



Neighbours at War

Policy Recommendations

1. Security presence needs to be increased in the conflict areas to deter and halt violent conflicts.
2. Urgent humanitarian intervention is needed for the displaced and injured.
3. Illegal arms in the area should be mopped up.
4. A permanent demarcation between the two communities is needed, to serve as part of the permanent solution.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of Nextier SPD.

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Since 2005, the people of Ukele in Yala Local Government Area of Cross River State and those of Izzi in Ebonyi State have been locked in internecine communal conflicts over land. People on both sides of the divide have been attacked at homes, farms and highways by militia groups set up by both communities. In June 2018, the inter-communal clashes resulted in the burning of over [1,500 homes](#); displacement of over 7,000 persons; and [killing of 20 persons](#). Scores have been forced to abandon their farms, and [many more missing](#), triggering looming food insecurity in the area. Besides the negative impact on agriculture, the conflicts also unleash sufferings on travellers. For example, each time the conflict rages, human and vehicular movement is halted on the popular Tran-Sahara Highway which connects Nigeria to Cameroon and neighbouring countries as travellers do not want to be caught in the crossfire. Following these developments, this edition of Nextier SPD Weekly examines the [festering land dispute](#) between Cross River and Ebonyi states with a view to finding amicable solution to the impasse.

Some of the communal conflicts over land in Nigeria date to the colonial times. Like the Aguleri/Umuleri Conflicts in South-eastern Nigeria (Onwuzuruigbo, 2013), even though the Ukele and Izzi people have lived together for several years, the former consider themselves as landlords and the

latter as settlers. With land as a natural resource, even if they have lived in peace for centuries, as evidenced by research, environmental pressure and resource scarcity are likely to continue to escalate violent conflict between the neighbouring communities, thereby threatening Nigeria's national security (HomerDixon,1999). As a result of this segregation and the fast rate of land degradation and usage for other purposes rather than farming, there have been [skirmishes between Cross River and Ebonyi](#) states for years especially at Izzi/ Yala axis, Abakaliki/Obubra axis, Ikwo/ Obubra area, Ikwo/Abi area and Izzi/ Ukele. But since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the inter-communal conflicts have become more frequent and deadly. The year 2005 marked a watershed in the relations between the Izzi and Ukele communities. Ahead of the 2006 national census, some politicians of Izzi extraction brought in enumerators to the community. Sensing their ancestral land was about to be demarcated to favour the so-called "Izzi settlers", the people of Ukele protested against the enumeration, leading to violence in which over 20 persons lost their lives.

In response to the conflicts, a peace agreement between the two communities was brokered by previous administrations of Dr Sam Egwu of Ebonyi State and Donald Duke of Cross River State. But the peace deal was poorly implemented leading to resurgence of violence. Similarly,



several prominent individuals including Senator Liyel Imoke, Senator Victor Ndoma-Egba, Mr Lawrence Alobi, and retired General Moses Obi have intervened in the conflicts without success. More recently, the Deputy Governor of Cross River State, Professor Ivara Esu, and his Ebonyi State counterpart, Mr. Kelechi Igwe, signed another peace agreement. In 2018, [a federal government delegation led by the Minister of Interior, Lt Gen Abdulrahman Dambazzau](#) (rtd) visited the warring communities on a peacebuilding mission. Following this, the soldiers deployed in the area were provided with combat bikes to access hard-to-reach locations. The missing link in these whole efforts by the Nigerian state is the seemingly lack of consideration that “peace is more likely to fail after conflicts related to natural resources because access to such resources is an especially valuable prize worth fighting for”(Rustad and Binningsbø, 2012).

From the foregoing, the measures employed by the federal and state governments have not addressed the root cause of the inter-communal conflicts. There is the assumption that peace is a condition which once achieved, remains permanent. As noted by Ibeanu (2006), peace relates to existing social conditions, rather than an ideal state or condition. It is a dynamic process (rather than a static condition) and it is not a linear, unidirectional process, instead it is complex and multifaceted, meaning that other socio-economic and political conditions could re-define either peace or fuel conflict. Guided by these underpinnings, a number of short- and long-term measures are needed to resolve the lingering conflicts.

1. Police presence needs to be increased in the conflict

areas. To halt the senseless killings of persons especially children, women and the elderly, a buffer zone manned by Mobile Police should be established in the remote area to arrest the orgy of violence.

2. Urgent humanitarian intervention is needed for the displaced and injured. Most of the people displaced by the conflicts currently take refuge in schools and abandoned buildings in Abakaliki and Calabar. The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) needs to come to the aid of the victims to alleviate their plight.
3. Illegal arms in the area should be mopped up. The land dispute has become extremely violent in recent years because of the proliferation of illegal arms and ammunition. Some of these illicit weapons are produced locally while others are supplied by disgruntled politicians. The security agencies should thoroughly mop up the area and prosecute local producers and suppliers of deadly weapons.
4. A permanent demarcation between the two communities is needed. The officials of the National Boundary Commission should be sent to the troubled zone to demarcate the area to find a permanent solution to the crisis.

Finally, gone are the days when barbaric and senseless killing was seen as a way of seeking redress to grievances. In modern democracy, dialogue and the court system are the principal, legitimate and peaceful mechanisms of resolving conflicts. The people of Ukele and Izzi must sheath their swords for mutual peace to reign.

Reference

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