

# Buhari and grazing reserve policy

By ADEZE OJUKWU

**FEW** weeks back, Chief Tagbuo Oguejiofor, a community leader, aged 85, was allegedly killed in his farm at **Oma Eke village in Udi Local Government Area (LGA), in Enugu State by fulani herdsmen.** Reports had it that the nomads allegedly killed the octogenarian, when they invaded his farm and destroyed his crops. **Some weeks earlier, hundreds of Benue farmers died, many others injured, property and crops worth millions of naira were destroyed, during a fierce battle with Fulani pastoralists, who were said to have invaded their farmlands.**

The enormity of human and economic losses, arising from incessant clashes between farmers and cattle rearers is quite alarming. These violent clashes and reprisal attacks have become a regular occurrence across the country, with the most of the clashes recorded in Benue, Plateau, Taraba and Enugu states. Unfortunately, these conflicts over land ownership, have been worsened by desertification, loss of arable land, drought, flood, erosion, poverty and urbanization as well as burgeoning population rates.

While farmers accuse the cattle rearers of violent invasions of their communities and farm lands, wanton killings and rape, the cattle rearers blame the farmers for cow rustling and grabbing their pastures. The nomadic pastoralists, who migrate from the north to the middle belt and south regions of the country in search of fodder for their stock, want unfettered access to grazing fields nationwide. Meanwhile the indigent people believe that the lands are their ancestral heritage and will not relinquish them.

With this imbroglio, no lasting solution has been found, as most efforts by relevant federal and state authorities are often scuttled by the warring parties.

Unfortunately, the crisis has almost degenerated into a religious warfare, with the predominantly muslim Northerners supporting the herders, who reportedly bear sophisticated arms, while the christian populace pitch their tents with farmers in middlebelt and south regions.

However, beyond these religious and ethnic sentiments, many experts argue that the major factor that has fuelled the crises is economic. While the herder holds the cow as a primary source of income and sustenance, the farmer depends on the farm produce for livelihood.

Many Nigerians have expressed worry over the escalating tension and blood-letting in affected communities, describing it as 'grievous and unnecessary.' Stakeholders also condemned government's inability to quench the crises, which they described as 'atrocious and appalling.' 'It is within government purview to end these senseless killings,' many have argued.

With each side laying claim to rights to the disputed lands, the clashes have continued to escalate, threatening national security and unity. Many analysts find it sad that successive governments have allowed the clashes to degenerate to this heinous level. In recent history, no other country has witnessed this level of atrocities over land disputes.

According to Abuja-based agriculturalist, Mr Daudu Ochepa, no responsible government will tolerate this level of mindless killings of its citizens and loss of economic resources. Government must muster the political will to end the crises, and urgently too,' he stressed.

This country can ill-afford this massive human and economic destructions, given the intolerable levels of poverty, food scarcity, malnutrition across the country. 'Nearly 1,000 Nigerian



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children die of malnutrition-related causes every day - a total of 361,000 each year,' United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), stated recently in a release.

UNICEF country representative Jean Gough, who stated this in Abuja at the Community-based Management of Acute Malnutrition in Children program disclosed that 'there are approximately 1.7 million severely acutely malnourished children under five in Nigeria - accounting for a tenth of the global total.' Hence urgent steps must be taken to resolve these incessant clashes and all other conflicts bedevilling this critical sector, as Nigeria struggles to extricate itself from its myriad economic, political and security challenges.

Several recommendations have been thrown up in the public domain in recent times. But implementation of these wonderful ideas have remained herculean. For instance, Senator Ben Murray-Bruce in an online publication urged government to take urgent steps to end the conflict, saying 'the clashes have occurred in every state in Nigeria.' According to him, government should, temporarily, restore the ancient grazing routes for the pastoralists, as a short-term measure.

Meanwhile, he proposed a long-term measure, in which 'the Federal Ministry of Agriculture should give a deadline of not less than 10 years to Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association to convert from pastoral cattle rearing to the modern business of cattle ranching.' He equally advised the cattle dealers to embrace ranching, due to its economic and security advantages, saying Senate President Bukola Saraki, introduced the system to Shonga, Kwara State, 10 years ago, when he was governor of the state, for its numerous benefits.

Recently, President Muhammadu

Buhari gave a directive for the establishment of nationwide grazing reserves for cattle rearers. Permanent Secretary, in the Federal Ministry and Rural Development, Sonny Echono, said Buhari had directed the ministry to study and consider the investigations sponsored by the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF) and Northern Governors Forum (NGF), in order to develop action plan to establish grazing reserves and stock routes nationwide.

Echono stressed, 'the need to develop action plan to establish grazing reserves and stock routes nationwide, as part of efforts by the current administration to mitigate the recurring pastoralists/crop farmers conflict became imperative, following persistent clashes, which have taken a massive toll on human lives, properties and the nation's economy.' Echono who spoke, while inaugurating a special committee on the issue, charged the committee members to, 'develop short, medium and long-term recommendations that will end the persistent farmers and pastoralists conflict in the country.'

Among other things, the committee is to review the policy on stock routes development with monuments to ensure free movement of livestock. This is as the pastoralists are expected to work with communities, state and local governments to settle and develop pastures as well as maintain reserves infrastructure for sustainable use,' he added. However this call has come under severe attacks in several quarters, with many farmers, who spoke anonymously, dismissing the idea as 'archaic and untenable.'

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