

FEATURES

Lagos home-grown terrorists turning Nigeria's commercial capital into a war zone

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Some gang members

Lagos is indeed home to the good, the bad and the ugly. As opportunities abound to put in the hard work and be successful, some boys and young men have constituted themselves into street terrors and unleash mayhem on innocent residents and visitors alike. DEJI LAMBO takes a look at the factors aiding them and proffers solutions

In different parts of Lagos, almost on a daily basis, gangs of armed and violent youngsters snatch phones, bags, wallets and laptops, pick pockets, mug pedestrians,

break into homes, crash uninvited into parties, demand protection money and burgle shops. They also engage in free-for-all, commit arson and murder.

These groups of hoodlums and cultists bear names like One Million Boys, Fadeyi Boys, Ereko Boys, Akala Boys, Awawa Boys, Ijesha Boys, Awala Boys, Shitta Boys, Nokia Boys, No Salary Boys, One Hour Boys, Oshodi Boys, No Mercy Boys, Aguda Boys, Night Cadet, Black Scorpion, Akamo Boys, Omo Kasari Confraternity, Para Gang Confraternity (mainly teenage girls), Japa Boys and Koko Boys, among many others.

In times past, gangs were only found in densely populated low-income neighbourhoods like Ajegunle, Bariga, Somolu, Oshodi, Iyana Ipaja, Ketu and Oworonsoki, among others. However, in recent times, many of such groups have sprang up in most parts of Lagos, except for highbrow areas like Ikeja GRA, Magodo, Ogudu and Omole.

In several parts of the state, where these gangs operate at will, residents live in fear as violence can break out at any time. When it does, these gangsters move through neighbourhoods breaking into shops, vandalising vehicles and leaving death and destruction in their wake.

Besides the streets, the domestic terrorists have also turned Lagos' many expressways, major roads and bridges into danger zones. Some of the roads and bridges dreaded by motorists and commuters during gridlocks and at odd hours are the Apapa-Oshodi Expressway, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, Ikorodu Road, Eko Bridge, Oshodi Bridge, Apongbon Bridge, Oworonsoki Bridge and Costain Bridge.

Reign of terror

For many Nigerians in other states, Lagos is the heartbeat of the nation. It has the country's biggest business centre, entertainment and technological hub, and the

country's most active social scene. But hardly can you open a newspaper in a week without reading stories about the acts of terror of the gangs.

On Monday, February 24, 2020, a cab driver, identified simply as Ehis, met his untimely death on the Eko Bridge. Ehis' car had a flat tyre around 10.30pm on the bridge and while changing it, suspected members of a daredevil gang attacked and dispossessed him of his valuables. He was later thrown off the bridge.

A month before Ehis' tragic death, another gang of young boys, in a similar manner, killed a yet-to-be-identified ride-hailing driver, who was trapped in the gridlock on the Oshodi Bridge. An eyewitness, who identified himself simply as Damilare, said, "While he (the victim) was trapped in the gridlock, the boys came to him and demanded his phones and money. He became annoyed that they were young boys and got down from his car.

"He made that mistake and the boys descended on him and threw him off the bridge. The driver landed on a sharp object at the construction site underneath the bridge and his stomach was ruptured. He died on the spot. I saw his corpse."

On the same Oshodi Bridge, another ride-hailing driver, Dauda Ajilowura, lost his life when gangsters threw him off after stealing his phone and money on May 2, 2019.

Two men were shot dead opposite the Dre Bar and inside the Garden Bar in Igbe-Lara, Igbogbo Bayeku Local Council Development Area of the state around 4pm on Sunday, December 6, 2020. A resident and eyewitness, Abideen Akintunde, shared details of the tragic incident with *The PUNCH*.

He said, "The assailants stormed the area in two vehicles and started shooting indiscriminately. A lot of people were wounded and two were killed at different locations. The people, who perpetrated the crime, were up to 15 and they were not local cultists; they were grown-ups and very huge.

“They came with sophisticated weapons and in two vehicles and motorcycles. There was no sign that they had a target because the moment they got to the Igbe-Lara junction, they started shooting and kept shooting as they entered into the inner street leading to the Garden Bar.

“They shot one of the customers, Olanrewaju Omobolaji, aka Excel, to death at the Garden Bar. It was later that we gathered that another man, who used to sell dogs close to the Dre Bar on the Igbe-Ginti Road was shot dead opposite the bar.”

In the Fagba area of the state, Saheed Salami witnessed an attack by a group of gangsters on a lady at a bus stop. He said the attack, which was carried out by the Awawa Boys, was unprovoked.

He stated, “A lady was almost killed by members of the Awawa Boys. She was waiting at the front of the Enyo filling station in Fagba for a vehicle to convey her to work when the gang members attacked her.

“I was refuelling my car and saw as they were dealing machet blows on the lady just because they wanted to steal her bag. They even dared other people and I tried to intervene, but as they advanced towards our direction, I switched on my car engine and zoomed off.”

While the Awawa Boys were having a field day at Fagba, on the same day, another group, the Awala Boys, butchered a photographer, Peter-Greg Edogbeji, during a clash in the Ajegunle-Apapa area of Lagos. Footage of the attack obtained by our correspondent showed no fewer than 10 boys taking turns to deal cutlass blows on the head and body of a man later identified as Edogbeji till he lost consciousness.

A member of the Aiyetoro Security Committee in Ajegunle, Joseph Mazoje, told *The PUNCH* that the tragic incident started as a clash between two groups. During the clash, the traditional ruler of Oke-Ira, Taiye Layeni, and some youths in the community, including Edogbeji, led policemen to the scene to restore normalcy.

“Unfortunately, they ran into an ambush laid by the Awala Boys, who started attacking them immediately. Others escaped, but Layeni and Edogbeji were severely injured with cutlasses. They were later rushed to hospital, where Edogbeji died,” Mazoje said.

Pandemic problems

Although gangsterism was part of the city’s social fabric prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of insecurity heightened during the pandemic. During the lockdown, traffic robbery dwindled because gridlocks disappeared and snatching of phones and bags, among other related crimes, became less common due to the restriction in movement. Out of frustration and their inability to feed themselves through their usual crimes, these terror gangs took their criminal activities to the doorsteps of unsuspecting residents.

Bands of gangsters roamed the streets, threatening the tranquility of neighbourhoods, while the security agencies struggled to cope. Areas like Iyana Ipaja, Aboru, Oke-Odo, Agege, Abule-Egba, Anthony Village, Iju, Ogba, Solomon Grace, Itire/Ikate, Jibowu, Karimu Alabi, Dopemu, Capitol Road, Amowo, Oko-Oba, Oworonshoki and Mushin recorded serious disruptions to daily life. At some point, residents formed emergency vigilante groups to protect their neighbourhoods and tried and kept vigils to repel attacks.

Despite this, the gangs still operated in some areas and their operations were accompanied by loss of lives. Around 8pm on April 18, 2020, a 60-year-old taxi driver, Junaid Owe, was butchered when suspected members of the One Million Boys went on rampage in some parts of the Itire/Ikate Local Council Development Area.

The Chairman of the Community Development Committee in the LCDA, Adedupe Adekoya, told *The PUNCH*, “My heart palpitates each time I remember the week Owe was killed. We heard that the bad boys were around and everywhere turned into something else. They came in full force and with impunity. They started robbing

people of their phones, attacking them with cutlasses and dispossessing them of their belongings.

“They carried out all manners of criminal activities, so our community people were in the process of pushing them back. But Junaid was unlucky – the hoodlums surrounded him and cut him with machetes. He was unconscious before he was taken to hospital, where he later died.

“Everybody in our area did not sleep well. We were always out in the evening for the night watch. We spent about eight hours performing the role of vigilantes every day and this involved everybody in the community – boys, youths, men, women and the elderly. We were not sleeping in our homes, because of these bad boys. We are tired of them and they still attacked and killed recently.”

Six days to the day Owe was butchered, suspected members of the Awawa Boys and One Million Boys stormed the Agege area of the metropolis and dispossessed many residents of their valuables on Easter Sunday. Similarly, in the Abule-Egba area, no fewer than 30 hoodlums reportedly robbed residents of their valuables.

A resident, Ganiyu Adeniyi said the situation had not changed. He said, “Solomon Grace, the Miyaki Relaxation Centre, Jibowu, Karimu Alabi and other areas in Abule-Egba have been enveloped in tension due to attacks by hoodlums.

“They (hoodlums) have been robbing us in the area, but the youth have risen to the challenge. Landlords and youths in the community are the ones guarding us now, because the situation has gone out of control. They usually make bonfires at midnight so that the hoodlums will be aware that they are not asleep,” Adeniyi stated.

Perplexed by the level of unrest occasioned by the insecurity in their neighbourhoods, hundreds of youths recently took to the streets to protest against the incessant attacks by members of the terror gangs.

The beginning

Security experts, community leaders and activists have tried to trace the root of this anti-social problem and have different explanations. A youth leader in Ajegunle, Ajeromi Ifelodun Local Council Development Area of the state, Michael Jeje, said some of the street gangsters were trained to dispossess unsuspecting members of the public of their valuables by people, who dealt in stolen goods.

He said, “They (merchandisers) train those boys and they go all out in the morning and return in the evening to hand over whatever they steal to the merchandisers. They have a coordinating system whereby there are certain people they assign to various areas in the state for robbery operations so as to avoid clashes.

“Some of these merchandisers buy motorcycles and tricycles for these boys to convey passengers and rob them of their belongings. They are also the ones who usually protect these boys whenever they are arrested anywhere in the state.”

A security expert, Frank Udom, tied the rise of gangs in Lagos to rural-urban migration and the lack of support systems for homeless youths.

He said, “When they get to Lagos, they go to the slums to cohabitate with people of like-minds, sleep in parks or open spaces, market stalls and uncompleted buildings. Most of these boys have no particular skills, they learn no trade and they have no education; so, they either engage in manual labour or go rogue.

“Some peers that may not be up to 10 individuals come together, start doing things together and give themselves a name. Once they succeed in committing a particular crime and enjoy the loot afterwards, it encourages them.”

Experts say these gangs, like many other terror gangs profiting from illegal acts across the state, are very territorial. Jeje, while attesting to this, said, “The Awala Boys,

despite having a network across the state, 90 per cent of them are found in their base in Ajegunle-Apapa.”

Fighting back

In a bid to curb the obnoxious activities of the terror gangs, the state Commissioner of Police, Hakeem Odumosu, organised a series of



- Some suspected Awawa Boys during their parade by the police recently...in Lagos

stakeholders’ meetings involving security agents, neighbourhood watchers, traditional rulers, CDAs and youth leaders, among others. While some stakeholders bitterly complained about the police and judges releasing arrested suspects despite confessional statements about their roles in crimes committed, others noted that their situation had become a case of the hunter being hunted by suspects released after being handed over to the police.

The Deputy Commander, Onyabo Vigilante Group in Ikorodu, Olanrewaju Olabinjo, said, “I have arrested some suspects more than 10 times, handed them over to the

command and they are soon released. They will return to the community and afterwards, a complaint will still be made that they stole someone's phone or bag and we will go after them again.

“It is not that the police are biased; at times, the court will say the evidence is not sufficient. We have brought suspects, including cultists, who made confessional statements that they were the ones who killed someone. But the court said we didn't have enough evidence. When I asked what evidence, we were told that we didn't recover the gun used to carry out the crime.

“Also, the public needs to be orientated about how to handle the matter of the bad boys, because in some cases, when we arrest some of these hoodlums, whether they injured somebody with a bottle or snatch someone's phone or bag, what the victims are normally interested in is their property and not to pursue the case.”

Reacting, the police boss, Odumosu, said, “There are procedures in the criminal dispensation of justice. Once ‘A’ arrests ‘B’ or an offence, ‘A’ should be ready to follow it up. They should go and give statements and not just arrest and hand over to the police. What is the evidence? They should be ready to give evidence in court.

“We have limited hours to detain suspects under the fundamental human rights laws. So, once you just pick up someone and hand the person over to the police and you don't go back to the police to give evidence when the case is taken to court, and these things are not there, definitely, the magistrate will only judge based on the facts available. That is why you see them back in society, simply because the complainants/victims don't follow up the case to conclusion.”

The way out

Udom argued that relevant laws ought to be strengthened. He said, “The legal instruments for punishment are not quite strong. The punishment is supposed to be sterner. By the time you arrest a person, who has the tendency to kill, even though he

has not killed, and the magistrate gives him three years, when they perfect the bail and come out, it becomes normal to them.

“For instance, the number of times that the Awala Boys have been to prison increases their ranks. I was wondering why one of them is being referred to as a ‘General’. He said being referred to as ‘General’ means you have been to prison. If you are a one-star ‘General’, you have been there once; if you are a two-star ‘General’, you have been there twice; so, they no longer take being jailed seriously, because they know that in no time, they will return and the magistrates can’t go outside what the law says to make a judgment as they have to confine themselves to the provisions of the law.”

Reacting, the state Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Gbenga Omotoso, stated, “Those who drew up the laws are not unmindful of what is going on. In most cases, most of these things (laws) are not to punish for the sake of punishing, but to reform. But the government, through the instrumentality of the law, can say this is where we want the society to be.

“But if people now feel that maybe the law is not strong enough, of course, they can go to the House of Assembly, which can review it, call a town hall meeting, and make a recommendation that will be put to vote on the floor of the House and a new law will emerge.

“The state government is doing a lot about security; we are strengthening the neighbourhood watchers; we are increasing our assistance to the state police command; and we are hiring more hands for the neighbourhood watchers to support the police and other security agencies with intelligence gathering.”

A psychologist, Prof. Oni Fagbounbe, said criminal activities perpetrated by members of these terror gangs were still thriving because there was no strong deterrent factor.

Fagbounbe stated, “In industrial psychology, there is what we call Equity Theory, whereby what you inject into the society and what you get in return for injecting your effort, energy and qualification, among others, must be commensurate with what returns to you.

“But where there is an imbalance between the two, it usually results in different ways of turning the perceived inequity to equity, and this is what you find with these boys. Perception of inequity has a way of giving people headache; all kinds of unsettled life and nobody wants to continue to live with that and so, they will find a way to change that perceived inequity to equity.”

Fagbounbe suggested the Thundike Law of Effect as an approach to tackling the criminal activities of the terror gangs in the state.

He said, “It was an experiment performed in psychology using rats. A hungry rat was put in a cage and it was busy moving randomly inside the cage looking for food, but just by an accident of touch, he got to a portion where there was a device, he stepped on it and the weight of the rat depressed it and food dropped into the cage. The hungry rat quickly swallowed the food, but instead of going randomly around the cage, it concentrated its movement around where he got the food.

“There was a second version of that experiment, but instead of putting food inside the device, the device was connected to the source of an electric current, so this hungry rat was moving about in the cage and when it got to the portion of the device and stepped on it, instead of food dropping into the cage, it was shocked by the electric current in the device and the rat ran like mad and started looking for an escape route from the cage.

“The Thundike Law of Effect states that any stimulus that brings pleasure will be maximised, but the one that brings pain will be minimised. So, what it boils down to is that, here, there is no deterrent factor in our system. You steal, the justice will not come in time; there are so many things in the system that encourage criminality.

“Suspects will be arrested and handed over to the police and they will be released and when they return, those that arrested them are in trouble. So, there is no deterrent factor and where there is no deterrent factor, you find people moving towards impunity.”

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