

Policyweekly

Banditry and Crisis Ethnic Vigilantism in Zamfara State, Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

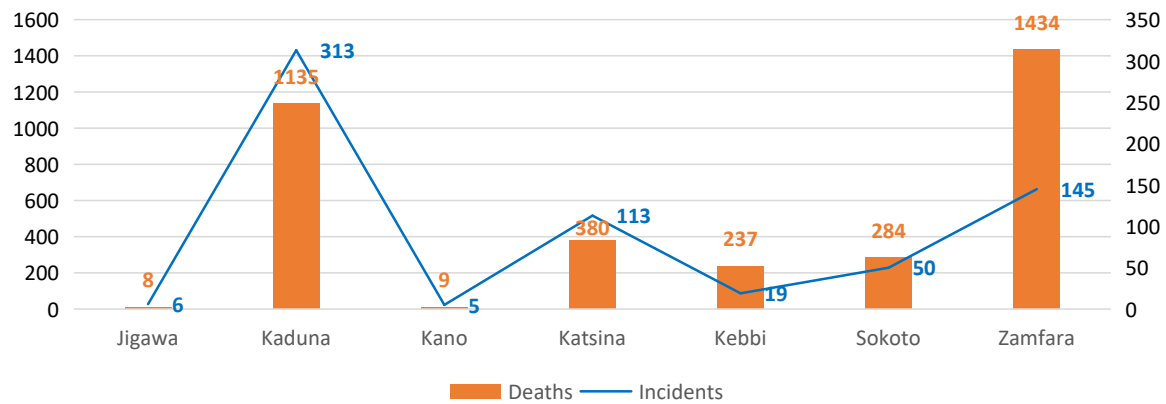
- 1** Zamfara state government should strengthen the regulation of vigilantes by establishing strong institutional and legal frameworks to guide the activities of vigilante groups.
- 2** The state government should support the approved and registered vigilante groups by building their capacity, particularly regarding human rights, investigations, arrests and other judicial processes.
- 3** The collaboration between the vigilantes and state security agencies, such as the police, should be deepened.
- 4** The federal and state governments, in collaboration with approved vigilante groups, should improve surveillance of forests and border areas.
- 5** Government at all levels must implement mechanisms to reduce rural poverty, particularly among the youth in Zamfara State and the entire North West.

Introduction

Zamfara State is facing the double burden of containing armed banditry and taming the excesses of non-state armed actors such as the proscribed [Yan Sakai](#) and [Yan Bindiga](#). Data from the Nextier Violent Conflict Database, as presented in figure 1, show that between January 2021 and December 2022, Zamfara State has experienced 1,434 deaths arising from 145 different incidents of banditry, the highest number of death arising from banditry in the entire North West within the period. The inability of governments at all levels, despite various efforts, to contain activities of armed bandits in Zamfara and across the North Western region has led to the proliferation of ethnic vigilante groups. This is because communities resorted to self-help by establishing vigilantes to protect their lives and properties from the nefarious activities of bandits. The proliferation of ethnic vigilantes and the weak capacity of government at all levels to effectively regulate vigilante activities has led to internecine violence in Zamfara State and the entire North West. This edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly reflects on the crisis of vigilantism in Zamfara State and highlights actionable strategies for taming the monsters of banditry and internecine violence occasioned by ethnic vigilantism.

Figure 1: North West: Banditry Deaths and Incidents

Period: 1st Jan 2021 - 31st Dec. 2022



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database (2023)

Explaining the Menace of Banditry in Zamfara State

Banditry is a metaphor for organised crime by clandestine, armed non-state actors who pursue economic objectives and other sectional interests by engaging in various forms of criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom, raiding/looting of communities, and other illicit economic activities from which they make illicit gains (Ojo, 2020). Zamfara State has gained notoriety as the incubator of contemporary banditry ravaging North West Nigeria. The first set of organised bandits in the contemporary history of the North West was traced to Zamfara State in 2011 when bandit groups formed by Kundu and Buharin Daji started operating in Dan-Sadau District, Maru Local Government area of Zamfara State under the label Kungiyar Gayu, meaning 'association of young guys' (Rufa'l, 2021). After that, bandits multiplied across the entire North West, and by 2021, there were about 120 similar groups in the region (Rufa'l, 2021). The governor of Zamfara State, Bello Matawalle, was reported to have revealed that [over 30,000 bandits were operating across the six states of the North West](#). The bandits in Zamfara State engage in cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, raiding, extortion, and illicit taxation of communities.

A multiplicity of factors causes banditry in Zamfara State. First is the existence of [ungoverned spaces](#), which consist of a large expanse of forests and porous borders along the North Western states, which the bandits exploit to perpetrate criminal activities. With a land area of 35,170.63 km², Zamfara is the third largest state in the North West. The state also shares international borders with the Niger Republic making it easy for bandits to exploit the borders to perpetrate their criminal activities. This is especially given that Nigeria's borders with neighbouring countries are largely porous. There are [137 unprotected borders in the North West and North East](#) which the bandits can exploit to operate freely. The [forests of Mashema in the northern part of Zamfara bordering the nearby Niger Republic and Birnin Gwari](#) to the south leading to Kaduna State have been identified as part of the bases used by bandits to stockpile weapons. A second factor responsible for the growth of banditry in Zamfara State is illicit gold mining in Zamfara State. A recent [Nextier SPD Weekly Policy](#) demonstrated that illicit gold mining in Zamfara State had created an informal criminal economy growth, providing the gaps exploited by bandits to operate and expand in Zamfara State and the North West region. The third factor contributing to banditry

is poverty. The [2022 Nigeria multidimensional poverty index](#) shows that Zamfara State is home to 4.17 million multidimensionally poor persons. The multidimensional poverty in the state contributes to banditry as poor young people are easily recruited into banditry.

Admittedly, the federal and state governments have tried to contain banditry through hard and soft approaches. Some hard approaches include [banning and shutdown activities suspected to enable bandits' operations](#), launching various military operations, etc. The soft approaches include [negotiations, peace talks, and appeasement of bandits](#). These government efforts failed to end banditry because they did not address the core drivers of banditry, such as ungoverned spaces, illicit gold mining, and poverty in the state.

The Crisis of Ethnic Vigilantism in Zamfara State: The Yan Sakai Versus Yan Bindiga

The alarming rate of banditry and the failure of government at all levels to protect the lives and properties in affected communities in Zamfara State led to the emergence of ethnic vigilante groups as a form of an attempt by communities to defend themselves from banditry. Within this context, the Yan Sakai vigilante group emerged in Zamfara State as a form of self-help by the Hausa ethnic communities to mobilise and defend themselves against Fulani ethnic militias and armed bandits terrorising their communities (Ejiofor, 2022). The Yan Sakai was [formed spontaneously without any central command or control](#). It consisted mainly of youth from Hausa rural communities, and their targets were mainly Fulanis town dwellers suspected of banditry due to their affiliation with Fulani herders operating in the forests (Ejiofor, 2022). The Yan Sakai grew and spread from Zamfara to other states of the North West.

The Yan Sakai adopted various sanctions and strategies for fighting banditry. Some of their prominent sanctions include arbitrary arrests, torture, indiscriminate confiscation of cattle, burning down of Fulani settlements and extrajudicial killings in which individuals alleged to be cattle rustlers/bandits were apprehended and publicly executed in places like market squares (Ejiofor, 2022; Madueke, 2023). Many of the alleged bandits targeted and executed by the Yan Sakai were people of the Fulani ethnic group. The weak judicial system, the strategy of ethnic profiling and the extrajudicial execution adopted

by Yan Sakai gave their activities ethnic colouration and undermined their legitimacy, particularly before the Fulani ethnic group. In reaction to the perceived injustice and violence against them, some Fulanis resorted to arming themselves to protect communities and retaliate against killings by the Yan Sakai (Madueke, 2023).

Consequently, the Fulani pastoralists formed the Yan Bindiga (gun owners) – a militia group of Fulani pastoralists. The Yan Bindiga took up arms to defend Fulanis, protect their cattle as well as avenge the injustice meted to them by the Yan Sakai (Ejiofor, 2022). This marked the beginning of internecine violence between the Hausas and the Fulanis in Zamfara and many states of the North West. For instance, in April 2021, at least [20 Fulani traders were killed in the Dansadai district of the Maru Local Government Area of Zamfara State in what was considered a reprisal attack following the killing of three people, including a member of the Yan Sakai by suspected Fulani bandits](#). Consequently, Zamfara State and [other states](#) in the North West [proscribed the Yan Sakai](#), while the federal government in November 2021 proscribed the various ethnic militia groups, including Yan Bindiga operating in the North West and declared them as terrorist groups. However, the continuous operation of the Yan Sakai group in Zamfara State and across the North West even after their proscription, suggests two things. First is the unflinching resolve by communities to defend themselves against banditry, which the government has been unable to contain. Secondly, the state cannot regulate the activities of vigilante groups in the North West.

Strategies for Addressing Banditry and the Crisis of Ethnic Vigilantism

Establish strong institutional and legal frameworks for the regulation of vigilantes: Zamfara state government should strengthen the regulation of vigilantes by establishing strong institutional and legal frameworks to guide the activities of vigilante groups. All existing vigilantes groups and other groups intending to establish vigilantes must approach the designated government agency in charge of registration and regulation of vigilantes. To this end, the state should partner with experts and organisations to conduct proper due diligence and assessment of the groups before approval is granted for such groups to be registered as vigilantes. Activities of the groups should also be properly monitored to ensure remedial actions are taken once any group oversteps its bounds. With Nigeria Security and Defence Corps (NSCDC) constitutionally mandated to regulate the Private Security Companies in the country, getting the vigilante groups regulated by another state security institution will be of great value.

Build the capacity of vigilante groups: The state government should support the approved and registered vigilante groups by building their capacity, particularly regarding human rights, investigations, arrests and other judicial processes required to carry out their functions effectively. This will reduce the incidences of arbitrary arrests

and extrajudicial killings. Organisations such as National Human Rights Commissions, The Nigeria Bar Association (NBA), the Nigeria Police Force, the NSCDC, etc., should be used to build such capacity.

Deepen collaboration between state and non-state security agencies: the collaboration between the vigilantes and state security agencies, such as the police, should be deepened in intelligence sharing, joint operation, technical training, arrest detention and prosecution of suspected bandits.

Improve surveillance of forests and border areas of the North West: the federal and state governments, in collaboration with approved vigilante groups, should improve surveillance of forests and border areas in Zamfara and the entire North West in order to deny the bandits supply routes, entry/exit points and operational basis.

Strengthen regulation and supervision of gold mining: the federal and state governments should deepen regulation and supervision of gold mining in Zamfara State to ensure that criminal groups do not continue to engage in mining activities from which they raise funds to acquire arms and ammunition.

Address rural poverty: government at all levels must implement mechanisms to reduce rural poverty, particularly among the youth in Zamfara State and the entire North West. This can be done by supporting rural livelihoods and farming activities of smallholder farmers in rural communities by providing improved seedlings, fertilisers and other necessary extension services.

Conclusion

Despite various interventions, the inability of government at all levels to contain activities of bandits in Zamfara State and the entire North West has given rise to the proliferation of ethnic vigilante groups as a strategy by communities to protect their lives and sources of livelihood. Unfortunately, the organisational and operational weaknesses of the vigilante groups have given rise to internecine violence, which has worsened the security situation in the entire North West. Government at all levels must collaborate to put institutional and legal frameworks in place to regulate vigilante groups' activities and position them to effectively contribute towards ending banditry in the North West.

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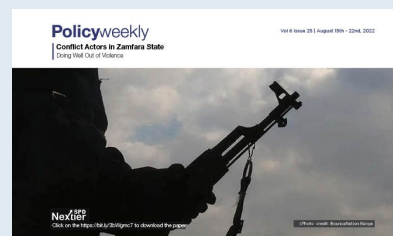
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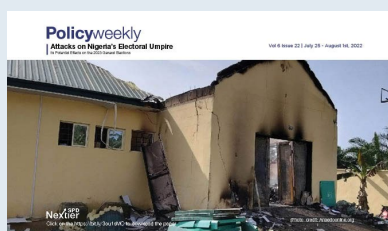
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