

Farmers - Herders' Conflict in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the State's Response

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Abstract

This discourse examines the farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria. It looks at the nature of the conflict; the causes of the conflict and its attendant socioeconomic impact on the nation's development. It then proceed to critically evaluate the response of the Nigerian State to the lingering farmers/herders' conflict in the country. Anchored on John Rawls' theory of social justice, the study which relies on secondary data sources posits that the evasive and lethargic nature of the State's response characterized by inaction smacks of a grand ploy to downplay equity, fairness and justice in the determination of policy to stem this ugly trend that threatens to disrupt the social fabric of the Nigerian State. As a panacea to this social miasma, the Nigerian state is called upon to enthrone social justice in the policy arena to promote harmonious and peaceful co-existence among the diverse nationalities in order to deepen unity in diversity.

Keywords: Farmers- Herders, Conflict, Causes, Effect, State Response, Appraisal

Introduction

Recurring violent clashes between sedentary farming communities and nomadic herdsman have persisted in Nigeria for over a decade. Rather than abate, the clashes seem to escalate on a daily basis thus posing a serious threat to the corporate existence of the country as an indivisible entity. Both local and foreign analysts have viewed this ugly trend with serious concern and have called on the government to take decisive and resolute actions to stem these barbaric and heinous acts. The crises like a tectonic storm have wreaked havoc across the length and breadth of the country and if not properly nurtured can dissolve into anarchy, ethnic violence or social disintegration that can catapult Nigeria into the club of "failed states". Day in day out, the media is replete with orgy of killings and destruction perpetrated by the farmers-herders' conflict in the country. Statistics from Nigeria Watch data base indicate that between 2006 and 2014, the country recorded a total of 615 violent deaths related to cattle grazing (Olayoku,2014). With an estimated death toll of approximately 2,500 people in 2016, (International Crisis Group, 2017), and nearly 1,700 violent deaths between January and September,2018, Global Terrorism Index has pointed out that the farmers-herders' conflict has become Nigeria's gravest security challenge now claiming more lives than the Boko-Haram insurgency (Bada, 2018). In 2018 for instance, Amnesty International (AI) documented 312 incidents of attacks and reprisal attacks in 22 States and Abuja between January, 2016 and October, 2018.

The North Central geopolitical region of the country in particular has in recent years witnessed more brutal attacks than any region of the country. In Benue state for instance, the people were thrown into wailing in early March, 2023 when 50 people were brutally murdered by suspected armed herdsman in a four-day attack in Kwande local government area of the state (Ezugwu, 2023). And on May 11, 2023, suspected armed herdsman attacked and killed 8 people in Mbawa, Guma Local Government Area of the State. This came shortly after the gruesome killing of 28 people at an Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camp in Guma Local

Government Area of the State (Crisis 24, 2023). On November 24 and 25, 2024, twenty five (25) people were confirmed dead following series of attacks by suspected herdsmen in Tombo council ward and other villages in Logo local government in Benue state (Ukanwa, 2024). The situation is not different in Plateau state where these dastardly attacks by armed herdsmen has been relentless. Between 15 and 17, May, 2023 suspected armed herdsmen attacked 32 communities in the State and 200 people were killed and over 15,000 people displaced. This led to the emergence of nine (9) Internally Displaced Camps (IDPs) in the State (Sahara Reporters, 2023). Since then, the state has been replete with incidents of deadly attacks by armed herdsmen.

These attacks instead of subsiding have intensified in the country over the years. Premium Times (2021) reported that more than 300,000 were displaced across the states in the country between 2001 to 2018. Figures indicate that 176,000 persons were displaced in Benue state; about 100,000 persons displaced in Plateau state and another 100,000 displaced in Nasarawa state, all in North Central Nigeria. Similarly in Taraba state in North Eastern Nigeria about 19,000 people were displaced. The crises have impacted negatively on the socioeconomic development of the country. The federal government reckons that the farmers-herders' clashes have cost the country \$14 billion annually (Amnesty International 2018). The federal government also revealed that on average, Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and Plateau States have lost 47% of their internally generated revenues as a result of the crises (Amnesty International, 2018). In addition, these attacks have left emotional and psychological sufferings on the victims. Young girls and boys have suffered sexual abuse capable of demeaning and affecting the victims and putting them at greater risk of developing mental problems like depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobia, suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, Africa Conflict and Security Analysis Network (ACSAN,2017). This therefore calls for urgent steps by the government to address this social miasma that has threatened Nigeria's revered 'unity in diversity'.

Theoretical underpinning:

This study is anchored on John Rawls' (1971) theory of social justice which sees justice as fairness. The idea of social justice has been a subject of philosophical discourse over some time. Plato in the *Republic*, conceives justice as the principle of harmony among the three classes, namely, the guardian class, the soldier class and the laborers encapsulated by the right ordering of the three elements of human mind. While Aristotle in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* distinguishes between distributive, corrective and reciprocal justice. John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) did not only come out with a fresh way of looking at justice but underscored the principles of a just society. In his conception of social justice as fairness, Rawls came out with two principles, the first principle of social justice as fairness emphasizes that individuals should have equal access to basic liberties, and these liberties should be compatible with the same liberty of others (Gaubu,2007). The second principle focuses on social and economic inequalities and he emphasized that a just society should find ways to reduce inequalities in areas where it can act.

It has been observed by Gauba (2007) that the idea of social justice crops up when people find fault with the existing social order characterized by oppression and exploitation which pushes them to demand for social justice by seeking changes in social policy for determining an authoritative allocation of values. Social justice is therefore the cries of the oppressed and the disadvantaged against the excesses of the social system. The loss of lives, wanton destruction of property and the attendant displacement and psychological trauma associated with the farmers-herders' conflict has necessitated the need for the Nigerian state to enthrone restorative justice in the policy arena to promote harmonious and peaceful co-existence among the diverse nationalities in order to deepen unity in diversity.

Causes of Farmers/Herders' Crisis

Myriad of factors are responsible for the lingering farmers-herders' conflict in the country as no single factor can adequately account for it. One of the identified factors is climate change and population explosion which has exerted pressure on available land (Gursoy,2019). It has been estimated that for over two decades the rainy season has decreased from 150 days per year to 120 days, (Conroy,2014). Consequently, this has triggered desertification especially in the

northern part of the country. The rate of desert encroachment in the country is alarming, it has been pointed out that the Sahara Desert occupies 35% of Nigeria's land mass and is encroaching southward at the rate of 0.6 km a year (Conroy, 2014). Equally the country's population is growing at geometric progression. According to the National Population Commission, Nigeria's population growth has reached 3.2 percent based on the estimated population of 216 million (Ogagu, 2023). This increase in population from 45 million in 1960 to over 200 million in 2023 has brought enormous pressure on land resources. Hence, the combination of desert encroachment, population growth has depleted water and forage crops has necessitated the movement of Pastoralists downward to the middle belt area as well as the southern part of the country in search of pasture (Adetula, 2016). This downward movement has often made the Pastoralists to trespass on farm lands culminating into clashes between sedentary farming communities and the Pastoralists. The farmers- herders' clashes are therefore a clear manifestation of Eco-survival.

Another cause of the farmers- herders' conflict is the encroachment on grazing reserves by indigenous communities. Nigeria has 415 grazing reserves created by the Grazing Law of Northern Nigeria (NN Law of 1965) to facilitate the movement of cattle and encourage sedentarization among farmers- herders. However, out of these 415 grazing reserves, only 141 were gazetted by the government (International Crisis Group, 2017). The total land mass covered by the 415 grazing reserves was 4,275,326 hectares of land out of which the 141 grazing areas that were gazetted occupy a land space of about 2.7 hectares of land. Apart from this law, there has never been any federal legislation on grazing routes that is applicable everywhere in the country. This made the grazing law to be only applicable in the Northern part of the country. The subsequent creation of States by the federal government also made the law to be enforceable in only states that were formerly under the then Northern Region that domesticated the law, (Ndijihe, Umoru, Akinferin, Iheamnoch, Nanlong & Ewepu, 2021). It is also worthy of note that these gazetted areas were not properly protected by the government and farmers started encroaching on them (Okello, 2014). This encroachment brought the Pastoralists and sedentary farmers on a collision course.

It should also be emphasized that the enactment of the Land Use Act, 1978 served as a major blow to this grazing reserves/routes policy. The Act conferred on the State Governor the power to issue Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) to those who apply for it. This made it possible for sedentary farmers to acquire certificate of ownership of land easier than nomadic herdsmen that prefer moving around with their cattle and are less keen on acquiring land on a permanent basis (Okello, 2014). Indeed, through the instrumentality of the Land Use Act of 1978, the State Governments have conferred preferential land rights on those they dubbed indigenes (Natives) of the state, thereby marginalizing and frustrating the so-called settler (foreigner) groups which the nomadic Fulani herders belong to (Okello, 2014). In addition to this, urbanization and the modernization of agricultural practices have pushed the government and businessmen to encroach on some of the grazing reserves/routes by constructing dams for irrigation purposes and construction sites (Gursoy, 2020). The encroachment on these grazing reserves/ routes by government policies and programs have in no small measure contributed to the rising conflict between herdsmen and farmers in the country.

Cattle rustling is another contributory factor to the lingering clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria today. It has been pointed out by Gursory (2020) that the farmers- herders' conflict is a response to the frustration both the herdsmen and farmers encounter in their quest to secure their means of survival. This perspective is adumbrated in the frustration- aggression theory propounded by Dollard (1939), which underscores that individuals or groups whose basic desires are thwarted and who subsequently experience profound sense of dissatisfaction and anger are likely to react aggressively at what is perceived as being responsible for thwarting those desires.

In Nigeria, the rate of poverty and unemployment has pushed many youths into cattle rustling. It has been revealed by Achineku (2018) that of the over 50 million cattle which inhabit and traverse the Nigerian landscape, the number of rustled cattle is on average 60,000 head or 60%.

Some of the attacks by herdsmen are therefore a retaliation against the threat to their means of livelihood. The revelation by Garus Galolo, the leader of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that the attacks against villagers by the Fulani in 2018 at Nengere village a border community with Taraba State was primarily because over 1000 of their cattle were rustled by the villagers at the border town. In his words, (Pidgin English) 'as we dey relocate go Taraba State through Nasarawa State at Nengere, thief come collect 1000 cows from us, so we sef fight them back (Odufowokan, 2018).

Government response to the Farmers/ Herders' clashes

The State's response to the farmers-herders' crisis has been rather lackadaisical, beyond issuing statements condemning the attacks after they happen and deployment of security personnel, not enough is being done by the federal and state governments to bring the perpetrators to justice (Amnesty International, 2018). Instances abound where communities were attacked and some community members recognized some of their attackers and provided information to security personnel but they failed to make arrests. This Amnesty International (2018) reiterates is compounded by the fact that, though state Governors are the chief security officers of the state, they do not have control over the security forces in their States as orders are taken from above at the headquarters of their commands. In some cases, Amnesty International (2018) reveal that communities envisaged impending attack and sent desperate Save our Soul (SoS) calls to security agencies to beef up security in their areas to forestall the attack but security agencies failed to act swiftly. A striking example is in Birnin-Gwari Local Government Area, in Kaduna State where Amnesty International (2018) reported that the Police were informed of an impending attack three weeks before it took place but there was no action taken by the police. Several of such incidents have been chronicled by Amnesty International (2018) in its report.

Apart from condemnation of attacks and deployment of security personnel, the first proactive step the federal government under President Muhammadu Buhari took was to set up a committee through the National Economic Council (NEC), headed by the Vice President, comprising the 36 state governors and the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria in 2018 to look into the crises. This committee later set up a sub-committee headed by the then governor of Ebonyi State, David Umahi, to look at the root causes of the clashes between farmers and herders and proffer solutions.

After the inauguration of the Umahi led Committee, the federal government again in February 2018, set up a committee headed by the Vice President with a task to visit all communities affected by the crisis in order to enable the government, have a better understanding of how "to ameliorate the suffering of the people in those areas and to resettle them." (Amnesty International, 2018). In response to the Committee's recommendation, the federal government in May, 2018, released the sum of N10 billion for the rehabilitation, reconstruction, resettlement and compensation of villages affected by the farmers-herders' crisis. This amount, it should be noted appears infinitesimal when compared to the \$14 billion the federal government claims is losing annually in revenue due to the farmers-herders' crisis.

Finding a permanent solution to the problem has been a herculean task to successive governments for some time. The Buhari led government for instance has vacillated over policy initiatives such as the reactivation of Open Grazing Routes which met stiff opposition from majority of Nigerians. Also in 2018, the federal government made an unsuccessful attempt to establish Cattle Colonies, but, many states kicked against the initiative, describing it as a ploy to forcefully snatch lands for the use of armed Fulani herders, whom they feared would later unleash terror on their host communities (Ndijihe et al 2021). The government again introduced the Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) initiative. The then Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Chief Audu Ogbeh, who unveiled the initiative, stated that President Buhari approved the RUGA settlement as a solution to the farmers-herders conflict. Again, most southern states rejected this (Ndijihe et al,2021).

The Federal Government later came up with the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) in June, 2018. The establishment of ranches formed the core of the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) announced by the National Economic Council as a permanent solution to addressing the farmers-herders' clashes. The NLTP is a long term plan targeted to develop the livestock sector over a 10- year period. It is meant to foster greater prosperity through reforms that will make the livestock sector "more productive and sustainable" as well as encourage peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers (Amnesty International,2018). The target of the NLTP is to stem the movement of cattle through the encouragement of nomadic herders to revert to sedentary and mechanized farming in order to curtail conflict between nomadic herders and farmers. The programme was planned to cost N179 billion over a period of 10 years. The two tiers of government, the federal government and the states were to jointly spend N70 billion in the first three years of the pilot phase.

A cardinal objective of the NLTP is to establish ranches of various categories in public grazing reserves and provide services like water to irrigate pasture and grow fodder, with support from the government, private investors and foreign donors (Amnesty International,2018) Apart from targeting livestock producers, other multiplier effects include the encouragement of small-scale farmers to grow more crops for use as fodder. The Plan envisaged that the establishment of ranches will curb competition over land and water, boost production of meat and other protein sources, raise incomes and prevent farmers-herders' conflict in the future. Intrinsic in the plan is the need to enhance the capacity building of leaders at the grass-root level in peace-building, conflict resolution mechanisms in order to promote social cohesion. It also targets to strengthen the justice system (formal and informal); as well as regulate livestock movement. In addition, it places premium on rebuilding and reconstruction of common facilities - worship places, markets and individual homes that have been destroyed as well as support rehabilitation. The responsibility for funding the implementation of the NLTP rests largely with the federal government. A National Livestock Transformation Plan Steering Committee was set up to co-ordinate the activities of the NLTP domiciled in the office of the Vice President.

The federal government from onset identified seven pilot states to donate land to develop ranches in public grazing reserves. The states are Benue, Zamfara, Adamawa, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba. The plan envisages that each of these seven states would designate two pilot sites and four ranches will be established at each location.

The Tinubu administration that has succeeded the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari in May, 2023 apart from the establishment of the Federal Ministry of Livestock Development with the aim to modernize livestock practices has aligned itself with the NLTP, aimed at modernizing the livestock sector and addressing longstanding farmers-herder conflicts.

The NLTP it should be noted, is quite enthusiastic in its goals and objectives; but, there seems to be no serious commitment to its implementation. The government appears sluggish in its implementation. The country has exhausted seven years after the plan was mooted in 2018, however no appreciable progress has been made to acquire land in states to establish ranches and the plan is still in the drawing board after seven years. Many displaced people have not been resettled and are living in refugee camps in squalor. Compensation has not been given to displaced persons to rebuild their homes. Also, secure and safe locations have not been given to people to farm, though a major goal of the NLTP is to enable 50% of displaced farmers to farm in safe and secure locations in the first year. The NLTP targets that 50% of destroyed facilities including people's homes will be rebuilt. But this is still a mirage (Amnesty International, 2018).

Apart from the NLTP initiative, some state governments have taken some bold steps to forestall open grazing of livestock through the enactment of Anti-Open Grazing Law. States such as Abia, Benue, Ekiti and Taraba states have passed laws prohibiting open grazing of animals as an antidote to the perennial clashes between farmers and herdsman. However, the Miyyeti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), an umbrella organization for nomadic herdsman have come out strongly to condemn the law that it is alien to their nomadic culture and would resist it with violence because it is antithetical to their nomadic culture. The association has pointed out that they prefer grazing reserves / routes than ranches as a panacea to the

incessant conflict between pastoralists and farming communities (Ojiabor, 2016). Hence, they have vowed to resist the anti-open grazing law with violence. However, the government has failed to condemn the stance of MACBAN. Government has been adamant and no leader of the association has been arrested for questioning. Consequently, there appears to be no respite as the attacks have not waned but increased in recent times.

Conclusion:

This study has examined the violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria that has lingered unabated for over a decade. Specifically, it looked at the nature of the conflict; the causes of the conflict; and critically assessed the response of the state to the conflict in the country. Sifting through secondary data sources, the study found out that beyond condemnation not much has been done by the government to stem this violent clashes. The government has adopted more of a fire brigade approach to the conflict by mobilizing security personnel to conflict areas sometimes belatedly rather than making conscious efforts to implement the NLTP which is meant to be a pragmatic approach to solve the crisis. The failure of the government over the years to apprehend and prosecute suspects involved in perpetrating the killings and destruction especially MACBAN officials that have come out in the open to claim responsibility for most of the attacks points to a conspiracy to down play fairness in handling the farmers-herders' conflict. Elsewhere, the government has reacted with sledgehammer and proactive violence to the least ethnic provocation from other parts of the country such as the attack against the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Eastern Nigeria.

Delay, it should be noted is compromise, the sluggish approach to the implementation of the NLTP that has at its core re-building and re-construction of common facilities such as worship places, markets, individual homes that have been destroyed as well as support rehabilitation is a clear indication that the government has failed in its responsibility to safeguard her citizens. In short, it attests to government's reluctance to enthrone social justice in the policy arena by churning out corrective and re-distributive measures to promote harmonious and peaceful co-existence among the diverse nationalities in Nigeria to deepen unity in diversity.

As a panacea, it is recommended that the government should promote rule of law by ensuring that all incidents of violent clashes between herdsmen and farmers are properly investigated, arrests are made and prosecutions are carried out. Adequate compensation should be given to victims of these crises, albeit, destroyed properties should be rebuilt and families compensated. This is the only way to punish the criminals and ensure social justice. Civil society groups should also prevail on the government to fast-track the implementation of the NLTP. The state governments should consciously sensitize their people on the advantages of donating land for the establishment of ranches.

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