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Nigeria: The Grazing Routes To Ethnic Bloodshed

By Edegbe Odemwingie

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*This report highlights political, tribal and cultural influences and practices that continue to fuel the perennial herdsman/farmer clashes. The situation is typified by a vicious circle of violence and mutual vendetta which has ravaged large swathes of the country's north. **EDEGBE ODEMWINIGIE** reports from Nigeria's North Central states of Nasarawa, Benue and the country's capital, Abuja.*

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In Alingani, the stench from burnt, decaying carcasses – of both human and cattle – was still fresh on a recent visit. Remnants of burnt houses were the only signs of human life in this settlement once inhabited by herdsman. A reprisal attack by farmers aided by Ombatse, the militia of the dominant Eggon ethnic group of Nasarawa State, sacked the Fulani nomadic settlers in August.

Although ethnic differences are often given as the reasons for similar clashes, access to land is at the root of these confrontations.

Triggered by desperation to protect and advance an ever-shrinking ecological space, characterized by resource-scarcity, population explosion and climate change-induced migration of pastoralists from the far North to the North-Central region of Nigeria in search of grazing fields, the country has recorded deaths by the thousands from clashes between predominantly Fulani herdsman and local farmers.

In communities visited, the feeling of frustration, suspicion and government abandonment is palpable. Our reporter is not spared. He is treated as a potential foe and a possible spy.

The villagers later relax and open up after our identities and intentions are disclosed.

"Komai na Allah ne. ko wonai fili na Allah ne, ba naku ba" (In Hausa, this translates as "Everything belongs to Allah. Every piece of land belongs to Allah and not yours". These words from a Fulani herdsman to a farmer were enough to spark renewed fighting between farmers from the Eggon ethnic group and Fulani at Alingani in Lafia local council of Nasarawa State on August 14, 2014.

In one account, a Fulani herdsman, Najid Muhammad Dan-Auta, 27, said crisis broke out at Alingani when an Eggon farmer accused a Fulani herdsman of grazing his land. At the end of the attacks and reprisals, the death toll stood at 60 according to Police accounts, with over 80 houses and properties destroyed.



11 children between the ages of two and 10, drowned in Guyaka River while trying to flee the violence that began at a farmland in Fadama Bauna, Nasarawa Eggon local government.

Dan-Auta speaking in Hausa language, recounted the episode at his herdsman settlement. "I don't know what happened. We were just

Uari-Auda speaking in Hausa language, recounted the reprisal on his herdsman settlement, "I don't know what happened. We were just returning from grazing in the evening on Saturday alongside some of our women who had gone to a nearby market to sell things, only to meet our houses burnt down with some of our animals killed or taken away by the attackers. The elderly men and women as well as children were burnt while in their huts. Only the children who went out on grazing with animals survived".

A survivor of the prior Fadama Bauna farmland attack, Mr. Mathias Danjuma narrated his ordeal to LEADERSHIP Weekend. "They (herdsmen) came from nowhere and started shooting guns. That day I managed to escape by the grace of God. I had to run among their scattered cattle which were running in different direction following the shooting".

Danjuma alleged that police authorities failed to arrest the situation despite formal complaints.

"On the night of the same day, Fulanis mercenaries, armed with automatic weapons invaded the village. They killed many," Danjuma reported.

According to the Nigeria Social Violence Dataset, which tallies incidents of deadly social violence in Nigeria, since 1998, herdsmen/farmers clashes have resulted in 3732 fatalities on all sides of the conflicts.

The clashes have peaked under the present administration. This year alone, 1075 deaths have been recorded. From 2011 till date, reported deaths from the clashes is put at 2,500. The Nigeria Social Violence Data in a breakdown shows: 2011 (210), 2012 (323), 2013 (892) and 2014 (1075).

In 2011 alone, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that 200 people were killed in Plateau State between January and April 2011. Between January and June 2011, 100 people were killed in clashes between Tiv farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue State, and over 20,000 persons displaced and scores of communities destroyed. Towards the end of the year, another 5,000 people were displaced in Benue and Nasarawa States as Fulani herdsmen clashed with farmers. Up to 10 people were killed in the attacks.

Death figures from clashes between herdsmen and farmers now rival those linked with the Boko Haram-led insurgency that has grabbed all the news headlines – local and international.

The clashes, driven mostly by disputes over land use, pits the semi-nomadic, cattle-herding Fulani people against settled communities that practice a mix of farming and cattle rearing. Nigeria's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Akinwunmi Adesina, says rising livestock population and encroachment on grazing lands were some of the causes of the clashes.

In addition to herds destroying farms in their grazing strides, local communities are also buffeted by large-scale commercial farmers.

There are also religious undertones to these crises. In Plateau state, the clashes have taken on a sectarian character. The indigenous farming communities are largely Christian, while the Fulani are overwhelmingly Muslim. Plateau state, which is ironically celebrated as "The Home of Peace and Tourism," has been fractured in recent years by Muslim-Christian clashes in the state.

Going by several reports of herdsmen encroaching and grazing their cattle on farmlands and the pattern of attacks on farmer's settlements and communities, the Fulani appear overwhelming as the aggressors. And there are allegations that the Fulani community is so resolutely committed to fighting their cause that they engage mercenaries, who are sometimes dressed in Nigerian army fatigues and use sophisticated weaponry on hapless local community members. However, there has, so far, not been any evidence of official sponsorship, although Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, a Fulani rights protection group, regularly rises in defence of the herdsmen.

Again, the inability of the law enforcement agencies to check the proliferation of Small Arm and Light Weapons (SALW) worsens security situations in the Northern part of Nigeria, leading think tanks, research groups, and advocacy organizations have repeatedly reported.

Findings showed that the nomads have benefited heavily from the proliferation of Small Arm and Light Weapons (SALW), which feed mercenaries and transnational criminal networks from Africa's volatile Sahel region stretching from Mali to neighbouring Niger and Chad.

A top Nigerian security official (not authorised to comment on the development) confirmed that the mercenaries have also been extensively used by the Boko Haram insurgents.

"There are classified intelligence (reports) that confirm that many of the reported Fulani gunmen are actually mercenaries from Niger and Chad. Apart from their (mercenaries) cross border criminal activities, many of them have prior battle experience in Sudan, Libya and most recently Mali," the source said.

According to the January 2014 report of the Journal of Educational and Social Research, out of an estimated 640 million Small Arm and Light Weapons (SALW) in circulation world-wide, 100 million are estimated to be in Africa, about 30 million in sub-Saharan Africa and 8 million in West Africa alone.

Futile response

"Our herd is our life because to every nomad, life is worthless without his cattle. What do you expect from us when our source of existence is threatened? The encroachment of grazing fields and routes by farmers is a call to war." Those were the words of a Fulani herdsman in 2009. They largely capture the mindset of an opposing camp in the second largest security challenge that Nigeria is grappling with at present.



At the other end, the sentiments of those opposed to ceding land to cattle herdsmen are no less extreme. Tordue Salem, a journalist who has covered the conflicts extensively, says host communities see the idea of grazing reserves and routes as “provocative” and “selfish”. He alleges that the move is open to religious and political biases.

“The proposal for citing grazing routes and reserves across the country is selfish and provocative,” he quotes sources as maintaining. “You can’t ask people in an agrarian area like Benue, for example, to cut out areas and designate them as grazing precincts just to avoid incessant conflicts with herdsmen. The proposal is simply provocative.

“Grazing routes would mean less farm lands and farm yields for a people who are predominantly farmers. That would also, go a long way in depleting the agricultural profile of these agrarian states and would adversely hamper food security in Nigeria”.

No one has been able to find a middle ground between these two extremities. And so the bloodletting continues.

In the absence of a well coordinated national response, states have resorted to their own initiatives to stem the tide of clashes. On October 20, the Major General (rtd) Lawrence Onoja-led committee on the Fulani/Farmers crisis in Benue State recommended a law to prohibit roaming of livestock. The committee also recommended the formation of community volunteer guard.

The committee’s report presented to the Benue Governor, Gabriel Suswam, called for a disarmament programme to check unauthorised use of fire arms by Fulanis.

The geographical location of the state, which provides favourable climatic conditions for all year round livestock grazing among other issues, are the major attraction for the nomads, according to the report.

Compared to the copious attention given to the Boko Haram insurgency by the Nigerian government, there is perceptible government aloofness from the herdsmen/farmers clashes in the country.

Section 14(2)(b) of the 1999 constitution places responsibility on government to ensure the security of lives and property. Yet, past and present administrations have not demonstrated the political will to halt the herdsmen/farmers clashes. The situation has given rise to a sort of pervasive Fulani militancy in central Nigeria.

Without a coherent policy to proactively deal with the phenomenon of herdsmen/farmers clashes, the clashes have escalated in different parts of the country, particularly in the middle belt region, including Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Kogi. There have also been clashes in Kaduna, Niger, Jigawa, Sokoto, Yobe, including Nigeria’s capital, Abuja. Down south, states like Ebonyi, Enugu, Edo, Delta and Anambra have recorded incidents.

According to the research, over 200 reported clashes in the years under review resulted in thousands of displacement, destruction of property, farmland and loss of cattle.

The government has thrown billions of Naira at the problem with no worthwhile results to show, with efforts concentrated on emergency relief.

For now, the policy of Nigeria’s government is the establishment of nationwide grazing reserves and routes. In 2009, a director in Nigeria’s agriculture ministry, Mr. Jinaidu Maina, stated that; “Nigeria officially has 415 grazing reserves but only one-third is in use; the remaining 270 have been built on or farmed.”

That year, the government began marking out grazing reserves across Katsina and Bauchi states in northern Nigeria, as well as the capital Abuja. The three planned reserves, to serve about 15 million pastoralists, involve demarcating 175,000 hectares of grazing land, building veterinary service centres, and constructing settlements for nomads to use en route, at a cost of \$247 million.

The government also began demarcating a 1,400km livestock route from Sokoto State in the northwest to Oyo State in the Southwest; and another 2,000km route from Adamawa State in the northeast to Calabar in the Delta region.

Five years after, the state of the country’s grazing reserves has remained unchanged. In April, Nigeria’s agriculture minister, Dr. Adesina Akinwumi said of the current 415 grazing reserves across the country, only 141 have been gazetted with less than 20 equipped with resources for pastoralists.

Although a presidential committee, of which the minister is a member, has been set up and given specific terms of reference aimed at improving existing grazing reserves and designing a new financing regime for them, the committee has been remarkable for its inactivity.

However, the Nigerian government earmarked the sum of N10 billion for the operation of the Great Green Wall Programme (GGWP), in an effort to boost the fight against desert encroachment, a major factor that has driven pastoralists from the far North to the North-Central region of Nigeria in search of grazing fields

From 2011-2014, an analysis of the agriculture ministry’s capital budget shows inconsistent allocation to the development of grazing routes and reserves.

In 2011, the agriculture ministry allocated N31, 404,899,584 for capital projects. It channelled N310, 489,185 for its National Grazing Reserves and Pasture Development Programme that year.

Of the ministry's N45,009,990,000 capital budget for 2012, a total N930,000,000 was allocated to the development of grazing reserves, stock routes (1140km) and resting points across Nigeria.

In 2013 and 2014, the ministry allocated N130,582,000 and N100,130,000 respectively from its N50,808,871,428 and N35,151,172,583 capital budgets in the year under review for countrywide grazing reserves development.

Bloody clashes between these herdsmen and farmers continue to occur in several parts of the country.

The Nigerian government's response to the violence tends to oscillate between the use of military force and mediation by eminent persons when a crisis erupts. The latter are engaged to hold consultative meetings in conflict situations or appointed into peace commissions of inquiry.

When military forces are deployed to contain particular spikes in the violence, the treatment of the civil population has itself become a critical political and security challenge. Several accounts report excessive use of force, extra-judicial killings and other human rights abuses.

Both efforts have failed as clashes have continued unabated over the years. According to findings, there has not been any political will to implement the reports of the several commissions of inquiry.

Between 2002 and 2010, the federal government appointed four commissions to investigate the violent conflict (largely herdsmen/farmer) around Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue States: Justice Okpene Judicial Commission of inquiry into communal conflicts in Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba states in 2002; Presidential Peace Initiative Committee on Plateau State, headed by Shehu Idris, Emir of Zazzau, May 2004; Federal administrative panel of inquiry into the 2008 crisis, headed by Major General Emmanuel Abisoye; and Presidential Advisory Committee on the Jos Crisis, headed by Solomon Lar in 2010.

International attention

The herdsmen/farmers clashes has attracted international attention. To this end, this report was produced with support from Partners for Democratic Change and from the Institute for War & Peace Reporting. It is part of the Access Nigeria/Sierra Leone program funded by the United States Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement.

KEY POINTS



As contained in the Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) report, "The State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012", estimates of casualties vary.

The perennial tensions between herders and farmers over land and water use have become more complicated as the two occupational groups are on opposite sides of the ethno-religious fault lines, MRGI reports.

"Attacks perpetrated by suspected members of the Boko Haram Islamist group, which launched several suicide attacks in Nigeria, including the August bombing of the UN office in Abuja, have increasingly targeted farming communities in dispute with pastoralists. The ethnic and religious dimensions of the conflict appear to be overshadowing the underlying basis, which is competition over natural resources. The government has focused on so-called anti-terrorism campaigns while failing to address resource depletion and ethnic conflict in the country, particularly between minority groups," the report says.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) in December 2013 said clashes in central Nigeria had killed 3,000 people since 2010, accusing Nigerian authorities of ignoring the violence, a charge they denied.

Shrinking spaces

The report's findings revealed that the herder/farmer conflict typifies the resource conflict that thrives in an atmosphere of ecological scarcity and competition, as well as livelihood crisis. The conflict is evidently accentuated by the global trend of climate change which has led to the shrinking of ecological space and resources, leading to intense pressure on, and competition for, the available resources.

Accordingly, the spiralling migration of pastoralists from the country's far North towards the central part of the country has resulted in tense relations between the Fulani herdsmen and the settled native farmers. As a result, there is a desperate and violent struggle for access to and control of scarce ecological space and resources.

According to official figures, in Nigeria, more than 35 per cent of land area of 923,768 square kilometres is threatened by desertification affecting the livelihoods of more than 40 million people.

During the harmattan, the land is dry in most of the country's far North. With no grasses for cattle to feed their herds and the soil too dry to sustain cropping, the herdsmen have no option than to move down South for greener pasture. The herdsmen leave the far North (an extremist kind across the country's northern borders from Niger and Chad) during the harmattan season, usually during the end of the year and travels long distance by foot, covering hundreds of kilometres stretching the central to the Southern part of the country in search of grazing lands to feed the herds.

An expedition from Sokoto in the country's deep north to Oyo state, down south will take four months on foot through the various cattle routes.

The dangers along the grazing routes are typical. Herdsmen are routinely attacked by cattle rustlers and farming communities. But neither the distance nor the dangers that line the route has stopped the nomads from their traditional occupation.

The social standing of a Fulani herdsman depends on the number of cattle he possesses. Hence, the herdsman guards his cattle jealously and fights anybody who tries to harm his animals.

The attachment is evident in the custom of paying condolence to a Fulani man who loses his cattle probably as a result of communal strife or death arising from an epidemic.

A poisoned dagger is the herdsman's favourite weapon of choice. As a deterrent, the herdsmen are well armed and move around with sticks, daggers, cutlasses, bows and arrows, swords and other dangerous weapons to protect themselves against any attack. The herdsmen also move around with amulets and charms for protection for themselves and their animals

Traditional beliefs continue to fuel the farmer/herder clashes. Some herdsmen believed that, when their animals feed on fresh crops, they will remain healthy, well fed and be able to resist certain illnesses associated with dry season.

The fractured relationship between herders and farmers is sometimes relaxed for mutual business transactions. In some Northern states, farmers contract herdsmen to stay in their farms with their cattle after the farming season. This is mainly for the manure.

In a report, "Global Overview 2014: people internally displaced by conflict and violence," by the Internal Displaced Monitoring Centre (IDMC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), there are 3.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria and 470,500 individuals were displaced in 2013 alone.

The report explains the unprecedented rise in IDPs in Nigeria last year by the increased number of Boko Haram attacks, heavy-handed counter insurgency operations, and ongoing inter-communal violence typified by clashes between farmers and herdsmen over grazing lands in states such as Benue, Taraba, Zamfara and parts of Kaduna.

In April, the Nigerian government's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) set up 11 camps for over 100,000 people displaced in eight local governments in Benue State, central Nigeria.

A Modern Nomad?



Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN)

The August 2014 report of a National Conference which discussed Nigeria's future decided that "in the long term" cattle routes and grazing reserves should be "phased out" to lay emphasis on ranching. It however identified cattle rustling as a disincentive to ranching and called for "better policing".

"In the meantime", the report urged states which have large livestock populations to maintain grazing reserves. The Conference decided that government embarks on a contentious "modernisation programme" in which nomadic herdsmen will be integrated into settled communities based on established cattle ranches with fodder development technologies, and including abattoirs, processors and other businesses along the livestock value chain.

Funding for the proposed 5 to 10 years' programme should be from both federal and state governments in states where such settlements are established, the report decided.

"The integrated development program should be undertaken and wrapped up within a period of 5 to 10 years after which such settlements should have become self-sustaining with the full integration of the nomadic herdsmen community into modern Nigeria political economy"

The conference decided that traditional institutions should be primarily responsible for the conflict resolution between the Herdsmen and Farmers, and also their respective Associations where resolutions has failed, then the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Centre

should be their last resort.

In September, Fulani rights protection group, Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, appealed to federal and state governments to establish a grazing reserve commission to enable its members own land and be issued with Certification of Occupancy (C of O) all over the country.

The issue of grazing sites have split most segments of the society on divergent lines. Opponents say it would be counter-productive, while the proponents insist grazing reserves and ranching were in line with standard best practice that ensured maximum benefit to nomads.

On renewed clashes between farmers and Fulani herdsmen in Benue and Nasarawa states, former president Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) said on August 30, "The farmers would want their crops to be protected, while the cattleman will also want their cattle to feed. So the government should fashion out peaceful means to end the crisis."

Political gains

The legal adviser to the Ombatse cultural group in the state, Zechariah Zamani Alumaga, reported that the influx of "Fulani mercenaries" into Nasarawa state is for the governor's political gains.

Alumaga was referring to displaced persons from neighbouring states who are camped in Danka and Kwandere in Nasarawa and reportedly fuelling the renewed conflict in the state.



The Nasarawa State House of Assembly also accuses the state Governor, Tanko Al-Makura of sponsoring the violence. The lawmakers accused the governor of engaging the services of Fulani mercenaries to unleash havoc in the state, with the intention of holding onto power beyond 2015.

"The governor planned, incubated and hatched the crisis. You cannot impregnate a woman and deny the child. Let him face it," the Assembly spokesman, Mohammed Baba Ibaku stated.

Even though the camps exist, the paper could not independently verify the credibility or otherwise of the allegations. The governor's spokesman when contacted rubbished the report as "malicious and unfortunate".

"I know those who are involved in the crisis and we are not going to spare anybody including the politicians who are behind the persistent ethnic insurgency in the state," the governor himself stated in reaction to the indictment of 58 persons by a commission of enquiry on the killings in Nasarawa.

Ethnic violence tends to worsen around election time — Nigeria faces governorship, parliamentary and presidential polls in February 2015 — as politicians exploit ethnic rivalries to cement their power bases.

Going by global standards, nomadic grazing is outdated. The Fulani herdsmen must learn ranching techniques to avoid unnecessary running battles over destroyed farmland, exposure to rustlers all causes of unending murderous rampage.

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