantly attacked by the herdsmen and have often been cut with machetes.



“We all know these cows belong to rich people. You can’t imagine the calibre of people that come around to bail them when we make arrests. It is a shame. Our staff are being careful. Nobody wants to die on this job. We don’t carry arms. So, imagine us confronting these people with poison-tipped daggers and other weapons. I don’t know what we can do. Honestly, we are in a serious trouble. Considering the status of the FCT, they mess up the entire city with dung and it’s so annoying and irritating.”

Due to the frequent clashes between herdsmen and farmers across the country, there have been calls for a Grazing Reserve Bill that would allow cattle owners to build ranches, thereby discouraging free-range cattle rearing. To this end, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, in collaboration with some Portuguese partners, did a ground breaking of a 50-tonne/per hour animal feed. With another 20-tonne/per hour plant in Yola, Atiku said his desire is to have the factories in zones across the country. This move, he believes, will end the spate of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers.

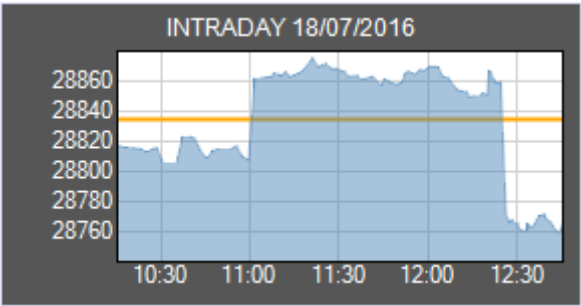
Finding herdsmen and their cattle in the FCT is a piece of cake. Some of them are as young as seven-years-old and may be male or female. The Guardian engaged one along Airport Road with the help of an interpreter. The herder insisted money is exchanged before he would talk. When he realised nothing of such would happen, he began a rant in his dialect. The name ‘Buhari’ was the only thing the reporter made out.

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this article: Federal Capital Territory Fulani herdsmen

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