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## **Building Peace the wrong Way: Amnesty Programme and Unending Banditry in Nigeria's Northwestern Region**

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### **Abstract**

*Convinced that a non-military approach is critical to ending vicious banditry in Nigeria's northwest given the failure of the military, the state governments of the region entered into amnesty deals that prioritised cash incentives in exchange for peace. In spite of the euphoria the deal generated, the amnesty had the opposite effect of what was intended. Given this background, this study examines the changing dynamics of banditry in Nigeria, it argues that three factors were critical to the failure of the amnesty programme as a potent peace-building framework. First, since the bandits operate in clusters without any discernible central leadership, granting amnesty to some groups merely stimulated the growth of new groups for material gains. Second, the complex relationship between terrorism in the northeast and banditry in the northwest has implications for the failure of the deal and the intensification of the crisis. Finally, since bandits operate transnationally across the Sahel region, they have no regard for national laws or governments in Nigeria. Consequently, they show contempt for various amnesty agreements with governments.*

**Keywords:** Amnesty programme, banditry, insecurity, peace-building, and northwest Nigeria

*I don't know what to tell them (the people of Katsina State). I cannot look at them in the face because we have failed to protect them.*

– Aminu Masari, the immediate governor of Katsina State (Punch, June 18, 2020)

### **1. Introduction**

The above statement from the former governor of beleaguered Katsina vividly illustrates the dreadful condition of insecurity that exists in northwestern Nigeria. In spite of all attempts to

address the situation, the remark conveys a gesture of despondency at the rising ferocity of armed

banditry in the area. While the violent operations of Boko Haram still pose a more complex security threat than the government is willing to acknowledge in the northeast, the security condition across Nigeria has been further complicated by armed banditry. The heavily armed bandits continue to relentlessly launch catastrophic raids in the northwest of Nigeria. Organised banditry is essentially a criminal operation driven by the desire to amass wealth, in contrast to the Boko Haram Islamist sect, whose ultimate purpose is the elimination of Nigeria's secular constitution and the corrupt democratic governmental institutions in favour of a Sharia-compliant theocratic society.

Cattle rustling, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, ongoing youth unemployment, illegal artisanal mining, poverty and inequality, and, most importantly, the growing instability in West Africa are the main causes of banditry (Campbell, 2020). The military, which is overstretched and demoralised due to its deployment in numerous states of the federation, adds to the intractability of the attacks. It is generally accepted that the majority of the bandits are Fulani in origin and originate from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, Senegal, and Mali (Olaniyan and Yahaya, 2016). Some of the bandit groups operating in the northwest, according to the Nigerian Police, "come from outside the country." Among other nationalities, we arrested Sudanese, Nigeriens, and Malians (Vanguard, 2020).

In response to escalating banditry in the northwest, the Nigerian government expanded the deployment of security personnel to the affected states, which resulted in the arrest and killing of some of the bandits. However, despite the military's efforts, the gangs' violent attacks rapidly increased, rendering the coercive strategy ineffective. Therefore, the governments of the northwestern states negotiated amnesty agreements with bandit leaders in 2019. Speaking about the need for the agreement, Governor Masari argued that a negotiated amnesty is the best option for achieving lasting peace (Campbell, 2020). The negotiated agreement did not, however, have the expected impact because armed banditry considerably expanded in the area. Masari claims that although "We went through with the amnesty programme because we wanted peace to reign in the state, and we did all that within our limited resources to see the initiative succeed, but peace has continued to elude the region" (Michael, 2020). In essence, the agreement called for the disarming of the bandits, the release of the kidnapped individuals, and, most importantly, an amnesty for the bandits rather than prosecution in exchange for an undisclosed sum of money. However, the amnesty was a dismal failure! Today, the vicious activities of these gangs are rapidly escalating insecurity challenge in Nigeria. A report by *Punch Newspaper* (2023) shows that at least 23 local government areas in three North-West states alone are still under the control of bandits. This report underscores the gravity of the situation. Both farmers and residents in the affected 23 LGAs in Sokoto, Zamfara and Kebbi states have abandoned their farms and communities, fleeing rising banditry. Not only has this criminality affected farming – the largest of employer of labour in Nigeria, several villages have been deserted. The bandits enforce the payment of tributes to farm or harvest crops, collect taxes, and kill randomly those who default. In the same way, in Niger State, Governor Abubakar Sani-Bello, said seven of the state's 25 LGAs were under siege of banditry. In August 17, 2023, bandits shot down military helicopter and slaughtered 36 soldiers in a deadly confrontation (Punch, 2023). These actions revealed the increasing sophistication of the bandits and their competences for lethal operations. Certainly, these killings mimic a war situation. With physical insecurity being constituted by these criminals, food insecurity has also got worse

leading to the intensification in extreme poverty in the region specifically and the entire nation generally.

Even though literature on banditry in northern Nigeria has proliferated (Okoli and Agada, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014; Okoli and Ukwu, 2019; Olaniyan, 2018; Olayoku, 2014). the government's amnesty offer for bandits has not, however, gotten the scholarly consideration it merits. Given this background, this paper examines banditry in the context of the negotiated amnesty agreements. It argues that rather than leading to a de-escalation, the deals really had the opposite effect, escalating the crisis throughout the Northwest and beyond. The study makes use of quantitative data sourced from institutional reports, including WANEP, ISS, Terrorism Monitor (Jamestown Foundation), Amnesty International, and International Crisis Group, as well as personal interview data. Additionally, relevant data was gathered from secondary sources which include journal articles and other library resources.

## **2. Rising Insecurity and Armed Banditry in the Northwest**

In general, banditry refers to the use of violence by subnational criminal organisations to further their economic goals rather than advancing a political or religious cause. Contrary to ideological or religious movements, which always have fundamental objectives, banditry consists solely of illegal acts directed towards people and organisations for the purpose of accumulating wealth. It includes murder, armed robbery, raiding of villages, kidnapping for ransom, rape, cattle rustling, and other forms of armed violence (Kuna and Ibrahim, 2016). According to recent security studies, there is a direct correlation between the prevalence of armed banditry committed by organised crime groups and the waning authority and power of governments in the Global South (Saheed and Danjibo, 2019). Although cattle rustling, village raids, and robberies are all forms of armed banditry that have existed in Nigeria for as long as the country itself, in recent years, the crime has gradually evolved into a sophisticated and well-organized criminal network that poses a serious security threat to the affected states. Banditry in the northwest has turned into a terrible humanitarian catastrophe, illustrating the country's ongoing socioeconomic malaise and general lack of effective national leadership.

Although the majority of research on armed banditry in Nigeria tends to concentrate on the ongoing conflict between Fulani pastoralists and local farmers (Ladan, 2014; Misereor, 2018; Ahmad, 2019; Ojo, 2020). the problem is much more nuanced than this narrative suggests. The internationalisation of armed banditry and its link to the jihadist terrorism of Boko Haram, demand a rigorous effort to comprehend the peculiar threat that armed banditry poses and the reasons why amnesty deals designed to address it have failed. There is not much evidence to support Okoli and Ukwu's claim that the attacks carried out by the bandits represent the premeditated attempts by Islamist groups to further the Islamization of northern Nigeria as a whole (Okoli and Ukwu, 2019). Contrary to Islamist jihadist terrorists, banditry is motivated by wealth accumulation rather than any ideological basis. According to Ojo bandit behaviour lacks any political motivation (Ojo, 2020). It seems overstated to link the motives of armed robbers or kidnappers to ideological or political goals. They are bands of criminals driven only by nefarious motives to satisfy their pecuniary needs (McGregor, 2014). Muslims make up the vast majority of the victims of the crisis in Zamfara, Katsina and Niger states where the crisis is most severe.

Continuous armed banditry in the northwest is a sign of a social disorder, made worse by inequality and governance crisis. The criminals are taking advantage of this social chaos. In fact, the situation of human security in Nigeria has gotten worse due to the horrific atrocities committed by bandits. According to a report by the West Africa Network of Peace-building (WANEP), the bandits in Northwest have killed over a thousand people in 2019 alone, the majority of them were civilians (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) (2020). According to the Northern youth movement, which operates under the auspices of Arewa Youth Forum (AYF), attacks by the bandits in the state claimed 11,000 adult males and left 44,000 children orphaned (Vanguard, 2020). Zamfara State has been the epicentre of the conflict. Abdulaziz Yari, the state's former governor, said roughly 500 villages had been destroyed between 2011 and 2018 (Premium Times, 2018).

Contrary to the petty banditry committed by individuals that predominated during the previous epoch, the modern banditry is well-organized and depends on a network of syndicated criminal gangs. Banditry has evolved from a low-level crime into a ruthless and financially motivated multinational criminal business with the introduction of sophisticated weapons, mostly from the chaotic Sahel. An avalanche of criminal targets is made possible by the robust local economy, which is centred mostly on cattle farming, crop production, and unregulated informal mining. In most agricultural areas, the lack of a national security structure has provided a significant opportunity for criminal opportunism and impunity (The New Humanitarian, 2013, 19). Cattle rustling, which is predominantly motivated by associated accumulative inclinations, is the most significant and well-discussed aspect of armed banditry in the Northwest. According to Olaniyan (2018, 97), "Fulani herdsman have practised cattle raiding for many years as a cultural pattern of showing prowess and of restocking depleted stock." The current brutal armed banditry marks a transformation from this former traditional practise of cattle raiding leading to a well-coordinated and well-funded banditry in nearly every state in the northwest. As a result, Fulani herdsman and fighters are frequently linked to the most recent wave of banditry given their historical roots and the ethnicity of the majority of bandits apprehended (Campbell, 2020). Ojo highlights that there is evidence that Fulani cattle breeders have engaged in cattle rustling in northern Nigeria after losing their herds to inclement weather, sickness, or violent conflict (Ojo, 2020, 20).

Writing on the linkage between cattle rustling and banditry in 2017, Bagu and Smith (2017, 5) aptly capture the unfolding deadly scenario, observing that "in North-West Nigeria, criminal gangs [bandits] are reportedly engaging in organised rural banditry to profit off livestock theft and trade..." Cattle rustling by armed bandits thrives in the northwest due to many factors. The region's topography and political economy are two of these that are crucial. The crime naturally fits into the unusual ecology of the region where traditional itinerant livestock husbandry is a pervasive practise and the herders themselves have resisted any type of nomadic pastoralism changes in accordance with international best practice. The largely unregulated nomadic pastoralism is marked by systemic contradictions, particularly in Nigeria's northwest and north-central regions, one of which is the escalating phenomenon of "killer herdsman" orchestrating all types of rural crimes throughout the country (Okoli and Lenshiie, 2018).

Additionally, the environmental peculiarities of the northern hinterlands and borderlands, which include rocky mountainous terrains and dense forests, have made them vulnerable to opportunistic exploitation by various bandit gangs. The breadth of the zone's landmass exacerbates this

difficulty. In fact, the security personnel are rarely able to access the vast tracts of forest reserves that are present in the northwest. According to Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016), the majority of livestock rustling banditry occurs in state-owned forest reserves such the Kamuku, Kiyabana, and Fagore forests in the northwest. These forested areas make the ideal hiding places for bandits trying to flee from security agents. In addition to the treacherous terrain, which the bandits are more familiar with, the Nigerian security forces are woefully underprepared and lacking in motivation to risk their lives searching the jungles for criminals brandishing high-tech weapons. In essence, various bandits and other criminal elements, including terrorists have turned forest reserve areas into safe havens. It is increasingly appearing that the military has left these outlaws in these “ungoverned spaces” to their devices. Taylor offers a useful explanation of what ungoverned spaces are. He said:

A situation in which a provincial, local, tribal, or autonomous government is unable or unwilling to fully or effectively govern the local population due to insufficient governance capacity, a lack of political will, gaps in legitimacy, the presence of conflict, or constrictive social norms. Under-governed, poorly governed, contentious, and exploited locations should all be considered to be ungoverned (Taylor, 2016, 18).

Taylor's investigation makes it clear that the pervasive and growing armed banditry in northern Nigeria is just a poorly handled security crisis that has been building for years. Armed bandits, notably in northern Nigeria, have taken advantage of the phenomenon of poorly controlled borderlands, under-governed or ungoverned forestlands. In addition to the previously mentioned poorly managed areas, the ruling political elites' corruption and incompetence have rendered the government dangerously unable to exercise its authority within its borders, leaving the populace to fend for themselves. This has become increasingly clear in recent years due to the state's flagrant displays of a pathological inability to govern effectively, further fueling the perception that Nigeria is fast turning into a failed state. Northwest is vulnerable to armed banditry due to the prevalence of the informal economic activities, the existence of criminal networks connected to international actors, access to modern weaponry, and an insufficient government presence (Ojo, 2020).

The high rate of kidnapping shows a growing aspect of banditry in the northwest, in addition to cattle rustling. In places like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna states, bandits are abducting people on a regular basis. The desire for financial gain through ransom is what propels the crime. According to Okoli and Agada (2014) the victims are typically those that the bandits believe have some Kidnap Ransom Value (KRV) due to their socioeconomic standing Mohammed Sani, a notorious bandit who was apprehended by police, admitted kidnapping several people and killing a great deal of abducted victims since they could not pay ransom. According to Police Public Relations Officer DCP Frank Mba, while parading the suspect, says that Sani specialises in banditry and livestock rustling and has over 100 men directly under his command, emphasizing that he "carried out his operations mainly in Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, and Zamfara States" (Adepegba, 2020). Within the wider banditry operation, Sani, a "Sector Commander," says:

I have lost count of the number of operations I have participated in, but we usually release those on whose heads we collect ransoms, while anyone, who

could not pay or his relatives could not pay, was killed. We have killed over 50 persons who did not pay ransom (Adepegba, 2020).

The crime has sparked considerable mistrust between the Hausa population and the Fulani ethnic group in Zamfara State, the centre of banditry in the northwest, with the former accusing the latter of committing banditry in their territories (Amnesty International, 2018). The state's current position is concerning since certain bandit groups have become territorial and sedentary, operating in the forest areas where criminal impunity rules supreme amid the "authority" of the kingpin-bandits (Okoli and Ukwu, 2019). Despite all attempts to address the situation, the suspected Fulani marauders' relentless attacks in Kaduna State have widened the gaps in terms of religion and ethnicity between the Fulani- and Christian-dominated Southern Kaduna. Zamfara State, where approximately 500 villages were pillaged by criminals between 2011 and 2018, was hardest hit by this type of banditry (Premium Times, 2018). Additionally, Kaduna State, particularly Southern Kaduna, has emerged as a new hotspot for rural banditry resulting in the killing of hundreds of locals. The 2018 Amnesty International's report claims:

Several villages in Birnin-Gwari Local Government Area of Kaduna State continue to face security challenges similar to those in Zamfara State. Their situation is even more volatile, due to the proximity of the LGA to Zamfara State. The forests that cut across the two States (Kaduna and Zamfara States), made the residents vulnerable to repeated abductions (Amnesty International, 2018).

In addition to the deaths of persons and destruction of property, tens of thousands of locals fled to the neighbouring Republic of Niger, while others are still suffering in the appalling conditions in Internally Displaced Camps throughout the region (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020). Continuous village attacks have also had detrimental effects on economic activity, which has led to decreased productivity throughout the zone.

The various sites of artisanal mining activities in Zamfara and Katsina States were repeatedly raided by bandits, who stole the gold and money while kidnapping the miners, especially the foreign ones, for ransom (Adeniyi, 2018). The Federal Government had to ban mining in the area in 2019 due to the intricate connections between banditry and mining operations, but illegal mining still takes place with the bandits maintaining control of the operations (Igundele, 2020). The continued proliferation of weaponry in the area has been linked to mining profits. Bello Matawalle, the governor of Zamfara State, warned that foreign arms dealers trade weapons for gold on August 26, 2020. He partly blamed the continued banditry in the state on a collaboration between the international cartel that smuggles weapons, and various armed bandit groups in the Sahel (Ogunmade, 2020). The flow of weaponry into Nigeria from the Sahel has increased since the destabilisation of Libya following the fall of Muammar Ghadafi's dictatorship (Gaye, 2018). Nigerian terrorists and bandits have taken advantage of the disarray in the Sahel to have access to sophisticated weapons.

The government response to the situation has primarily been reactive thus far, focusing mostly on the military approach. Expecting a decisive victory over the bandits has become a false optimism, given the military's generally subpar handling of security issues in Nigeria in recent years. Without any comprehensive strategic planning to stop the marauders, it has responded to the security dilemma in the northwest in a situational manner, devoid of any holistic strategic planning to defeat

the marauders. Armed surveillance and carefully planned airstrikes that are directed at the many flashpoints make up the bulk of the military strategy against banditry. But instead of destroying the bandit organisations, the aerial bombardments have merely caused the bandits to disperse throughout several locations in the northwest. While they continue to operate in Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna, armed banditry has become more prevalent in formerly unaffected areas like Niger, Kebbi, and Sokoto.

### **3. Amnesty initiatives and Upsurge in Banditry**

Given the seemingly intractable banditry in spite of the military efforts against it, the state governments in the area considered granting amnesty to the bandits in order to induce a cease-fire. These varying shades of amnesty deals for the bandits were primarily premised on what seems to be a somewhat successful amnesty scheme to address militancy in Nigeria's delta region granted by the Federal Government. It is essential to examine the idea of amnesty within the context of peace-building efforts before delving into the analysis of amnesty for the bandits. The amnesty programme has generated scholarly discussion in recent years as a real non-coercive tool for tackling socio-political unrest (Laplante, 2012; Scharf, 2007, Saheed and Danjibo, 2019). For instance, Slye stated that amnesty is a viable non-military option that can be used to resolve political impasses and other social crises, majority of which are ethically defensible (Slye, 2002). The use of amnesty has gained popularity as a non-military strategy to promote peace and stability in a society beset by crises as conflicts grow more and more impossible to win militarily especially in most African states.

The modicum of success it has had in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger delta indicates eloquently about the inherent potential of amnesty in the peace-building process. Slye (2002) maintains that amnesties within the context of conflict management circles are "less a reflection of our increased tolerance of impunity and more of an indication of the force of the international human rights movement" (Slye, 2002, 175). This is more so given the growing inability of states, particularly in the Third World to assert their authority within their borders. Although the arbitrary use of amnesty tends to violate administration of criminal justice and encourage blatant impunity, amnesty deals have become critical in addressing criminality resulting from social injustice. The Niger delta conundrum aptly captures the essence of the utility of amnesty since the militants' agitation is based on the destruction of their livelihood through the activities of oil majors in the region. Amnesty deals are frequently seen as providing temporary social stability and are not essential to the long-term stability that is necessary for the enjoyment of basic human rights and the rule of law (Obi 2010). Ledum Mittee, the Chairman of the Niger/Delta Amnesty Committee, for example, has noted the following in light of the implementation of the amnesty programme in Niger delta. According to him:

I have my difficulty with the way they (Federal Government) have presented amnesty as a solution (to Niger Delta militancy) in itself. They seem to be saying that we are not going to prosecute some people if they drop their arms and then that will bring peace. Anybody who thinks that way must be dreaming (Albert, 2015).

Although incidences of vandalism to oil infrastructure have significantly decreased as a result of the implementation of amnesty to meet the particular issues faced by the people of the region, this

measure has only had a modicum of success. Crimes like oil theft conflict involving 'ex-militants' and state agents continue to occur. As a result, Sadat claimed that the amnesty programme lacked much moral or persuasive force (Sadat, 2007). Despite skepticism regarding amnesty, the practical efficacy of the agreement, when implemented by state actors in a climate of openness and accountability, reflects an effort to support engender peace and facilitate growth of human rights.

Since the execution of amnesty in the country's oil-bearing region has generally been regarded to be successful, it has, therefore, been suggested to address other comparable security challenges in the country. Indeed, persuaded by the appropriateness of the programme, President Muhammadu Buhari made amnesty, which entails the rehabilitation and the reintegration of the deradicalised ex-Boko Haram terrorists one of the arrow-heads of the regime's counterterrorism efforts through Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Despite the fact that armed banditry has no overtly stated political or religious objectives like Boko Haram group, certain state governments such as Zamfara, Katsina, and Sokoto States in northwest similarly came up with amnesty deals in July 2019. the government of Katsina State, defended the need for the agreement by stating that amnesty continues to be the greatest path to a lasting peace (Campbell, 2020).

The state governments of the troubled region believed that once cash incentives in the name of amnesty were provided to the bandits, banditry and everything related with it would vanish because it was widely accepted that unemployment and rural poverty were the causes of the banditry. Consequently, the agreements were primarily framed in terms of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR). In this context, disarmament suggested that the bandits were compelled to hand over their weapons, and demobilisation meant the disengagement of bandits from their hideouts in the forests and various armed groups. Reintegration, the final phase, comprised providing financial aid for resettlement to hundreds of previously imprisoned bandits who had undergone rehabilitation as well as the repentant bandits (This Day, 2019). The local security frameworks comprised of youth volunteers (*Yan sakai*) founded by the state governments to combat armed banditry was outlawed to ensure that the bandits are no longer harassed by anybody.<sup>49</sup> This was carried out to ensure the success of the amnesty.

In essence, the amnesty efforts produced some promising outcomes soon after they were put into place. Attacks decreased, weapons were recovered, kidnapped victims were freed, and cows that had been rustled were returned to their owners. According to the Zamfara State government, 525 hostages, mostly women and children were freed as a result of the amnesty campaign (Jonathan, 2019). The notorious bandit leader, Sada was among the bandits who accepted the gesture and voluntarily relinquished their weapons (Okezie and Ndidi, 2020).

However, the amnesty programmes unexpectedly acted in the opposite direction by increasing the number of armed bandits in northwest at the end of 2019 (the same year the bandits accepted amnesty). Those who accepted the deals after renouncing banditry, went back to the crime. Indeed, the crime became more ferocious in Zamfara and Katsina States (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020). The resurgence of banditry in the area was so severe that Katsina State Governor Masari expressed sorrow for having pardoned the criminals and vowed never to do so again (Michael, 2020). According to him, "...some bandits who accepted amnesty betrayed this government and became enemies of the state, and were among those fueling insecurity in the state" (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Thus, it becomes apposite to comprehend the factors behind the failure of amnesty and intensification of banditry in the northwest. There are undoubtedly some issues with the amnesty. Even though the amnesty persuaded bandits to accept the terms of the agreement and surrender their weapons to the governments, the way the programme was conceived and carried out by the governors of the affected states primarily suggested that their primary objective was to secure peace for their respective states rather than address the various crisis-related causes. In the beginning, government representatives and important members of the armed bandit groups were involved in the negotiations that led to the amnesty. The bandits, meanwhile, are motley of violent gangs with no clear central leadership. Some bandit groups do not function like militias; in fact, International Crisis Group claims that they occasionally act independently, engage in combat with one another and some cahoots with the local Emirs and Chiefs in exchange for rewards for crucial information.<sup>55</sup> Some people engage in banditry without being affiliated with any gang. They turn to banditry primarily to survive in a setting of acute poverty and injustice.

While some bandits submitted their weapons in exchange for financial assistance from the governments, the controversial deal unintentionally encouraged the unemployed youth to turn to crime, which led to the spread of armed bandits in the area. Tim Iwuagwu, a former naval engineer, thinks it is a bad idea to provide amnesty to robbers when questioned about its appropriateness. It's like approving of these crooks' malicious actions. It will convey the incorrect messages to the larger unemployed persons in the region. It should not have been encouraged in the first place (Interview: 22 December 2019). Both the bandits and the locals saw the amnesty as a surrender by the government, which lacked the necessary political will and superior military might to combat crime. The amnesty scheme turned into a mean of extracting benefits and opportunities from the governments, particularly for the economically disempowered people and other people with criminal tendencies in the area. Therefore, armed bandit groups proliferated notwithstanding amnesty. It is important to recognise that the agreement was simply imposed by the governments on the bandits without any type of compensation (justice) to the victims or transparency prior to its execution.

Since the bandit gangs were not defeated by the state governments, the negotiated amnesty did not include the crucial reconciliation that is a key element of amnesty. Even Governor Masari even vouched for the bandits, claiming they are ready to disarm. According to him, "The first stage of the amnesty is about the release of some of them [bandits]. We will start reconciliation between them and their neighbours" (Lakemfa, 2020). How, in reality, could gangs of rapists, killers, kidnappers, rustlers, and armed robbers coexist with their victims as decent neighbours who were not given compensation for their losses? There was absolutely no justice served to the freed bandits, not even a conviction or a court case!

In fact, the state government in Zamfara declared that it would no longer enter into agreement involving cash incentive with the so-called repentant criminals in order to stop them from using the fund to purchase more weapons. According to him, a repentant bandit would receive two calves in exchange for each firearm they turned in. We don't want to give them money because we fear that they would spend it on new weapons. (Umar, 2020). Instead, in exchange for each weapon turned in, the authorities promised the former bandits two cows. It appears that the negotiators were unaware of how difficult it would be for different criminal gangs operating transnationally without centralised leadership to adhere to agreements. Upset by the upsurge in criminality in the

aftermath of amnesty, Governor Masari bemoans the persistent banditry in his state, saying: "My government initially introduced amnesty for cattle rustlers, they changed operations and introduced kidnapping, and later introduced invasion of villages for the sole purpose of killing the people" (Danjuma, 2020). This claim suggests that criminality would not have reached the current high level if the government had not given bandits amnesty.

Closely related to the argument advanced above was the infiltration of the northwest by the Boko Haram terrorists. According to numerous reports, there are bandit groups in the troubled northwest that have strong ties to Boko Haram/ISWAP groups in northeast. These groups reportedly use the proceeds from kidnapping, cattle rustling, robberies, village raids, and other related criminal activities to finance the region's seemingly unstoppable Islamist insurgency. The banditry in the northwest is being carried out by groups with affiliations with Boko Haram terrorists, according to Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Muhammed Adamu. The existence of Islamist terrorists in the area shows that armed banditry is much more complicated than what can be stopped by cash incentives disguised as amnesty agreements. The collaboration between the two outlawed groups was also emphasized in the leaked memo the immediate past Governor of Katsina, el-Rufai sent to the President Buhari in August 2022. In the memo, the ex-governor, revealed that "bandits and Ansaru terrorists (another faction of the Boko Haram sect) were 'consolidating their grip on many communities' in the state and running a parallel government" (Adebayo, 2022).

Armed banditry has gained more confidence, according to the Defence Headquarters, as a result of the presence and growing actions of Islamist terrorists in the northwest (Sahara Reporters, 2020). The prominent International Crisis Group also notes that the return of the previously dormant Boko Haram offshoot group: Ansaru in the northwest contributes to the region's worsening security issues. (International Crisis Group, 2020). Samuel (2020), in a piece for the respected ISS Think Tank, outlines how Boko Haram is taking advantage of the current situation in the northeast to broaden its influence. Jihadist organisations are progressively expanding their foothold in the northwest as security there continues to worsen. They are doing this by capitalising on the current security situation and the amnesties being provided by the governments of the zone. It would be thoughtless to expect Boko Haram's affiliates in the northwest to accept any sort of compromise after they resolutely rejected the amnesty that President Jonathan's administration had proposed in 2012. By accepting amnesties to be law-abiding, Boko Haram/ISWAP cannot risk losing one of their main sources of financing. The distinction between jihadi groups and other criminal networks can be very thin in Nigeria, as it is in most of West Africa, according to Campbell and McCaslin (2020), they also note that jihadi groups there use kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and drug trafficking to fund their operations. The amnesties in the northwest were solely used as an advantage by the terrorists who had become outlaws to continue their jihadi activities in the northeast. Additionally, there are bandit organisations in the northeast that are connected to jihadist organisations, and they are a major source of funding for terrorism in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States through the sale of rustled livestock and other related illicit enterprises (Jeremiah, 2020). The audacious abduction of 344 secondary schoolboys in Kankara, Katsina State on 11 December 2020, shows the growing alliance between Boko Haram terrorist group and bandit group. Abubakar Shekau-led faction of the Islamist group formally claimed responsibility for the dastardly act, with the slain Islamist leader maintaining that 'our brothers were behind the abduction in Katsina' (Burke and Abrak, 2020).

The fact that armed banditry is no longer a local security threat is another crucial factor to blame for the failed amnesty deals and escalating armed banditry. The crisis has been regionalized, affecting citizens of many West African nations. According to a statement made by Governor Masari, "several of the bandits operating in the state were from the neighbouring Niger Republic and were doing so in collaboration with their counterparts from Zamfara, Kaduna and Sokoto States" (Michael, 2020). Although the bandit violence in the northwest and the Boko Haram terrorism in the northeast reflect troubling security issues within Nigeria, their external component has made the issues worse. In fact, the presence of foreign combatants in Nigeria is a long-standing problem. Several non-Nigerians participated actively in the deadly crises in the 1980s violent religious revolt that was sparked by the Maitatsine movement. In actuality, Muhammed Marwa, the sect's founder, was a Cameroonian, and many of his adherents were from Cameroon and Niger (Adesoji, 2010). The same challenge is blatantly evident in the upsurge in banditry today.

Similarly, Mohammed Adamu, the ex-Inspector General of Police (IGP), remarks that: "We have realised that most banditry has an international component. The bandits are foreign nationals. Among other nationals, we arrest Sudanese, Nigeriens, and Malians (Omonobi and Salem, 2020). In his reaction to the regionalisation of banditry in the northwest, Timothy Iwuagwu blames the current crisis on the impoverishment and the lawlessness in the Sahel region. According to him, "The death of the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi led to a state of lawlessness, thereby resulting in the influx of gunmen with sophisticated arms into Nigeria and some other nations" (Interview 22 December, 2019). Effective border management is extremely challenging in Nigeria due to the distinctive nature of its borders with its adjacent neighbours to the north, which encourages cross-border trafficking in persons, weapons, drugs, and other contraband.

The European colonial legacies, particularly the arbitrary balkanization of the continent with little respect for the ethnic and tribal configurations, have continued to have an impact on the seemingly unstoppable cross-border criminality by criminal gangs. Since cross-border movement among the artificially divided tribes is perceived by the people as part of their internal movement and not as moving across countries, the Lake Chad riparian states are unable to effectively police their international boundaries that cut through cultural and ethnic groups. The adoption of the ECOWAS mobility protocol, which was designed to speed up regional integration, has significantly expedited cross-border movement and exacerbated the problem of transnational insecurity, particularly in the Nigeria's northern region. In essence, the proliferation of security threats outside national borders has been accelerated by globalisation processes, blurring the putative line between internal and external security threats. The porousness of Nigeria's borders has now been exploited by bandit groups, Islamic terrorist remarks that numerous armed bandits of Fulani descent have joined gangs engaged in cross-border armed banditry in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Senegal, and Mali.

In order to combat crime and stop the smuggling of arms to Nigeria, the Government of Nigeria decided to close all of Nigeria's landed borders in August 2019 (The Guardian, 2017). The rise in criminality in the aftermath of the amnesty deals in the northwest made total border closure imperative. Professor Bala Hussain, the coordinator of the Red Cross in Katsina State, has described the amnesties as 'premature'. He casts aspersion on the deals, saying, "They have not set up all the mechanisms, or done the groundwork before going into the bush.... It is very disheartening...because these [bandits] are conflict entrepreneurs" (Munshi, 2019). The

regionalisation of the armed banditry in West Africa with a high concentration in Nigeria's northwest cannot be simply addressed by offering an incentive to these conflict entrepreneurs.

#### 4. Conclusion

While Islamist terrorist groups are waging jihad with the Federal troops in their quest to establish a Sharia-compliant caliphate in the northeastern Nigeria, scores of multinational bandit groups are posing serious threat to human security in northwest through ceaseless attacks. The emergence of banditry signifies the evolution of the long-standing practise of cattle rustling among numerous contending Fulani pastoralist clans into organised regional criminal networks. The consequences of this crime against humanity have been enormous, causing a terrible humanitarian catastrophe and a significant socioeconomic downturn in the northwestern Nigeria. Amnesty deals were essentially designed to address this challenge but these deals did not only fail to curb banditry they also worsen the climate of insecurity in the region. The failure is not unconnected to the various factors. The nature and dimension of banditry as cross-national criminal gangs in the northwest coupled with the lack of discernable leadership and their growing nexus with the Islamist Boko Haram sect doomed the contentious deals. The negotiated amnesty deals, which took the shape of 'financial settlements', represents one of the wrongest ways to build peace in troubled society.

To defeat banditry, the Nigerian security system should work with local community watch organisations such as *Yan Kasai* to bolster local policing. The current security situation necessitates the effective participation of the residents in conflict management. For instance, residents of the Katsina village of Karaukarau fought off criminals who assaulted their community in an attempt to carry out raiding (HassanWuyo, 2020). Ten women who had been kidnapped by the gang were successfully freed when the locals confronted them. The bravery of the villagers shows that, with the right assistance and legal protection, they are capable of protecting themselves. Government and community cooperation will enable effective management of the forested areas that criminals now use as safe havens. It will be easier to restore normalcy to the area if the illicit users are prevented from dominating the reserves.

A successful counterterrorism campaign against the Boko Haram/ISWAP group in the northeast is crucial for the decimation of armed banditry in the northwest. This study has shown that there is a strong link between armed bandits and terrorist organisations operating in the northeast, which helps to explain partly how the crisis became violent and amnesty-defying. The expansion of Boko Haram's influence towards the northwest in order to get funding for its activities suggests that the fight against banditry should be viewed as a means of combating Islamist terrorism in Nigeria. To stop the influx of foreign armed militants and weapons into Nigeria, the military would have to effectively police national borders through the deployment of modern surveillance technology. The prevailing military mission code-named 'Operation Sahel Sanity' charged with the assignment of combating banditry should, of necessity, incorporate border policing in the region to check the inflow of undesirable elements into the country.

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