A National Security Perspective on Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria[1]

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Abstract:

This study seeks to explore the negative impacts of armed banditry in North-west (NW) Nigeria from a national security standpoint. The qualitative research design was used in the study to examine pertinent discourses with respect to armed banditry in the NW region and Nigeria's national security. The paper adopts the theory of functionalism given that it provides a framework for all the stakeholders in a whole-of-society approach to collaborate and interact as a functional structure in addressing the menace of armed banditry. The study identified socio-economic impediments as a major underlying factor that trigger armed banditry attacks. The paper argues that armed banditry has affected educational development in the NW region and disrupted economic activities with huge consequences on Nigeria's national security. The study found that weak local government administration, prevalence of porous borders, criminal justice impediments and inter-agency rivalry were major challenges affecting the efforts of the government in addressing the menace of armed banditry. The paper proffered some strategies to curb the spate of armed banditry in the NW region. These included increasing investment in human security, effective border management, and streamlining the roles of security and law enforcement agencies amongst others.

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Introduction

National security is paramount for socio-economic development, as emphasized by Robert MacNamara's assertion that "security is development, and without development there can be no security" (Okolie, 2022, p. 248). The Nigerian Constitution mandates the government to ensure the security of its citizens (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). However, Nigeria faces numerous security challenges due to the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of the environment, which includes threat such as Boko Haram terrorism, farmer-herder conflicts, crude oil theft, and armed banditry (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021).

Armed banditry, characterized by unlawful acts such as robbery, kidnapping, and looting using arms and coercion (Akinyetun, 2022), has escalated since the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 (Okonkwo et al., 2015). The proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), exacerbated by porous borders and the Libyan Civil War (2011-2020), has intensified armed banditry as a national security threat (Madubuegwu et al., 2022). The North-western (NW) region of Nigeria has been particularly affected, with 1,058 deaths reported in Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, and Niger states in 2019 alone (Abdullahi & Muktar, 2022).

This paper aims to analyze the impact armed banditry in NW Nigeria has on national security and propose strategies to address the menace. Employing a qualitative research design, the study examines relevant discourses and existing literature to discern key issues affecting the Federal Government of Nigeria's (FGN) efforts to counter armed banditry. The functionalist theory serves as the theoretical framework for presenting arguments.

The paper will provide an overview of armed banditry in Nigeria, explore its root causes, examine its impacts on national security, and evaluate current government efforts to address the problem. Additionally, it will discuss challenges hindering these efforts and propose some strategies to mitigate armed banditry as a significant security threat in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Theories offer a structure for understanding various discourses and their relationships with other phenomena (Bolu, 2021). The frustration-aggression theory, as proposed Dollard et al. (1939), is particularly relevant for understanding social behaviors manifesting as violent acts, such as armed banditry. It posits that when individuals or groups experience frustration due to unmet basic needs, especially in contexts of social injustice, they may resort to aggression (Dollard et al., 1939). Frustration-aggression theory assumes that all individuals possess fundamental needs and that failure to satisfy these needs can provoke violent reactions. The theory highlights the gap between individuals' desires and their actual circumstances (Ogege, 2013). Consequently, when the legitimate needs of groups are disregarded, frustration and anger often manifest as violent actions (Ogege, 2013). However, the utility of this theory is limited in analyzing the broader issues surrounding armed banditry in the NW region of Nigeria. While it

can help elucidate the behavioral motivations behind such criminality, its applicability is constrained.

Equally, functionalist theory offers insights into strengthening communication and information flow among stakeholders (Mele et al., 2010). By fostering harmonious interactions between institutions and key societal players, functionalism enhances governmental efforts to address social issues. This theory provides a framework for understanding how institutions operate and emphasizes the essential roles of various societal segments—including institutions, norms, and ideas—in maintaining system stability (Damian, 2007). Functionalist theory was adopted for this paper due to its focus on the necessity for units to interact and collaborate to achieve a common goal, specifically enhancing Nigeria's national security. Stakeholders—including security agencies, governmental bodies, and local communities—must work together as a cohesive structure to combat armed banditry. The interdependence of these components is crucial, as they cannot function in isolation. As such, this study will examine the challenges posed by poor synergy among security stakeholders and the disruption of social order, stemming from weak local governance and a flawed criminal justice system, which hinder governmental efforts to address armed banditry in NW Nigeria.

Historical Overview of Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria and National Security

Armed banditry in Nigeria has a pre-colonial history, dating back to pre-independence in 1960. The NW region, historically a key trans-Saharan trade and migration route, became a focal point for bandit activity against traders, particularly in areas such as Kwotarkoshi and Chafe in Zamfara State (Ojo et al., 2023). The first recorded incident of armed banditry occurred in 1901, when a group of bandits attacked a caravan traveling from Hausa land to the Tahoua region in present-day Niger Republic, resulting in the deaths of 210 traders and the theft of goods valued at approximately £165,000 (Akinwunmi, 2001). During this time and since, along this crucial trade route, pre-colonial governance in Northern Nigeria employed community policing to suppress these criminal activities (Ikeme, 1980).

However, the incidence of armed robbery surged following the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, a period marked by the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) across the country (Ajayi, 2011a and 2011b). This influx significantly contributed to the rise of armed robbery and other violent crimes, undermining national security. From 1976 to 1985, Nigeria experienced an average of 28 armed banditry incidents annually, a direct consequence of the civil war's aftermath (Ibrahim & Mukhtar, 2017). In response, the military government initiated various reforms in 1983, including overhauling the criminal justice system. A gradual decline in banditry and related crimes due to expedited legal proceedings can be attributed to this (Inyang, 2013). Nevertheless, the return to democratic governance in 1999 brought an escalation in political violence, as some politicians began recruiting unemployed youth as political

thugs, supplying them with weapons to disrupt electoral processes (Chidi, 2014). Many turned to armed banditry, kidnapping, and robbery for sustenance once abandoned by their political sponsors (Chidi, 2014). This shift marked the beginning of a new wave of armed banditry in NW Nigeria.

Since 2011, the NW region, encompassing Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, and Jigawa states, has witnessed a troubling increase in armed banditry (Habila, 2017). Armed banditry evolved into a pressing national security concern with the rise of notorious groups such as Buharin Daji and Fulanin Kundu, which began operating in Zamfara but expanded to over 120 criminal gangs across the region (Rufai, 2021). These groups engaged in mass killings, abductions, cattle rustling, sexual violence, and various human rights abuses. It is estimated that around 10,000 bandits in Zamfara alone killed over 12,000 individuals and destroyed approximately 120 villages, displacing more than 50,000 people between 2011 and 2021 (Rufai, 2021). Consequently, Zamfara state emerged as the epicenter of this social crisis.

Between January 2015 and May 2024, the NW region experienced 2,650 armed banditry attacks, resulting in 8,438 abductions and 7,084 fatalities (Beacon Security and Intelligence Limited, 2024). A breakdown of these incidents reveals that Zamfara, Kaduna, and Katsina states were disproportionately affected, linked to ongoing farmer-herder conflicts, illegal gold mining, and ethno-communal clashes (Ojo et al., 2023). Despite efforts by security agencies to combat this menace, armed banditry remains a persistent threat to national security in the region.
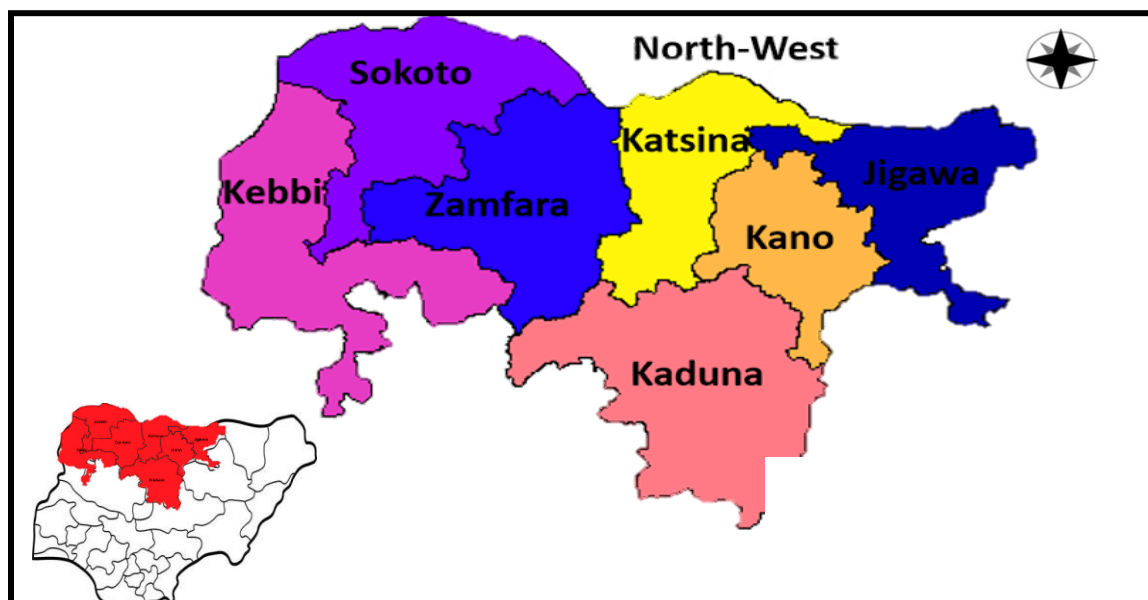

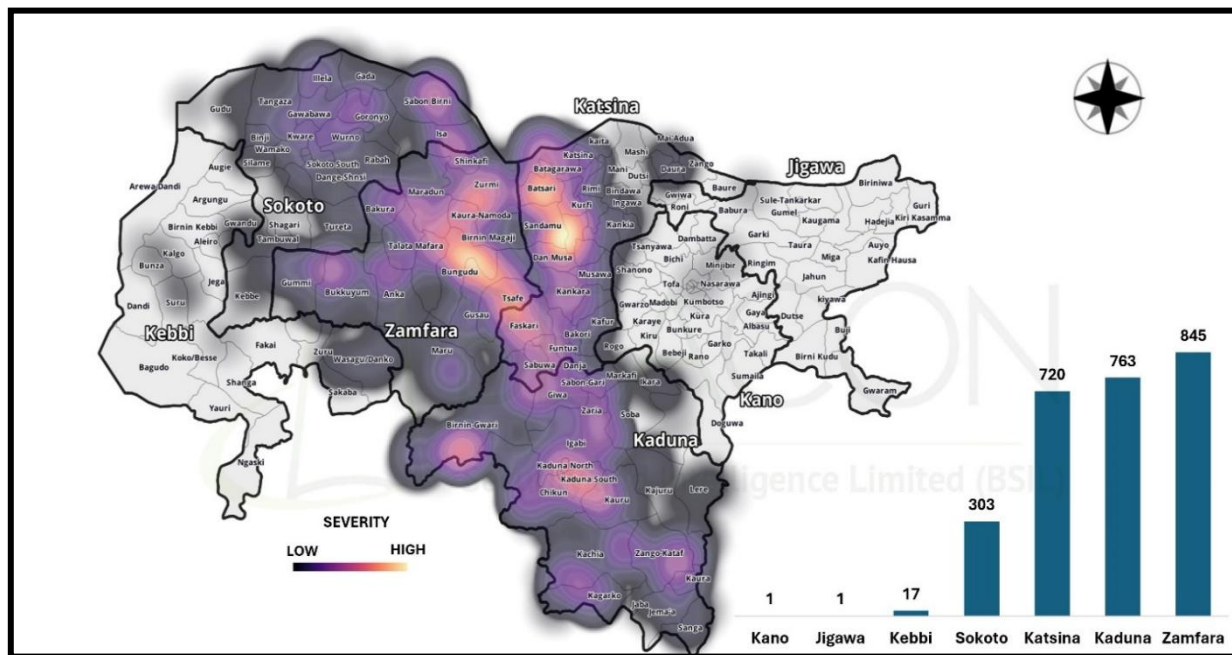Figure 1: Map of Northwest Nigeria. Source: Researcher's Design.

Figure 2: Bandit attack density in the North west region of Nigeria from 2015 to May 2024. Source: Beacon Security and Intelligence Limited, Nigeria (2024).

Background: Causes of Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria

Independent Nigeria has faced significant security challenges. The government's failure to meet the welfare and security needs of its citizens has often led to unrest, manifesting in peaceful protests, armed resistance, and violent criminal activities such as terrorism and armed banditry (Samuel & Omotola, 2023). The roots of armed banditry are deeply embedded within Nigeria's socio-political landscape, driven by socio-economic-, ideological-, and environmental factors.

Socio-Economic Factors

A society's well-being is often gauged by its security, low poverty rates, and employment opportunities, all of which reflect the state's socio-economic condition. Nigeria struggles with endemic poverty, affecting approximately 62% of its population, with about 133 million people classified as multi-dimensionally poor (Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics - Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2022). The northern region bears a disproportionate burden, with 65% of Nigeria's poor residing there, highlighting stark regional disparities (Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics - Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2022). This widespread poverty in northern Nigeria serves as a major catalyst for violent acts, including armed banditry. Poverty and economic hardship are significant drivers that push individuals toward criminal activities, including banditry, in search of survival. Unemployment also plays a critical role in exacerbating these conditions. Nigeria's high unemployment rate has been largely attributed to rapid population growth outpacing economic development as well as ineffective economic policies. Recent data from the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics shows a growth in

unemployment rate among individuals aged 15-24 during 2023 - 8.6% (2023 fourth quarter), up from 7.2% in the previous quarter (Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics Unemployment Data Report for 4th Quarter, 2023). Similarly, urban unemployment increased slightly to 6.0% in the same period. Despite changes in the methodology used to assess employment, the challenges remain, with many still unable to find sustainable jobs (Gbogbo, 2023). High unemployment creates frustration and desperation, which can lead individuals to engage in criminal activities such as armed banditry.

Ideological Factors

Ideological influences, particularly those tied to religious beliefs, significantly impact the spread of radical ideas and violence in Nigeria. In the face of widespread poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, many individuals turn to religious extremism as a means of addressing their socio-economic challenges. Extremist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) exploit these vulnerabilities, using religious rhetoric to radicalize and recruit followers (Maiangwa, 2014). Boko Haram, whose name translates to "Western education is forbidden," manipulates religious beliefs to incite rebellion against the state, targeting the economically disenfranchised population. This ideological radicalization fosters a mindset that justifies the use of violence to achieve extremist goals, creating a sense of alienation and opposition to state authority. Although Boko Haram insurgents and armed bandits operate as distinct entities, their shared tactics and ideological foundations often overlap, leading to coordinated criminal activities (Okwuwada, 2023). The presence of ungoverned spaces in the NW region provides these groups with the opportunity to establish operational bases, from where they launch attacks on remote communities (Okon et al., 2023). This growing ideological influence, augmented by criminality, has heightened political instability in the NW, posing a severe threat to national security.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors, such as desertification and unfavourable climatic changes in the NW region, are significant drivers of armed banditry in Nigeria. These conditions have triggered climate-induced migration and intensified competition for scarce natural resources (Ojo et al., 2023). Climate change has notably influenced the recurring movement of pastoralists in search of pasture and water for their livestock, often resulting in conflict with crop farmers. The pastoralist-farmer conflict typically arises from competition over grazing land, water, and other essential resources (United Nations, 2018). This conflict has frequently escalated into armed confrontations, leading to significant losses of life and property in various NW communities.

The ecological pressure in the northern region, driven by an increasing demand for expansive farmlands, has further constrained the available grazing land for herders. Additionally, the impact of climate change has exacerbated desertification in the NW

region, leading to prolonged dry seasons and further contributing to the migration of herders seeking sustainable environments for their livestock. Between 2015 and 2019, approximately 7,000 people were reportedly killed, and about 1.3 million individuals were displaced internally due to violent clashes between farmers and herders in Nigeria (Corps, 2019).

Desertification, drought, and other adverse climatic effects not only disrupt traditional livelihoods but also deepen poverty among affected communities. This economic strain sometimes pushes individuals towards armed banditry and other forms of violent crime as a desperate means of survival.

Negative Impacts of Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria on National Security

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has faced numerous security challenges, including political violence, farmer-herder conflicts, Niger Delta militancy, and armed banditry. Each region of Nigeria grapples with unique security issues that undermine socio-economic development and national security. In the NW region, the persistent threat of armed banditry has profoundly affected various aspects of life, leading to significant negative impacts on education, economic activities, rural-urban migration, and humanitarian conditions.

Adverse Impact on Education

Armed banditry in the NW region has severely undermined educational development, impeding human capital growth and, in turn, socio-economic progress and national security (Ibrahim, 2020). The targeted attacks on schools, particularly for the kidnapping of students, have exacerbated Nigeria's already critical issue of out-of-school children (Osasona, 2023). According to the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), Nigeria accounts for the largest share of the world's 13.2 million out-of-school children (United Nations, 2021). The northern region, especially the NW, are disproportionately affected, with approximately 3.49 million out-of-school children, in stark contrast to the South-East, which has about 713,716 (Premium Times Special Report, September 2021; Ojo et al., 2023).

The alarming number of school closures due to banditry further illustrates the crisis. For instance, in Katsina state, 99 schools were closed, and in Zamfara state, 75 schools were shut down as of August 2022 due to the threat of attacks (Save the Children International, Nigeria, 2023). Vulnerable schools in rural areas have been relocated and merged with those in safer neighbouring towns as a temporary measure. However, these closures disrupt the education system and hinder the academic progress of countless students, leading to increased school dropout rates and a further rise in the number of out-of-school children.

The psychological impact on students and their families is also profound. Fear and anxiety about safety have discouraged many from pursuing formal education (Akpa-

Achimugu & Ibeh, 2023). This reluctance to attend school heightens the risk of children becoming susceptible to recruitment into criminal activities, perpetuating the cycle of violence and insecurity. While the government's response to close schools following attacks may prevent immediate harm, it fails to provide a sustainable solution to the broader issue.

Addressing the crisis requires a comprehensive approach from the FGN, involving the development of robust policies and strategic frameworks to protect educational institutions from banditry. This would not only safeguard the right to education for children in the NW region but also contribute to long-term national stability and socio-economic resilience.
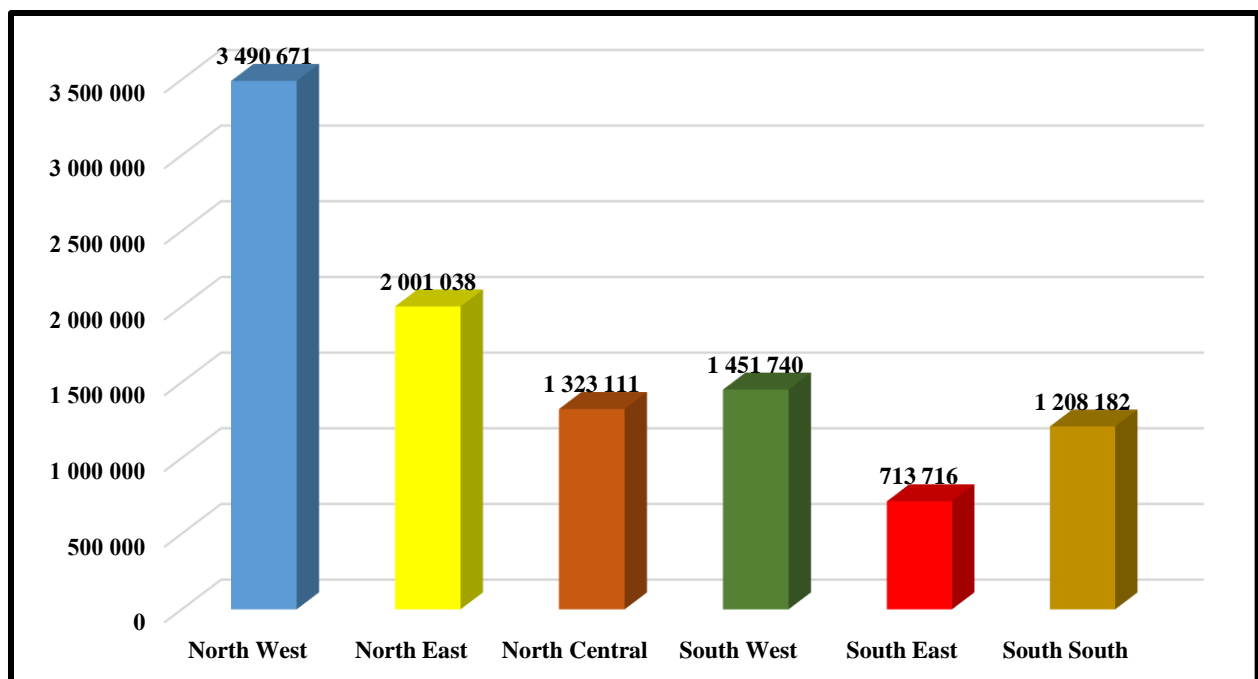

Figure 3: Bar Chart showing the number of out-of-school children in the six geo-political regions of Nigeria. Source: Researcher.

School	Number of students Abducted	Year of Abduction	Place of Abduction	State
Government Science Secondary School	344	December 2020	Kankara	Katsina
Islamiyya School	80	December 2020	Mahuta	Katsina
Government Girls Secondary School	279	March 2021	Jangebe	Zamfara
Bethel Baptist Church School	140	July 2021	Chikun LGA	Kaduna

Federal College of Forestry Mechanisation	39	March 2021	Afaka	Kaduna
Greenfield University	23	April 2021	Kaduna	Kaduna
Federal University, Gusau	24	September 2023	Gusau	Zamfara
LEA Primary/ Secondary School	287	March 2024	Kuriga	Kaduna
Almajari School	15	March 2024	Gidan Bakuso, Gada LGA	Sokoto

Figure 4: Breakdown of the number of school children abducted from schools in the NW Region from December 2020 to March 2024. Sources: 1. Vanguard, Punch, Thisday and Daily Trust Newspapers 2024, Government Bulletin (2021) and Ibrahim, A. (2020).

Humanitarian Impact

The protection of lives and property is a fundamental responsibility of the government and a core objective of Nigeria's National Security Strategy 2019. Despite various measures implemented by the government, armed banditry in the NW region has led to significant loss of lives and property, undermining national security. In 2021 alone, 213 people were killed in Katsina State and 1,192 in Kaduna State due to these attacks (Osasona, 2023). Furthermore, about 210,354 individuals were displaced in the NW region as a result of violence by armed bandits, severely impacting livelihoods and disrupting agricultural activities (International Crisis Group, 2020). The forced abandonment of homes and farms has led to reduced agricultural production, exacerbating food insecurity (Oyewole & Utibe, 2024).

The fatalities and economic losses caused by armed banditry have increased social risks and deepened poverty in affected communities. These attacks are particularly prevalent in areas with large expanses of ungoverned spaces, which provide safe havens for bandits and hinder prompt security responses (Ogbonnaya, 2020). Notable examples include the Rugu and Kumuku forests in Zamfara and Kaduna states, which serve as bases for launching attacks across the NW region (Ojo et al., 2023). The collaboration between armed bandits and insurgents in recruitment, training, and logistics has further escalated violence in the area (Ojo et al., 2023).

Disruption of Economic Activities

Armed banditry has severely disrupted economic activities in the NW region, deterring investment, causing job losses, and reducing revenue. Violent criminal acts, including banditry, negatively impact Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), with a reported decline of $132.59 billion (8%) in 2021 due to increasing violence (The Guardian-

Adekoya, 2021). Key markets in Zamfara and Sokoto states, which play crucial roles in regional trade, were closed in 2019 because of security concerns (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020). These closures have not only disrupted commercial activities but also reduced state revenue.

Agricultural productivity in the NW has also been heavily affected, as large populations in the region depend on farming for their livelihood. Recurrent banditry has led to the destruction of about 13,000 hectares in Zamfara and 21,316 hectares in Sokoto through burning and theft (International Crisis Group, 2021). This decline in agricultural output poses significant threats to the socio-economic well-being of the population, further undermining national security.

Rural-Urban Migration

The persistence of armed banditry has driven significant internal displacement, with over 210,354 people forced to flee their homes in 2019 across 171 communities in Zamfara, Sokoto, and Katsina states (UNHCR, 2020). Rural-urban migration driven by insecurity increases urban population pressures, stretching existing infrastructure and resources while negatively impacting rural agricultural production (Oyewole & Utibe, 2024). Such movements have worsened the humanitarian crisis in urban centers and contributed to declining socio-economic conditions in rural areas, threatening Nigeria's broader security and development goals.

Current Measures by the Government to Address Armed Banditry Attacks in Northwest Nigeria

The FGN and state governments in the NW region have implemented various strategies to combat armed banditry, employing both kinetic (military) and non-kinetic (soft power) approaches. Despite these efforts, the threat persists in many communities, indicating the need for more comprehensive strategies.

Kinetic Responses

Kinetic measures primarily involve the use of military and law enforcement operations. The FGN has deployed the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) and other security agencies to restore stability in affected areas. For example, the Nigeria Police launched Operation PUFF ADDER in 2016 to address the rising banditry (Madubuegwu & Abah, 2023). During the same period, the Nigerian Army and Air Force increased their presence through military campaigns like Operations SHARAN DAJI (2016–2019), HARBIN KUNAMA (2015–2019), and SAHEL SANITY (2017–2019), aimed at securing vulnerable communities (Babatunde, 2023).

To streamline command structures, the FGN established the Joint Task Force (JTF) Operation HADARIN DAJI in 2019, consolidating various anti-banditry efforts in Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Katsina states (Aina et al., 2023). The JTF Operation WHIRL PUNCH was also launched in 2020 to counter banditry in Kaduna and Niger

states. These coordinated operations have led to successes, including the neutralization of key bandit leaders, destruction of camps, and seizure of weapons (Babatunde, 2023). Additionally, in collaboration with Niger Republic, the FGN initiated a joint military patrol in 2020 to enhance cross-border security (Madubuegwu & Abah, 2023). Despite these efforts, continuous attacks highlight the need for sustained and more adaptive strategies.

Non-Kinetic Responses

Non-kinetic approaches focus on addressing the root causes of insecurity through socio-economic interventions. The FGN introduced the National Social Investment Programme (NSIP) in 2015, aimed at poverty alleviation and youth empowerment through initiatives like N-Power, National Cash Transfer Programme, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (Elemo, 2023). However, the impact of NSIP has been limited due to issues such as corruption and inadequate funding. The Safe School Initiative, launched in 2014 to protect educational institutions from attacks, also suffers from poor implementation and funding (Wilson, 2021; Onje, 2024). Although initially well-received, the initiative has struggled to create a secure environment for schools in the NW region. In a legislative move, the FGN enacted the Terrorism Prevention Act in 2011, recently updated to the Terrorism Prevention and Prohibition Act 2022, to enhance legal measures against violent acts (Attah, 2016). Another non-kinetic measure, the Pulaaku Initiative launched in 2023, aims to rebuild infrastructure and stimulate economic activity in affected areas with a budget of 50 billion Naira (33.5 million USD) (Nwanchukwu, 2024).

The establishment of the North West Development Commission (NWDC) in 2024 marks a further step in addressing the socio-economic fallout of banditry by focusing on infrastructure development (Akinwale & Aborisade, 2024). Meanwhile, state-led initiatives like the Amnesty Programmes in Katsina and Zamfara have yielded mixed results; while they initially reduced violence, a lack of trust and continued hostilities hampered long-term success (Omotuyi, 2021; Madubuegwu & Abah, 2023).

Challenges Associated with Government Efforts to Address Armed Banditry in the Northwest Region

The government's efforts to combat armed banditry in Nigeria's NW region face several significant challenges, including weak local governance, porous borders, criminal justice impediments, and inter-agency rivalry.

Weak Local Government Administration

Ineffective local governance is a key issue undermining efforts to address armed banditry in the NW region. The lack of autonomy for Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Nigeria, coupled with the influence of state governors who often control LGA funds, hampers their capacity to deliver essential services and development projects (Okorie et al.,

2023; Ejekwonyilo, 2024). As a result, poverty persists, with an estimated 68% of Nigerians living below the poverty line, which is linked to increased insecurity (Otekunrin et al., 2019).

The functionalist theory suggests that LGAs, as integral parts of Nigeria's political system, must operate effectively to support overall national stability. Weak LGA administration exacerbates poverty and limits government presence in rural areas, impacting socio-economic development and increasing the risk of violent activities, including armed banditry (Williams, 2012; Miguel, 2006).

Prevalence of Porous Borders

Nigeria's extensive border with countries like Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin remains largely unguarded, complicating efforts to curb armed banditry. With over 1,400 illegal border crossing points, including 217 along the NW region's border with Niger Republic, these gaps allow the free movement of armed groups (Asiwaju & Adeniyi, 2016). Only a fraction of these points is secured, enabling cross-border criminal activities that undermine national security.

The porous borders have also led to a significant influx of small arms and light weapons (SALW), estimated at around 10 million, mostly smuggled from conflict zones like Libya and the Sahel (Audu, 2021; UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2022). These arms fuel violence in the NW and North East regions, posing a major challenge to law enforcement agencies (Abdullahi, 2022). Addressing these security gaps through enhanced border management strategies is essential to stem the flow of weapons and combatants.
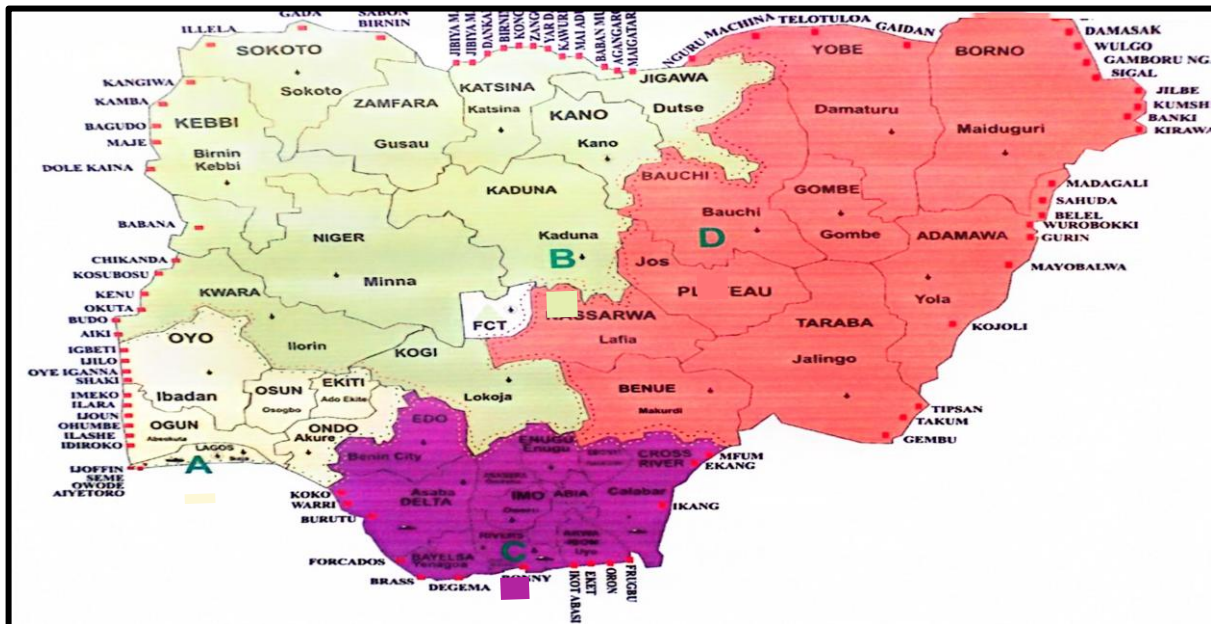

Figure 4: Map of Nigeria showing some illegal border points. Source: Nigeria Customs Service with amendment by the Researcher

Impediments of the Criminal Justice System

The effectiveness of a criminal justice system is vital for the timely prosecution of crimes, including armed banditry, to deter potential offenders. However, weaknesses in the Nigerian justice system often lead to delays that undermine justice, with trials dragging on for extended periods. Amnesty International's report described Nigeria's judicial system as a "conveyor belt of injustice, from beginning to end" (Amnesty International, 2008). It highlighted that at least 65% of inmates in Nigerian Correctional Service facilities had not been convicted, with many awaiting trial for up to 10 years (Amnesty International, 2008). These delays can result in the loss of evidence and witnesses, ultimately undermining efforts to combat armed banditry in the NW region.

Despite efforts to reform the justice system, such as the enactment of the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) in 2015, challenges persist. The ACJA aimed to address inefficiencies through innovations like stricter remand timelines, speedy trials, and the electronic recording of confessions (Udombana, 2022). While these measures have yielded some positive outcomes, the system still suffers from significant delays. For example, between 2010 and 2019, security agencies arrested 4,988 suspects for armed banditry and kidnapping, yet only 875 had been tried and sentenced by 2021 (Abdullahi, 2022). Such delays weaken the effectiveness of law enforcement and hinder efforts to address the rising threat of armed banditry in the region.

Inter-Agency Rivalry

Inter-agency rivalry is another critical issue, stemming from weak institutional coordination among stakeholders combating armed banditry. The complexity of Nigeria's security challenges requires a collaborative approach, yet conflicts of interest and a sense of superiority among agencies often hinder cooperation (Abdullahi, 2022). This problem dates back to 1977, when disputes arose between the Nigerian Army and the Nigeria Police over overlapping security roles in Port Harcourt (Odoma, 2014). Since then, recurring clashes among various security bodies have obstructed joint efforts in national security operations. Between 2018 and 2020 alone, there were 57 recorded incidents of inter-agency disputes involving the Nigeria Police and other law enforcement agencies (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Nigeria, 2021).

This unhealthy competition is frequently driven by mistrust and a lack of confidence among the leadership of different agencies, resulting in disjointed operations and ineffective intelligence sharing. Such inefficiencies compromise the government's ability to conduct intelligence-driven operations against armed banditry in the NW region. Effective inter-agency collaboration is critical for pooling resources and harmonizing efforts to achieve the shared goal of national security (Alao et al., 2018). According to functionalism theory, each security agency has a specific role to play, and when these

units collaborate effectively, they contribute to a coordinated effort in curbing armed banditry.

Strategies to Address Armed Banditry in Northwest Nigeria

To effectively address armed banditry in the NW region, the FGN could adopt a multi-pronged strategy that includes increased investment in human security, enhanced border management, criminal justice reform, and streamlining the roles of security agencies.

Investment in Human Security

While the Nigerian government has adopted both kinetic and non-kinetic measures against armed banditry, a greater emphasis on non-kinetic strategies is needed to address the root causes of violence, such as poverty, unemployment, and weak socio-economic conditions. Investment in human security, which prioritizes the welfare of individuals over state-centric approaches (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2015), is crucial.

The FGN's National Social Investment Programme (NSIP), initiated in 2015, aims to improve living standards through components like N-Power, the National Cash Transfer Programme, and others (Gulleng & Suchi, 2021; Elemo, 2023). However, these efforts require expansion and better state-level support to reduce poverty and unemployment. Legislative and policy reforms that prioritize human security can lead to the establishment of quick intervention programs in agriculture, rural development, and infrastructure, enhancing both socio-economic conditions and national security.

The recent Supreme Court ruling affirming financial autonomy for LGAs is a significant step toward grassroots development (Agbo, 2024). Strengthening this autonomy through free and fair LGA elections, potentially managed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), could promote sustainable development and stability.

Effective Border Control

Border security is essential in preventing transnational crimes, including armed banditry. The National Border Management Strategy (NBMS) 2019-2023 outlined measures to strengthen border control but left gaps in managing unmanned areas (NBMS, 2019). A Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS) could address these gaps by integrating technology like remote sensing and UAVs for real-time monitoring (Boukhalfa & Amine, 2022). This approach would enhance the existing Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS) and improve the Multinational Joint Task Force's operations.

Implementing the CIBMS requires coordinated efforts among stakeholders such as the Federal Ministry of Interior, Nigeria Customs Service, and other relevant agencies to ensure a holistic approach to border management.

Reforming the Criminal Justice System

Nigeria's criminal justice system needs comprehensive reform to expedite the prosecution of criminal cases, particularly those related to national security. Prioritizing criminal cases and limiting court adjournments could enhance judicial efficiency (Igbokwe, 2023). Digitalizing court proceedings and exploring legislative interventions can further streamline criminal justice administration.

Establishing a Special Tribunal for violent crime suspects, with a focus on armed banditry, could lead to faster trials and stronger enforcement of the Terrorism Prevention Act 2022. A dedicated committee should assess the feasibility and legal frameworks required to operationalize such tribunals.

Streamlining Roles of Security and Law Enforcement Agencies

The overlap in roles among security agencies has hindered their effectiveness in addressing armed banditry. Creating a Joint Intelligence Coordination Centre (JICC) in the NW region, modeled after the USA's Combined Intelligence Fusion Centre (CIFC), could foster better synergy and intelligence sharing (Lowe, 2004). This center would facilitate real-time intelligence processing and dissemination, improving response to security breaches.

Positioning the JICC within the Department of State Services (DSS) in Kaduna State, with sub-units in other NW states, would ensure coordinated efforts against armed banditry. Incorporating strategic communication within the JICC's operations would also counteract misinformation and strengthen public awareness about the threats of banditry.

Conclusion

The study reveals that addressing the menace of armed banditry in the NW region of Nigeria requires a holistic, non-kinetic approach that tackles the root causes of poverty and unemployment to enhance stability and national security. The rise of armed banditry in the region began in 2011 with the emergence of notorious groups led by Buharin Daji and Fulanin Kundu (Habila, 2017; Rufai, 2021). Collaboration between these groups and radical jihadist sects like Boko Haram and ISWAP has further exacerbated violent crimes (Maiangwa, 2014). Conflicts between pastoralists and farmers frequently escalate into armed banditry, resulting in significant loss of lives and property.

Armed banditry has severely affected educational development in the NW region by instilling fear in children and their parents, leading to a rise in the number of out-of-school children, which reached approximately 3.49 million in 2020 (Premium Times Special Report, September 2021; Ojo et al., 2023). These attacks have also driven rural populations from their communities, reduced agricultural productivity, and disrupted local economies, particularly in Zamfara and Sokoto states (Oyewole & Utibe, 2024).

Despite the adoption of kinetic and non-kinetic strategies by federal and state governments, armed banditry persists. The study identifies a lack of local government

autonomy as a critical factor contributing to weak administration and socio-economic stagnation in rural areas, exacerbating poverty and instability (Williams, 2012). The NW region remains the poorest in Nigeria, with the highest poverty rate (Otekunrin et al., 2019). Additionally, porous borders along the Nigeria-Niger corridor facilitate the movement of bandits and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW).

Recommendations for a non-kinetic approach can be proposed. Given these challenges, the government should prioritize non-kinetic strategies by increasing investments in human security to address poverty and unemployment—the primary drivers of armed banditry in the NW region. Legislative reforms to transfer the authority for local government elections from state electoral commissions to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) could strengthen grassroots governance and development.

The implementation of a CIBMS is also crucial. This system would integrate advanced technology and communication networks to improve border surveillance and control. Hi-tech surveillance tools, including UAVs and remote sensing devices, could significantly enhance border security.

Reforming the criminal justice system to prioritize cases based on their threat level would expedite trials and reduce delays. Legislative and policy interventions are necessary to digitize court proceedings and improve judicial efficiency. Establishing Special Tribunals to handle cases related to violent crimes, including armed banditry, would ensure timely justice and strengthen enforcement of relevant laws.

Furthermore, creating a JICC in the NW region would facilitate real-time intelligence sharing and enhance the operational capabilities of security agencies. This coordination would promote synergy among agencies, leading to more effective anti-banditry operations.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

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