Killer Herdsmen and the Quest for Food Security in Nigeria: A Looming Crisis

By

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Abstract

Since the advent of the 4th Republic in 1999, the activities of killer herdsmen in Nigeria has become a worrisome phenomenon to many stakeholders in the country, especially those in the agriculture, political, security and religious circles. Though the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria itself is not an entirely new phenomenon, but the frequency and impunity of the attacks, in recent times, calls to question the integrity and capacity of the present government to uphold its constitutional responsibility of protecting the lives and properties of all its citizens. Consequently, using the social conflict theory as a premise, this paper examines the prevailing social contradictions within the Nigerian society that has, over the years, influenced and reinforced the perception and orientation of the people as regards land ownership, competition and utilization. Furthermore, the paper posits that though the conflict has a complex socio-economic and political context; but it is still basically a resource-based conflict embedded in age-long historical, cultural and religious undertones. It also argues that Nigeria is presently at the brink of a national food crisis, due to the incessant herders-farmer clashes in the country which have led to the loss of many innocent lives, the destruction of farmlands and livestock, as well as the displacement of thousands of people and communities across the federation. However, the paper concludes by proffering some cogent and pragmatic socio-economic, political and security measures that could be taken to address the current crisis and ensure food security in Nigeria, in the long run.

Keywords: Herdsmen, Farmers, Killer-Herdsmen, Crisis & Food Security.

Introduction

Over the years, since the attainment of independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigeria has had a chequered political history. In the course of nation-building, its political foundation has not only been shaken but its sovereignty has often been threatened by a myriad of existential challenges; which includes intermittent military coup d'état in the 1960s and 1970s, violent religious crises in the 1980s, ethnic militancy in the 1990s, as well as banditry and terrorism since the turn of the new millennium (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

However, after almost sixty years of peaceful co-existence as a nation-state, one major issue that has become a reoccurring decimal in the Nigerian federation is the herders-farmers conflict. As noted by Ojo (2019), a single day or week hardly passes by without fresh

incident of violent killings and wanton destruction of properties and farmlands being reported across the country. In the rural areas, these killer-squads have become so daring and sophisticated in their activities that they now constitute a serious threat to agricultural production and food security in Nigeria.

According to Amnesty International (2018), in the last two years or so, over 3,641 persons have lost their lives and over a million more have become permanently displaced from their homes as a result of the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria. The Human Right group blamed this catastrophic agricultural, economic and human loss on systemic failure and gross incompetence on the part of the Nigerian government and its security agencies because of their inability to decisively intervene and resolve the issue once and for all.

Concpetual Clarificaiton

Farmer: Typically, a farmer is a person that earns a living by cultivating the land, especially one who owns or manages a farm settlement. But the Cambridge Dictionary (2010), on the other hand, defines a farmer as someone who owns a piece or several acres of land (and possibly a barn) where he or she grows fruits or vegetables and raises cattle either for personal consumption or for sale at the local market.

Herdsmen: The Collins Dictionary (2012) defines a herdsman as somebody, especially a man, who owns and keeps a large herds of domesticated animals, either at home or in the wild to serve as a source of food, a means of transportation or as a piece of economic or cultural exchange (e.g. marriage dowry). Broadly speaking, therefore, a herdsman or herder could be seen as someone who keeps, breeds or watches over a herd of cattle (mostly, cows, sheep, pigs or goats).

Killer-Herdsmen: In recent times, the term killer-herdsman evokes fear and terror in the minds of many people, but it actually represents a band of nomadic ethnic militia who aggressively protect the interest of their kinsmen, anywhere they reside, especially on matters that concerns land ownership, grazing rights and water sources (Ochab, 2018). But demographically these killer herdsmen originally belongs to a group of semi-nomadic people (mostly, ethnic Fulanis) found in many part of West Africa, whose major occupation is cattle rearing and animal husbandry.

Crisis: The Merrian-Webster Dictionary (2008) defines crisis as "any situation that is extremely difficult or dangerous…" or a condition of instability or danger, especially in social, economic and political affairs that could lead to a decisive change. While Bundy, et al (2017), on the other hand, conceptualized crisis as "…any event that is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and precarious situation affecting an individual, group, community or whole society." Often times, crisis connotes a negative change (especially when it occurs abruptly without notice) in political, economic, societal and security matters.

Food Security: The term 'food security' first emerged in the academic circle around the mid 1970s, particularly at the Wood Food Conference which held in Rome, Italy, in 1974, and was further re-emphasized by the Wood Food Summit of 1996. Before then, however, the United Nations, in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has already recognized the Right to Food for every individual; and posit that food is not only vital for human survival but it is also an integral instrument for the enjoyment of all other Rights (UN, 1999).

Consequently, therefore, food security according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), "exist when all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifestyle." Conversely, the US Department of Agriculture articulated 'food insecurity' to mean "a limited or uncertain availability of adequately safe and nutritional food, or the inability to acquire sustainable food in a socially acceptable way…" (FAO, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Within the last two decades, the violent conflict between nomadic herdsmen and indigenous farmers have continued to escalate in Nigeria despite concerted effort by government and other stakeholders to bring the warring parties to a peaceful settlement. In the past, this conflict has been grossly misrepresented by the media and some politicians as an ethno-religious crisis; but unfolding events in the country today have shown that it is more or less a resource-based conflict that has the potential of threatening not only the political stability of the country but also impact negatively on its food security potentialities (Alhassam, 2013).

In interrogating the subject matter, therefore, this paper adopts the Social Conflict Theory as its theoretical framework. The theory itself is a Marxist-based theory which argues that individuals and groups in the society always interact on the basis of conflict; rather than being consensus driven (Marx, 1971). Therefore, in the course of time, the more powerful group(s) in the society will eventually use its power or relative advantage to oppress, exploit and dispossess other competitor(s) or opponent(s) of available societal resources.

Furthermore, Horowitz (2000) articulates that this herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria also exhibits some element of historical, religious and socio-cultural dimension to it. For instance, while the farmer's legal and philosophical claim to land ownership is hinged on hundreds of years of ancestral possession, (passing from one generation to another); the nomadic herders, on the other hand, believes that all lands and its physical resources belongs to God (Allah); and therefore cannot and must not be monopolized by any single individual, community or ethnic group alone.

Major Causes of the Conflict

Nigeria, no doubt, is currently under severe internal security crisis and hunger threat which is occasioned mostly by the incessant conflict between nomadic herdsmen and indigenous farmers. Some of the major triggers and drivers of this conflict ranges from economic, political, environmental and socio-cultural factors as enumerated below:

Economic Factor: The first major factor that has continually triggered the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria is the unfavorable climatic condition in the northern part of the country. As noted by Mathe (2018), since the late 1970s, due to inadequate rainfall, over 350,000 sq km of arable land has been lost to desert encroachment from the Saharan region. The impact of this unbearable environmental condition on human survival and livestock production have forced many nomadic herdsmen to migrate to the southern part of the country for greener pasture which often results in violent confrontations with local agrarian communities (Ibrahim, 2018).

Political Factor: Another major driver of this herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria today is the inappropriate implementation of the Land Use Act of 1978 which gave the government exclusive ownership of land resources at the expense of the original owners (individuals and communities). Consequently, with this new arrangement, many State Governors traded away vast expanse of land for urban and industrial development without considering the future needs of nomadic herders and sedentary farmers who now have to scramble for the few uncultivated land that is available.

Socio-Cultural Factor: Also, one salient factor that has aggravated the current herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria is the gradual and systematic erosion of the powers and influence of our traditional chieftaincy institution. In earlier decades, most minor disputes over wandering livestock and inadvertent destruction of crops were settled peacefully by village-heads and religious leaders (ICG, 2017). But these days, that old traditional method of conflict resolution has been completely hijacked by the State and its security agencies that often lack the capacity to handle such delicate communal matters.

External Factor: In recent times, some Nigerians, including a sitting Governor, have asserted that the rank and file of younger generation of nomadic herdsmen have been infiltrated and indeed indoctrinated with radical ideologies by some irredentist Islamic clerics from war-torn countries in Africa (El-Rufai, 2020). However, the Governor's assertion may not entirely be unfounded, given the number of small arms and light weapons (SALW) often found in the possession of Fulani herdsmen and their quick resort to violence and reprisal attacks at the slightest provocation.

Impact on Food Security

In today's world, just like any other time in history, agriculture plays a very significant role in nation-building, especially in the attainment of food security. In Nigeria, for

instance, agriculture is the main occupation of majority of the people (particularly those in the rural areas) and also serves as the pivot of the nation's economy. Over the years, the Nigerian agricultural sector has not only provided food and nourishment to the ever growing demographic population, but it has also been a source of raw materials to the various agro-allied industries that generates employment and income for millions of household (Matemilola & Elegbede, 2017).

In this vein, therefore, any physical or economic disruption in the Nigerian agricultural sector today is not only a threat to her food and economic security, but also an open invitation to starvation and political instability in the country. According to a World Bank Report (2016) on the state of food security around the world, Nigeria currently accounts for the highest number of under-nourished people in Sub-Sahara Africa. This unenviable status is due largely to the incessant herders-farmers clashes in the country over the ownership, control and utilization of land resources.

As stated by Raj Patel (2020), security is one of the indices (and indeed the bedrock) of development; as no meaningful agricultural venture or economic activity can take place in an atmosphere of violence and instability. In the Nigerian scenario, therefore, food insecurity have become a major concern in rural communities, because within the last couple of years now, many families and villages which hitherto engaged in agricultural activities have been sacked from their ancestral land by marauding killer-herdsmen.
Another negative impact of this herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria is the agony suffered by innocent women and children caught in the crossfire between the warring parties. In recent times, Nigerian women in particular have become the greatest target and casualties in the unending crisis, as many have been kidnapped, tortured, gang-raped and psychologically dehumanized. Consequently, even after the cessation of hostilities, in some places, many women are afraid to return to their homes and farming occupation for fear of being attack once again (Chikwendu & Arokoyo, 1997).

Lastly, as stated by the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria, many agro-allied industries in Nigeria have either shut-down completely or have relocated out of the country, due to the activities of killer-herdsmen which have reduced their access to local raw materials needed to run their production plants (MAN, 2019). Consequently, a lot of able-bodied men who were hitherto engaged in agricultural activities in the rural areas have become easy target for recruitment into criminality and terrorist gangs across the country.

Conclusion

Nigeria, no doubt, is an agrarian state, with over 60% of its population engaged directly or indirectly in the agricultural sector. Over the years, Nigeria's economic strength and political clout in the comity of nations, particularly within the West African Sub-region, lies mostly on her ability to adequately feed her teeming population, as well as the supply

of raw materials to its numerous agro-allied industries without groveling at the feet of any country.

However, in recent times, the increasing rate of violent clashes between nomadic herdsmen and local farmers in several parts of the country has continued to pose a grave threat to Nigeria's food security potentialities. From the 1960s till date, no other sector contributes so much to the economic prosperity and political stability of the country like the agricultural sector (Maxwell, 1999). Therefore, any physical or perceived threat in the agricultural sector is bound to have a spiral socio-economic effect on our collective wellbeing and security as a nation-state.

Recommendations:
From the foregoing analysis, therefore, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

National Livestock Policy: First, if the government is truly serious about tackling the issue of herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria, then there is an urgent need to initiate a holistic and pragmatic national livestock policy (which can be domesticated by the various state governments to suit their respective needs and environment) that will transform the sub-sector from its present primitive status to becoming a modernized multi-billion naira industry in the economy.

Socio-Cultural Re-Orientation: Using various medium of mass communication, the government needs to gradually re-orientate the average farmers and pastoralists towards imbibing the culture of peace. Also, both parties needs to be taught how to utilize modern agricultural practices that maximizes the available limited land resources, for the good of all, as well as minimizing issues that could instigate violent clashes between them.

Agricultural Insurance Scheme: As part of its peace-building and conflict resolution effort, the government should encourage both herders and farmers to take agricultural insurance policy that could indemnify their losses (emanating either from natural causes or as a result of conflict), rather than resorting to self-help, violence and reprisal attacks to settle every minor squabbles.

The Nigerian Security Apparatus: The Nigerian security agencies, especially the police force, need to be thoroughly overhauled and transformed into standard, professional and modern organization. This can be achieved by ensuring that new recruits (and indeed serving officers) into our security agencies are properly educated on the basic tenets of professionalism, ethics, constitutionalism, the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights in the society.

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