

Policyweekly

The Massacre in Plateau State:

A Litmus Test on the Security Approach of Tinubu's Regime



Policy Recommendations

- 1 There is a need for an inclusive national dialogue on citizenship.
The Federal Government should set up a committee to collate the main issues identified in the several panels of inquiry on the Plateau and similar crises across the country and consider their recommendations for implementation.
- 2 Public should be informed about the outcome of investigations on previous arrests on farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State and across the country.
- 3 Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should form networks around agrarian conflicts and, in particular, engage security institutions to make the results of their findings public.
- 4 The media should sustain its role of active publicity of these acts of violence whenever they happen, including very remote ones.
- 5 There is a need to focus on the problem of under-policing of Nigerian territories both in urban areas and rural communities.
- 6 The government should develop a comprehensive security strategy that promotes information sharing and enables security agencies to prevent violence before it occurs.
- 7 The Nigerian government must reform livestock farming to reduce conflicts caused by current practices and tensions between herders and communities.

Introduction

On the eve of Christmas 2023, about [50 villages](#) in [Bokkos, Mangu and Barkin Ladi](#) Local Government Areas of Plateau State were visited with a crushing bloodbath by terrorist gunmen whom many think are [Fulani militia](#). This attack lasted [for three days](#), and the count of human losses is estimated to be about [200](#). Houses numbering over 221, farmlands and several vehicles were also set ablaze. At least 10,000 displaced persons from the several affected communities are in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Incidentally, this type of event is not new; neither is the show of criminal bravado among such mass murderers in Nigeria's novel. For the last thirty years, Plateau State has been a cauldron boiling with violence, which is rooted in the unresolved question of citizenship in Nigeria. The differentiation of citizenship into indigenes and settlers has led to the calibration of the rights of citizens along those lines, leading to levels of exclusion, which have resulted in contestations and bloody violence. Centrally, the mostly Christian indigenous Afizere, Anaguta and Berom conflict with

the mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulani migrants in Plateau State. The main issue is the contest over political leadership and other spaces, including access to sources of livelihood, such as land and other natural resources.

In 1994, there was a major riot in Jos Plateau state caused by the appointment of a non-indigene as the chair of Jos North Local Government. It was the era of military rule, and the army quickly stopped the riot. In 2001, another violence claimed over 1000 lives in

Jos. [Records](#) also show that 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015 all saw deadly violence in the state. The 2023 January to December Nextier violent conflict tracker report found that farmer-herder conflicts rank the highest among the violent conflicts in Plateau state, while Mangu, Bokkos and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas important conflict flashpoints (see figures 1 and 2). Besides, the farmer-herder conflict is the leading type of conflict, followed by banditry (see Figure 3).

Violent Conflict Data: Yearly Trend in Plateau State

Period: 2021 - 2023

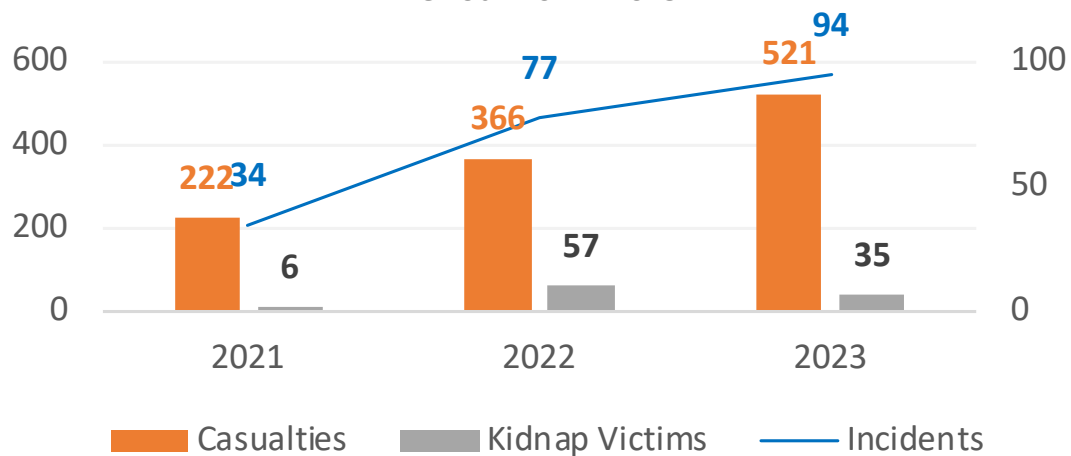


Fig 1: Yearly Trend in Plateau State (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

Most Affected Local Government Areas in Plateau State

Period: January 2023 - December 2023

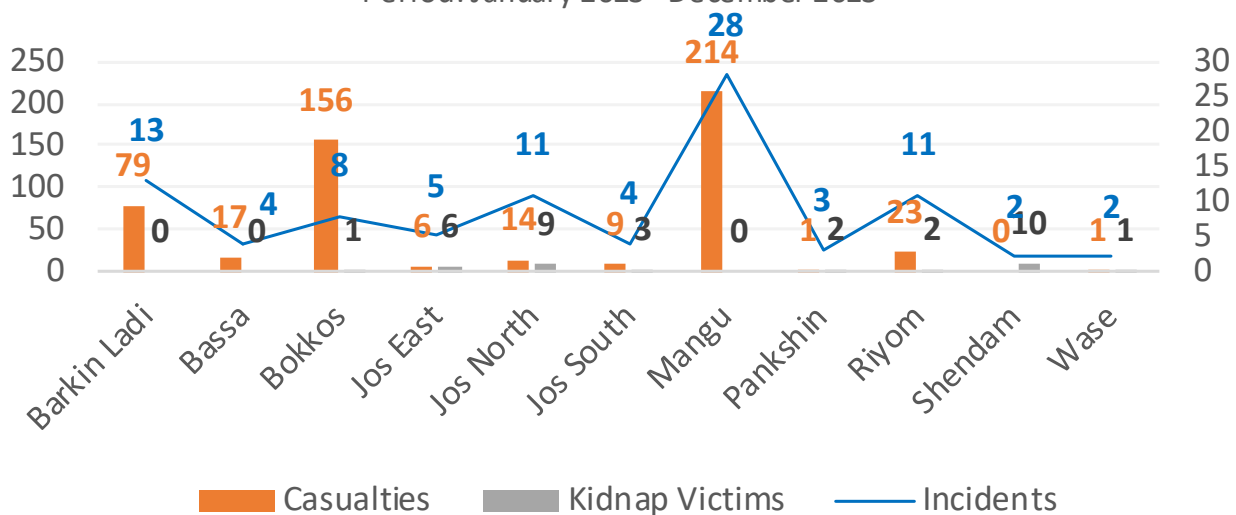


Fig 2: Most Affected Local Government Areas in Plateau State (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

Prevalent Conflict Types in Plateau State

Period: January 2023 - December 2023

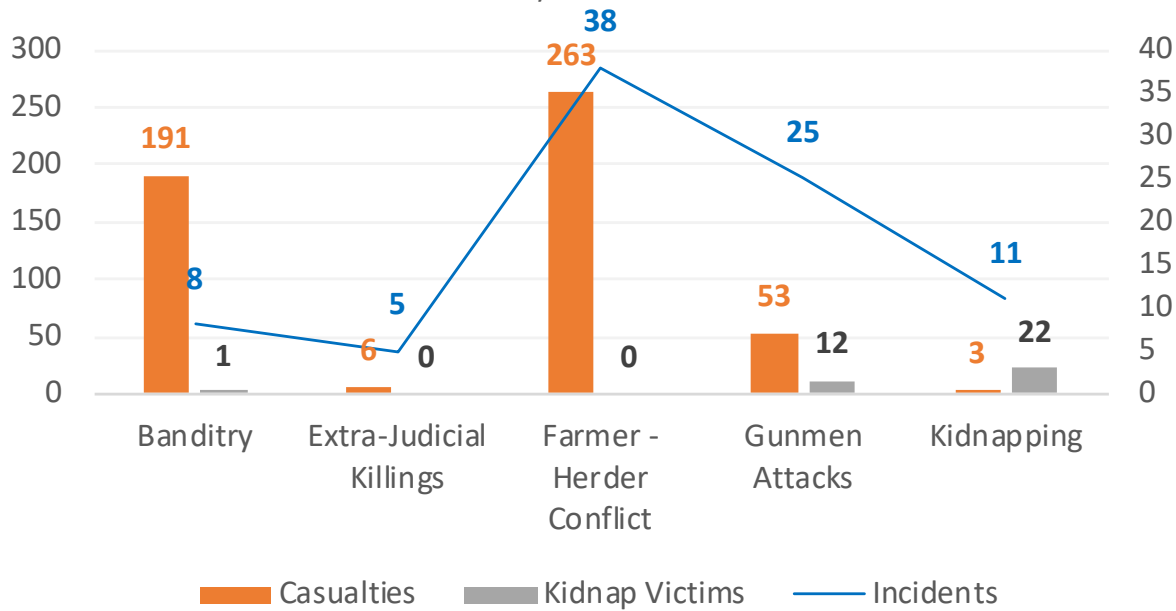


Fig 3: Prevalent Conflict Types in Plateau State (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

Between [1994 and 2016](#), at least ten commissions/panels of inquiry, peace conferences, and advisory committees on the Plateau conflicts failed to yield lasting results. Besides, arrests and investigations in the conflicts are handled cavalierly, freeing culprits and ultimately obscuring each episode of conflicts from official reference. Only in a few instances have conclusive prosecutions of arrested culprits taken place.

Violence has become a recurrent tragedy in Plateau State but gained consistency in 2015. A major decline in Nigeria’s internal security began during the regime of Goodluck Jonathan and worsened under [President Buhari. Citizens’ trust](#) in the state and its institutions plummeted substantially under Buhari, largely due to the increasing incapacity of the state to protect them. With the end of the Buhari era and the entry of a new regime, the attackers appear to have carried out their recent killings to test the ground about the capacity of the state and the disposition of its new managers for decisive action. Hence, in this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we explore the 2023 Christmas Eve massacre in Plateau state and the nature of the Federal Government’s response, which would define the cadence of further attacks and other threats to national security.

Buhari’s Approach to National Security versus Tinubu’s Need for a Different Approach

In 2015, when Buhari was elected, terrorism and insurgency were major security challenges

facing the country in the North East. Part of his major campaign promises was to end the spate of insecurity across the country. Over seven years, his regime spent [12 trillion Naira on security](#). However, [insecurity became worse across the country over the period](#). Banditry spread across the North West and North Central of Nigeria; unknown gunmen spread across South East, and kidnappings in the South West, South-South and across the entire country. Added to these rising waves of criminal activities was the sharp rise in farmer-herder violence all over the country. Farmer-herder clashes have led to the loss of over [60,000 lives](#). Middle Belt or most parts of the North Central region are major theatres of this insecurity, especially the farmer herder conflicts. Generally, the declining security situation did not correspond with the massive outlay of public expenditure in the sector.

To recall a few episodes of herders attacks during the Buhari regime, the suspected Fulani herders invaded the Agatu Local Government Area of Benue State between February and March 2016 and killed an estimated [500](#) persons. The [Fulani account](#) attributed the massacre to the earlier killing of their kin. Also, in April 2016, an attack by the suspected Fulani attackers on the rural [Nimbo town](#) in Uzo Uwani Local Government Area of Enugu state resulted in the death of about 20 persons. In January 2018, criminal herdsman also invaded [Guma and Logo](#) Local Government Areas of Benue and killed 88 persons in one day. In fact, between [2017 and 2020](#), suspected Fulani attackers were reported to have carried out 654 attacks and killed 2539 Nigerians. Serial targeted

mass killings have also continued in the North Central states, especially Benue and Plateau states, including the 2021 attack on [Bassa Local Government Area](#) that left 17 dead and the 2022 attack in [Puka and Dinter LGA](#), which led to the death of 7 persons.

In these deadly attacks, the state failed to protect the victims or the local communities, arrest the perpetrators or pursue justice for the victims. Public news regarding the findings of investigations or prosecution of arrested attackers is uncommon. Indeed, in most cases where a few persons were arrested, they were often [released](#). The body language of the state slanted towards sympathy for the assailants because apart from issuing moral platitudes of advising the victims to live in harmony with their neighbours, who they consider as the perpetrators, no consequence had been reported of the murderous attackers. To sum it up, the state dealt with sources of threat to national security from a point of weakness. Thus, the promise of restoring security, which was a major highpoint of Mr Buhari's promise during his campaign, was unfulfilled.

Like Mr Buhari, national security was one of the key priorities in Bola Tinubu's campaign promises. The present attack is an acid test to that promise. So far, in responding to the Christmas Eve attack, Vice President Mr Shettima has visited the victims of the attack. At the same time, President Tinubu condemned the killings and ordered the provision of relief materials to the survivors. On the part of the security institutions, they have assured Nigerians that they have arrested some of the culprits. Beyond these condemnations and reassurances, Nigerians are more interested in seeing state decisiveness in dealing with this cankerworm of internal insecurity. For the Christmas Eve attack culprits, they must be arrested and seen to be adequately punished. In a more general sense, citizens want to see an end to a state of permanent fears in their lives, which include constant agrarian violence, terrorism and insurgency, kidnap for ransom, including mass kidnap of adults and school children, banditry, piracy and other menaces. They also want to see an end to the attack and [occupation of communities](#) by marauders, as reported in the case of Benue state. Citizens want the massive security spending over the past few years and ongoing one to reflect in major improvements in national security. In summary, citizens want a return to peace.

Rescuing Nigeria

We need an integral security framework that connects institutions and citizens to rescue Nigeria from the Hobbesian state of nature that it has become. It is an approach that should have direct and indirect responsibilities for all stakeholders. Specifically, the President and his team should consider the following steps in responding to and dealing decisively with this issue of farmer-herder violence and mindless killings in Nigeria:

1. The constitutional question of citizenship should be addressed, especially the problem of the dichotomy between indigenes and settlers. There is a need for an inclusive national dialogue on citizenship. The democratic will of the people should prevail in that dialogue. Indeed, Nigeria is due for a national conference to fundamentally negotiate complex aspects of its statehood that are challenging its existence.
2. The Federal Government should set up a committee to collate the main issues identified in the several panels of inquiry on the Plateau and similar crises across the country and consider their recommendations for implementation. Steps taken by the government in this regard should be communicated to the public.
3. The public should be informed about the outcome of investigations on previous arrests on farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau State and across the country. And regarding the present carnage in Plateau state, it should be investigated, with findings placed in the public domain while culprits are punished.
4. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) should form networks around agrarian conflicts and, in particular, engage security institutions to make the results of their findings public.
5. The media should sustain its role of active publicity of these acts of violence whenever they happen, including very remote ones.
6. The Christmas Eve attack and the experiences of citizens in northwest Nigeria present reasons to give special attention to the question of under-policing of Nigerian territories both in urban areas and rural communities. Far-flung rural communities represent the typical ungoverned spaces which bandits have appropriated as the spaces of their local power. The state must recover and police these spaces effectively.

7. The government should work on an integral security model that valorizes information sharing at all levels and the effective use of such shared information by security agencies to circumvent any generalized violence before it happens.
8. The government should transform livestock agriculture in Nigeria to mitigate conflicts occasioned by the current practices that create tension between herders and communities.

Conclusion

The Christmas Eve massacre in Plateau state is only a continuation of criminal bravado that became poignant, persistent and common in the last eight years. Its recent occurrence is an early test of how the state machinery could be used to protect the citizens under the new

government of Mr Tinubu. The decisiveness of handling this episode will frame the trajectory of security as it affects rural violence, at least as long as this regime lasts. The collective pulse of the people invites a determined and firm response to this development.

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