

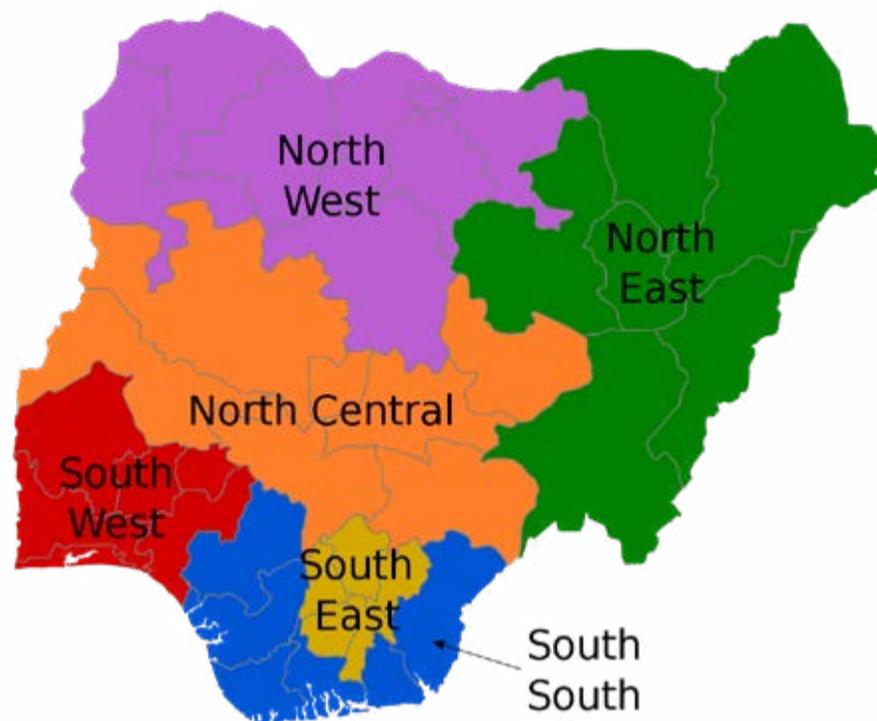
Conflict Drivers in North Central Nigeria

By Robert Feldman
OE Watch Commentary

Of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, its North East Zone is the one most often in the news as Boko Haram, which is situated there, periodically launches attacks that garner large amounts of publicity. Far less reported on is the North Central Zone. As the accompanying excerpted article from the Africa-based independent news source *The Conversation Africa* reports, violence has been significantly rising in the North Central Zone, which includes the Nigerian capital, Abuja, and several surrounding states. Conflict, especially over ethnic divisions and between farmers and pastoralists, has long plagued that impoverished region, but not to the recent extent. Interviews of household heads, community leaders, and other relevant stakeholders by the article's author revealed some of the drivers behind the escalating violence. These include: the rise of criminal groups, increasing population pressure, open grazing, the proliferation of small arms, over-militarization of the public space, and intimidation of political opponents.

The over-militarization of public spaces is particularly interesting. Six military operations were launched in the North Central Zone between 2005 and 2020. Their intention was to deal with cattle rustling, armed banditry, and clashes between farmers and pastoralists. However, because of some soldiers' conduct, including alleged human rights abuses of civilians, the security situation worsened and civil-military relations were poisoned. The article does not state or imply any recent improvements between the local populace and soldiers.

Looking at the broader picture, the article describes over-militarization of public spaces, along with many of the other conflict drivers, as a failure of governance, especially as it relates to protecting the public. Therefore, recommendations to stem the rising violence



Nigeria's North Central Zone is experiencing increasing violence.

Source: Leviavery/Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geopolitical_Zones_of_Nigeria.svg

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largely center on measures to improve governance. These include better community policing, tighter controls on ammunition, building community resilience to violence, and increased collaboration among the various levels of government. Thus, violence and its concomitant crises will likely continue to rise there unless steps are taken to counter the conflict drivers in the North Central Zone.

“Previous studies on violence in Nigeria have mostly examined what drives it in urban centers. Few have included rural communities.”

Source: Oluwole Ojewale, “What’s driving violence in Nigeria’s north central region,” *The Conversation Africa* (an African based independent news source), 7 July 2021. <https://theconversation.com/whats-driving-violence-in-nigerias-north-central-region-163532>

The escalating violence has deeply unsettled the local economy. Agriculture, the mainstay of the region’s economy, has been badly hit. Many farmers in the affected areas have abandoned their farms for fear of attack. And as a result of the herder-farmer conflict, the Nigerian government loses an estimated \$13.7 billion in revenue annually.

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Added to this is a proliferation of small arms and light weapons, particularly locally manufactured ones. Nigeria has over 6 million small arms in circulation. In Benue and Plateau states, locally made weapons were used in about 50% of crimes committed. Also, reports show that ammunition from at least 21 different nations has been used in the herder farmer conflicts in north central Nigeria.

During election cycles, politicians have been known to provide youth with ammunition to intimidate political opponents. Youth gangs were hired and armed by politicians to fight their political opponents, steal ballot boxes, and generally rig the vote. After elections, the gangs kept the weapons and used them to develop criminal enterprises.

Since it will never be possible to prevent all conflicts from leading to violence, building and strengthening community resilience to violent conflict must become a policy objective of all tiers of government in Nigeria. This means the government must support and strengthen communities’ efforts to build bridges between warring groups, fostering peace and security.