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## Herdsmen or killer squads?

Posted by: Dare Odufowokan in Sunday magazine 2 days ago

As the body count arising from clashes between farmers and cattle herders grows across the country, Dare Odufowokan, Assistant Editor, probes the increasingly bloody conflicts and how to resolve them.

HE age-long land disputes and fresh disagreements over grazing rights between nomadic cattle-keeping communities and farmers across the country have become worrisome. Many lives have been lost to the point that the international human rights organisations have become worried too. Rough estimates have put the death toll at about 2000!

The menace of the rampaging herdsmen are such that in Benue and Plateau states in the north-central of the country, their activities have been likened to a genocide on the native Tiv, Idoma, Berom, Angas, Kwalla and Taroh people. In recent months, the marauders have carried out their deadliest campaigns ever, descending on villages after villages while bearing AK 47 rifles and other sophisticated weapons, and leaving only after they have raped women, slaughtered hundreds of people, razed houses and destroyed whole villages.

The situation has become so grim that the Catholic community in Benue State earlier in the year asked President Goodluck Jonathan and Governor Gabriel Suswam to find solutions to the on-going killings of innocent people by suspected Fulani herdsmen in the state to prevent further loss of lives and property. Catholic Bishops of Gboko, Otukpo, Makurdi and Katsina-Ala Dioceses, Most Reverends Williams Avenya, Michael Apochi, Athanasius Usuh, and Peter Adoboh, respectively made the call at joint news conference in Abuja.

### A call for help

In their statement, they pleaded, "We call on both the president and governor of Benue State as Chief Security Officers, CSOs, to take responsibility of security in Benue State." But rather than for the killings to abate in the two worst-hit states after the plea, things got worse. Perhaps emboldened by the successes of their gory escapades over the years, the killer band extended their tentacles across the borders into Kaduna State earlier this month as heavily armed Fulani herdsmen attacked several villages in Southern Kaduna killing at least 100 villagers in an early morning massacre.

The attacks took place in Moro'a Chiefdom in Kaura local government area of the state. Residents of Me-sankwai, Tekum and Ungwan Gatah villages all under the Moro'a Chiefdom were reportedly woken from

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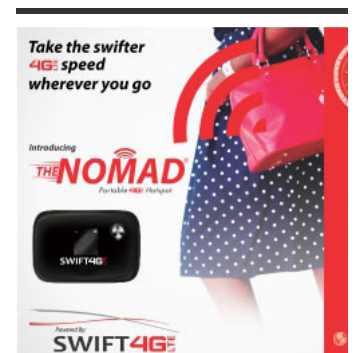
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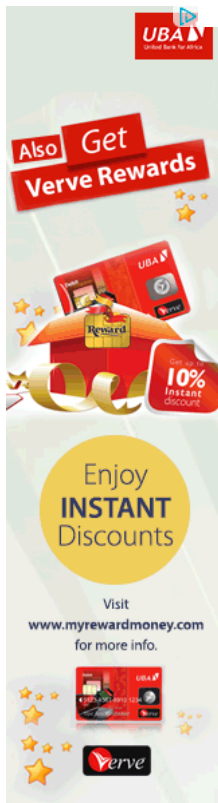
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### March 2014

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						
« Feb						

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Archive 1 (2006-2008)

Archive 2 (articles before  
June 22nd 2010)

Archive 3 (articles before  
April 16 2011)

Archive 4 (articles between  
April 2011 and September  
20, 2012)

sleep in the early morning raid by Fulani attackers with several men, women and children massacred. Several homes were also set on fire by the rampaging attackers. Some eyewitnesses stated that some villagers were simply burnt in their homes.

A villager who lost family members said, "They took scores of our people with them into forests in all the villages; this is not fiction but the reality of our predicament. Please, help us let the whole world know because the security agencies and the government are suppressing information about our communities. We are mourning, they came around 11pm when we were sleeping and started attacking until around 2am. There was no security presence or protection."

And in the weeks that followed that brazen attack, armed Fulani herdsmen slaughtered not less than 113 people in nearby Katsina State on the same day the president visited the state. According to reports, the attackers were ethnic Fulani cattle herders who have a history of tension with local farmers and rode on motorcycles into the villages in broad daylight, killing whoever was on sight.

Abdullahi Abbas Machika, a lawmaker, said 47 people were buried in one village alone in Katsina State after the attack. Reports quoted the State Police Commissioner, Huri Mohammed, as saying "The victims include men, women and children. Rescue teams are still combing nearby bushes [to] search for more bodies."

### Requiem after murder

A month earlier, during a requiem after yet another gruesome attack in Plateau State, the Interfaith Mediation Centre's Community Peace Action Network had issued a February 24 bulletin calling attention to "incessant attacks by unknown gunmen," despite a large, official security presence.

It catalogues the recent carnage thus:

\*February 20 attack on a village with 13 killed and nine injured.

\*February 21 attack; nine children, two women and two men were killed.

The killings are blamed on Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen and the victims are Christian Berom farmers as usual. This is a familiar pattern. A new scenario, however, seems to be that the killers are wearing army uniforms and move about in trucks painted in army colours.

A few days after the requiem, the burial party had to be summoned again after no fewer than 30 people were again killed and 25 others injured when gunmen struck at Shonong in Bachit District of the Riyom Local Government Area of Plateau State. Over 40 houses were torched by the gunmen believed to be Fulani cattle rearers. Also affected were domestic animals belonging to the villagers.

The attackers were said to have stormed the village around 7am on Monday in a commando-like manner, shooting sporadically. Those killed were caught in the pandemonium that followed staccato bursts of gunfire. Shom Toma, one of the survivors, who received treatment at the Vom Christian Hospital, Jos, told journalists that the attackers numbering over 100 struck at a time most of the villagers had gone to their farms. Toma said he was moulding some blocks near his house when he heard gunshots. He said most of the victims were children and elderly people.

For years unending, the state has tasted the bitter pills of attacks by herdsmen. In July, 2012, the then chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Senator Dantong Gyang Dalyop and Gyang Fulani, the Majority Leader of the Plateau State House of Assembly, were among the many people murdered during a mass funeral in the Barakin-Ladi local Government Area of the state. A member of the House of Representatives, Simon Davou Mwakwkwon, was badly injured in the attack. The funeral had hardly been concluded when heavily armed men in military uniform descended on the mourners, gunning them down at point blank range.

On February 20, 2014, gunmen, suspected to be Fulani herdsmen, had invaded Wase Local Government Area of Plateau State, killing no fewer than 20 persons and setting many houses on fire. This came barely 48 hours after two villages were attacked in Riyom Local Government Area, leaving 30 people including two policemen dead.

According to sources, the gunmen stormed Mavo village in Wase Local Government in the early hours shooting at the inhabitants and killing some with the use of cutlasses. Sources said over 10 houses were razed by the attackers. It was said that the gunmen stormed the village at about 2 am when many of the residents had gone to bed.

This development made youths in the community to troop out to protest the killings but were forced to return to their homes by security operatives who insisted that such an action would lead to further bloodshed. Constant clashes between the Taroh and the Fulanis had been witnessed in the last few months and they were believed to have been curbed with meetings organised by the security agencies in the state with the major stakeholders from the two camps.

The gory tale continued in neighbouring Benue State as 36 innocent Nigerians were murdered in Gbajimba town, the headquarters of Guma local government area of Benue State, gunmen suspected to be Fulani herdsmen killed no fewer than 36 people last Wednesday. Churches and schools were burnt, just as shops and some government properties including the secretariat situated in the centre of the town were torched. The place is now totally deserted.

The supervising Minister of Aviation and Minister of State for Trade and Investment, Mr Samuel Ortom, hails from the affected local government area of the state. Until Wednesday, Gbajimba was the only place that was yet to be attacked in the entire local government area. Since the day Governor Gabriel Suswam's



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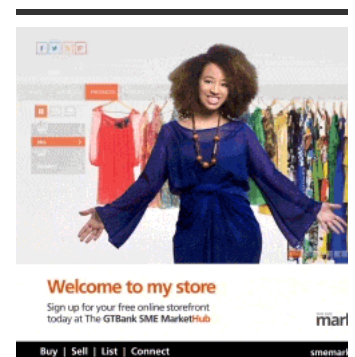
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convoy was attacked in the area, the homes of Ortom and commissioner for lands and survey, Mr John Tondo, have been destroyed.

It was gathered that, about noon on the fateful day, the invaders stormed the council headquarters in broad daylight, shooting and burning houses in the process. The council chairman, Frank Usa- Adi, who narrated the incident at the Accident and Emergency wing of the Benue State University Teaching Hospital, Makurdi, said the attackers shot sporadically and killed scores of people. Adi, who escaped death by a whisker, accused the police of showing levity. The gunmen came, killed, burnt houses and quickly left the place without security interference, he said.

"The attack this afternoon is very unfortunate and this is the most ugly attack Guma local government has ever witnessed because Gbajimba is the headquarters; and for the gunmen to have invaded and razed the place, something is actually fishy. The police abandoned us."

Houses and other places were burnt and we have managed to convey scores of persons killed by the attackers to this mortuary, and those injured were also brought to this Benue State University Teaching Hospital (BSUTH) for urgent medical attention. Others were moved to Abinsi and in Northbank areas," Usa-Adi said.

On March 13, 2014, Suswam's entire village at Anyii in Logo local government area was sacked by the suspected mercenaries. The invaders also slaughtered over 22 persons whose corpses were still trapped in the farms at Anyii and Ayilamo where the fleeing locals believe the mercenaries have set up their camps.

It was discovered that from Anyii, Suswam's ancestral home, to Ayilamo, a stretch of about 25 kilometres, all the inhabitants of the close to 29 villages had been sacked by the rampaging herdsman. It was also discovered that all of the governor's kinsmen, extended family members, elders, women and children have been sacked from their ancestral homes by the marauders, leaving the entire village deserted. One of the fleeing locals, who gave his name as James Terzungwe, said the invaders came to their communities from neighbouring Nasarawa State.

"They came from Nasarawa State after crossing River Benue and stormed our communities in their hundreds, when people were already in the farms. That was why many of the people were killed because they were caught up in the farms where it was very difficult for them to escape or jointly defend themselves. That attack left over 22 of our people dead, those are the ones we have seen, many are still missing and nobody knows about their condition because we gathered that so many corpses are still in the farms and bushes near the river, but no one can go near there for now because the Fulanis have completely taken over those areas," he said.

Just two days earlier, Suswam himself escaped death by the whiskers when his convoy was ambushed by suspected Fulani herdsman at Tse Akenyi in Guma Local Government Area of Benue State. The governor who led a team of security men including the Police, Civil Defence Army and the State Security Service (SSS) to take an assessment of the destruction caused in the area by the Fulani herdsman last week ran into the same herdsman who opened fire at the governor and his entourage when he made a stop over to assess some houses that were recently burnt at Tse Akenyi.

The rampaging herdsman who had at the early hours of the morning destroyed over 72 villages and killed 25 residents in Ukpan, near Daudu were repelled by security forces in the convoy of the governor.

A recent report by the Anglican Church in Benue State showed how nearly 1000 people lost their lives to incessant attacks by Fulani herdsman.

"On Oct. 12, gunmen killed 30 Christians in Oguchi-Ankpa," Christian leaders said. Apochi and Bello said the Christians were killed in their sleep after Muslim Fulani herdsman broke into their homes. Houses, church buildings and other properties were destroyed in the attacks.

On October 4, Fulani gunmen attacked Ejima, killing three Christians, according to Stephen Dutse, chairman of Agatu Local Government Council. Three days prior, Christian and community leaders in the area had declared a month of fasting and prayer in the face of unceasing attacks on them. Not less than 60 Christians have lost their lives in three attacks by Muslim Fulanis within the last two months, November and December, while over 10,000 Christians have been displaced and church activities been suspended.

Juliana Obeta, chairperson of Okpokwu Local Government Council, said the assailants killed one person while several others were wounded and treated at St. Mary's Catholic Hospital in Okpoga.

Authorities later reportedly discovered that some of the assailants were dressed like Fulani but were apparently hired assassins from out of state. Armed with AK-47s, the assailants invaded several communities, including an attack on a funeral, killing and burning houses and church buildings.

#### Unending killings

The killings have not been restricted to the states in the north central alone. For example, on December 24, 2012, some nomadic Fulani herdsman invaded the border town of Oja-Odan in Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State, killing two people who were said to have prevented their cattle from grazing on their farmlands.

On many occasions, different communities had always appealed to the federal and state governments for protection as the dry season approached, for fear of attacks by the murderous herdsman. Yet, there has hardly been any reported instance when law enforcement agents had arrested and prosecuted the culprits. A socio-cultural group, the Ketu Advancement Front, comprising 30 villages, once had cause to appeal to the government for protection, their communities having been attacked by Fulani herdsman operating between

the borders of Nigeria and the Benin Republic.

The attacks on Ketu led to the killing of no fewer than 40 innocent residents of the area. Last August 27, some Fulani cattle rearers were arrested in Aboriso village, Iseyin, Oyo State, for allegedly inflicting injury on a farmer named Fatai Alimi after a disagreement over grazing on a commercial farmland belonging to Alimi and his siblings. Brother of the injured farmer, Muibi Azeez, said the herdsmen led a large herd of cattle to the farm, which caused the destruction of crops. He said a heated exchange ensued as Alimi challenged the herdsmen. He added that the herdsmen responded violently, and later attacked them.

"They came to our farm with their cattle and destroyed our crops. There was a disagreement and, in the process, my brother was seriously injured. I escaped from the scene to alert the villagers and the police," Azeez said.

Speaking to The Nation on the menace that the herdsmen have become in the state, the senator representing Benue North-east senatorial district, Senator Barnabas Gemade, said the trend would destabilise the country if it is not urgently stopped.

The senator who alleged that the attackers hailed from neighbouring African countries of Chad, Mali and Cameroun, alleged that they were hired to destabilise the country. The senator alleged that most of the attackers were not herdsmen as often claimed, but were rather miscreants with the motive of causing internal crisis in the country especially in the Middle Belt region.

He said: "I think they really want to see some war fought in the Middle Belt part of the country which is a very big shame. Otherwise, how can you see an insurgency taking place in the middle of the country and the people who are doing this are coming from neighbouring countries such as Chad, Mali, Cameroun, Congo and many others.

"How did they pass through all the land that they passed through before getting to Benue which is right in the middle of the country? I think it is a matter which has to be looked at very critically. The law enforcement agencies have to take it upon themselves to look into this matter."

He added: "Well it is a matter that needs very urgent action by a combination of all the security agencies in this country to fish out the people behind it. It is not only the people who have fertile and full of grass for animals. But why are they not fighting those tribes? Why are they insisting on fighting the people who are in Benue State?"

"That tells you clearly that there is a motive behind it and this motive is not just addressed to the people living on fertile land but against a system and that system is against the peaceful existence of Nigeria and the peaceful performance of the government of the nation at this time. And I think the law enforcement agencies should take this seriously. As political leaders, we are talking about it. We are calling on people in this country not to allow our people take laws into their hands. You know that every community in Nigeria can raise an army if they want to do so and it is not right for us to begin to raise an army for ourselves and that is why the national defence forces should do their jobs."

The senator believed that the attackers are a mixture of miscreants from various parts of the continent, adding, "We are telling the government that they must raise a defence force that will come in and raid these areas and get rid of these people. We are also calling on people in these affected areas to be vigilant and they should not aid and abet those coming into their lands to go and attack the people. Let them not push us to a point where we have to raise an army."

Also, speaking on the menace, Ortom said Fulani herdsmen need to end the terror being unleashed on the people of Benue. "I call on the aggressors and Fulani herdsmen to stop the senseless killings. End the fire and bloodshed which has brought tribulation and torment to all Benue people. End the terror now. The security situation in our dear state has worsened, nowhere is safe.

"Our people have been driven from their ancestral homes and farms. This situation should perturb every ethnic nationality in Nigeria. They have destroyed communities in Makurdi, Torkula, Daudu, Tse-Akaahena, Tse-Ortom and over 60 other villages. My farmland of over 150 hectares has been destroyed by the terrorists who have hidden under the platform of Fulani herdsmen to carry out this mayhem," the minister said.

What is at stake?

Over the years, the herdsmen are demanding grazing land and stock-routes. As a response from the government, a bill empowering the federal government to establish grazing reserves in all states has passed a second reading in the Senate. But sadly, it is already mired in legal controversy and ethnic rows, giving the impression that it may take long for it to come to fruition if it ever does. Consequently, the herdsmen want to be allowed to graze openly, irrespective of whose farmland is damaged by their herds.

But pundits say that cannot be. The system of open grazing of cattle, experts insist, is archaic. Many countries have developed large grazing reserves and it is against the law in many countries to herd livestock in the open. We have once argued that "unregulated grazing begets environmental degradation and smacks of irresponsibility on the part of those in power at all levels," says Audu Ogburn, a former minister.

Holland, Australia and other countries with rich livestock management traditions present models Nigeria could copy. It is said that grazed cows produce less milk than those confined to sheds, where feeding is controlled. Cows now live in football-field-size covered sheds, rarely venturing outdoors, and are milked

three times a day. With 13.9 million cattle, 22.1 million sheep, 34.5 million goats, Nigeria can sustain a thriving animal husbandry industry. The practice of open grazing, where animals destroy crops, has to stop. Herded animals are of less nutritional and financial value, according to Ogbah.

"It is the cause of the tension we are witnessing around the country. Since livestock farming is a major occupation in northern Nigeria, governments in the region, therefore, should develop this business portfolio into a money-spinner. In addition, Fulani herdsmen do not have any special privilege more than the fishermen in the creeks. Through regional integration, state governors in the core north with substantial Fulani population have to revive the grazing reserves that dot the region and establish more irrigated reserves where the herdsmen will rear their cattle.

"It is their cup of tea since the welfare of cocoa farmers in the South-West and that of fishermen in the Niger Delta are the responsibility of their respective states and local governments. Setting up grazing fields, apart from solving pressing security challenges, could also boost their internally generated revenue," he said.

Thus amid deadly clashes with farmers and expulsion orders by state authorities, thousands of nomadic herders in the country do not know where to turn. The consequence of this is that tensions linked to pastoralist-farmer disputes continue to mount in recent months in several states. Local authorities expelled 700 pastoralists from Borno State in the northeast in May 2009 and some 2,000 from Plateau in April, according to reports.

"We settled in Damboa [in Borno State] like many other Fulani nomads, running away from desertification and drought in the far north where we have little food for our herd," nomad chief Alhaji Jebbe told researchers. If every community we move to treats us like this I don't know where we will turn to. Our herd, which is our source of existence, will be ruined and we will in turn be ruined," he said.

A local expert said effects of climate change are partly to blame for the disputes. Northern nomadic communities are increasingly moving southwards as climate change turns their grazing land into desert, Kabiru Yammama, environmental consultant with Green Shield of Nations, a Nigerian NGO, said.

"About 35 percent of land that was cultivable 50 years ago is now desert in 11 of Nigeria's northernmost states: Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Adamawa, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Yobe, Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi," Yammama said. Nomads expelled from Borno State had travelled 1,000km eastwards from Zamfara in search of grazing land, and are now heading back again, according to Jebbe.

The livelihoods of some 15 million pastoralists in northern Nigeria are threatened by decreasing access to water and pasture – shortages linked to climate change, according to Yammama. The rainy season in northern Nigeria has dropped to an average of 120 days down from 150 days 30 years ago, cutting crop yields by 20 percent, according to a 2008 National Meteorological Agency study," he said.

Lending his voice to the debate over what could be at the centre of the crises, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Abubakar, blamed the crisis on the nomadic nature of the herdsmen who have lost grazing fields and cattle routes in recent times due to the activities of farmers.

"They move from one place to another, from here to Cameroun to Niger to Chad. One of the challenges we have is that years back there were grazing places, there were routes for the Fulanis to follow, today the story is different, no grazing places no routes to follow," he said.

But beyond the simple economic arsons of the herdsmen wanting to graze at all cost and the farmers being determined to protect their crops, it appears another dimension has crept into the issue. Rising from an emergency meeting recently, the Middle Belt Dialogue alleged that the attacks on farming communities have concentrated on areas largely inhabited by Christians. The group cautioned that continued attack may be interpreted to mean a plan to exterminate the people of the region.

There is also palpable fear amongst security experts that the situation may degenerate into an open armed conflict in the regions. This concern is daily mounting as the attacks continue unabated. Perhaps this is why a number of state governments are swiftly moving to confront the issue headlong.

"If the Fulani herdsmen's activities are not quickly curtailed, we are inclined to be apprehensive of reprisal actions by the persistent victims. This may lead to an open armed conflict in the regions which may further aggravate the security challenges in the country. The government need to take more drastic action against the herdsmen killers in Plateau State. We are of the opinion that the activities of the Fulani herdsmen deserve no less attention from the federal government than it has given Boko Haram, as both represent unabashed terrorism and unrepentant murder," Aminu Wase, a former police commissioner said.

Similarly, in a bid to curb the excesses of Fulani herdsmen who have constituted nuisance to security of people of Oke Ogun area of Oyo State through cattle-rearing on their farmlands, the state government recently warned the Fulanis to resist the temptation of rearing their animals on farmlands.

The state Commissioner for Local Government and Chieftaincy Matters, Chief Peter Oluremi Odetomi, said the people of the state were not rejecting the Fulani but were opposed to the vandalism of their crops.

"We want to prevent the rancour between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers who complained of destruction of their crops," he disclosed.

Odetomi said that there must be perfect peace between the Fulani and Yoruba in the state, adding that anything that would threaten the existing peace must be avoided. He reminded the Fulani of the need not to rear their cows on farmlands where the farmers' crops could be destroyed, stressing that doing that would cause rancour between them and the farmers.

Also, the Ekiti Government recently set up a 50-man task force on the alleged destruction of farms across



the state by persons suspected to be herdsmen. The Secretary to the State Government, Dr. Ganiyu Owolabi, made this known on Tuesday at a meeting with stakeholders and victims of the clashes. Owolabi said that the government evolved the measure in order to find a permanent solution to the occurrence of such attacks.

According to him, the cattle reportedly destroyed between six and seven hectares of farm crops on a daily basis across the state. He said the matter was of serious concern as it threatened government's huge investment in agriculture. He expressed sympathy with the victims whose crops were destroyed, especially Alhaji Giringi Sulaiman. Owolabi noted that about 100,000 hectares of maize and yams farms, valued at about N80 million belonging to Sulaiman along Tjan-Ekiti Road, were attacked and destroyed by suspected herdsmen.

The state Commissioner for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Mr Jide Arowosafe, noted that many farms, including those of the 'Youth in Agriculture Programme' were reportedly destroyed in recent times. He advised the herdsmen to take advantage of the grazing facility already created at Irele-Ekiti. Arowosafe said that the government would replicate the facility in all local government areas as a way of curbing the herdsmen's excesses and the rampant destruction of farmlands.

Meanwhile, it is not that the country outrightly lack grazing lands. At least, on paper, the federal government in the past got some places to be designated as grazing lands to help the pastoralist Fulanis take care of their herds. 'The idea is that the Fulanis will gross the grass they need to feed their cattle and avoid unguarded grazing that has been the cause of so many crises across the country.

"Across Nigeria, there are more than 400 grazing reserves covering about 4,200,000 hectares of land. But most of these are yet to be gazetted by the relevant authorities. The state governments will have to gazette them to prevent people from encroaching into them. These are yet to be done in most cases. It is this lack of gazetting that is killing the idea meant to reduce clashes between the herdsmen and farmers to the barest minimum," Sulaiman Faisal Aliyu, spokesperson of the Miyeti Allah Cattle rearers Association in the southwestern region, said.

Most of the grazing reserves are today farmlands being cultivated by some people even after government's order that they be reserved for grazing. Some claim they are yet to be compensated for their land since the idea for the grazing reserve was conceived in 1996.

According to Aliyu, keeping the natives away from the grazing reserve has not been easy because they are yet to be settled by the federal government.

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