

Policyweekly

Attacks on Security Forces

Governmental Response Trajectory and State Building in Nigeria



Policy Recommendations

- 1 Strategies for trust and confidence-building in the civil populace should be part of training soldiers, police officers and other men of the armed services.
- 2 There is a need for transparency by men of the armed services as a trust-building measure.
- 3 There is a need to enhance the potential of police-community relations in communities where operations are sensitive and risky.
- 4 The government should strengthen the police force and only sparingly send military assistance to them where the need arises for reinforcement.
- 5 The members of the armed services must recognize human rights in their operations.
- 6 There is a significant need to create avenues for educating the populace on citizens' obligation to obey the law and maintain order.
- 7 Peacebuilding remains the key to achieving state-building in states like Nigeria with primordial interests and existing traditional suspicions.

Introduction

On March 14, 2024, 17 personnel of the Nigerian Army were ambushed and killed at [Okuama](#) in Delta State, Nigeria. The soldiers were in the community for peacekeeping in a dispute between the Okuama community and her neighbouring Okoloba town. Following the killing of 17 soldiers in the community, the military, according to news reports, embarked on a lockdown of the community, [reprisal killings and torching of houses](#). The ugly episode of Okuama is just one of the several incidences of killings of men of the security services in the country. The Nigerian Police, on March 23, 2024, reported the gruesome [murder of 6 of its officers and the disappearance of another 6](#) in an ambush at Ohoro forest in Delta state. Also, earlier on January 24, 2024, suspected [Fulani herders abducted three police officers](#) detailed to respond to distress calls in Delta state.

The above figures are only recent additions to an evolving trend in which both criminals and even the civil populace see and treat the members of the armed services with unfriendliness. In the recent past in the South East of Nigeria, when violent non-state actors referred to as unknown gunmen held sway, there was a series of attacks on men and officers of the armed services. [Onueke police](#)

station in Ezza South LGA was attacked on January 8, 2021, resulting in the death of 3 police officers. Also, in 2021 in Abia State, one police officer was killed on February 1 following an attack on [Omoba station](#), Isiala Ngwa LGA. police officers died during an attack on [Abayi Divisional Police Headquarters](#) in Aba. Attackers also killed three police officers on March 22 in [Abiriba](#), Ohafia LGA. Imo state recorded several attacks, including those of [Umulowo Police](#) Division in Obowo LGA on February 5, 2021, in which two police officers died; [Aboh Mbaise](#) Police station was on February 25, 2021, attacked and burnt down. On March 9, 2021, unidentified persons burnt a police station at [Ihitte Uboma](#) LGA. In Anambra state, one police officer was killed on March 18, 2021. at a police checkpoint in [Neni](#), Anaocha LGA; unknown gunmen murdered one police officer at [Ekwulobia](#) police station in an attack on March 19, 2021. Further in Anambra, there was an attack on April 19, 2021 at Zone 13 Headquarters in [Ukpo](#), Dunukofia LGA, where two police officers died in an attack. Another attack took place within the same period in [Obosi](#), where two policemen lost their lives.

Beyond attacks on the police, bandits also assassinated [four soldiers](#) in the Southeast region in the first quarter of 2021; another five soldiers were shot on May 29, 2021, at [Ihiala](#), Anambra State. Also, on May 29, unknown gunmen attacked and destroyed the Nigerian Immigration Headquarters in [Umuahia](#), Abia State. Earlier on April 5, 2021, they attacked a Correctional facility in Owerri Imo state and freed 1844 inmates. In most instances of these attacks, the gunmen confiscate the weapons of their targets and take them away, as well as burn security operational equipment and buildings

The above attacks suggest a major tension between citizens and the state and are indeed a manifestation of the citizens' deep-seated notion of the armed services as alien, hostile forces that coercively invade private spaces and, therefore, should be attacked whenever it is convenient. This attitude is typical among criminals, but the civil populace is also not known to be particularly friendly. More importantly, government responses have been brutal, often leaving multiple collateral damages behind. Sadly, this approach merely reinforces the citizen's notion of the state as an entity that does not share any moral imperative with the people and, therefore, evokes a sense of rejection rather than belonging. In this edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we engage attacks on security services and their connection with gaps in state building and legitimation process.

Attacks on State Forces and Governmental Responses

Government responses to criminal attacks on its security forces have been fierce and coercive. On November 20, 1999, the Nigerian Army, in carrying out presidential orders, invaded the [Odi community](#) in Bayelsa State, killing several persons and torching multiple houses. This invasion was in response to the killing of 12 police

officers by a militia that used the civil population as a shield. The death toll from the invasion of Odi is contentious, as Human Rights Watch reported several hundred while the government admitted it was 43, which is still monumental. Similarly, in October 2001, the military responded to the killing of 19 soldiers in the town of Zakibiam, Benue state, from a team deployed to restore law and order over the ethnic clashes between the Tiv and Jukun. A local Tiv militia killed the [19 soldiers](#), but the reprisal attracted more than a hundred deaths and the burning of several properties.

More recently, attacks on some military men in [Awo-Omamma](#) in Imo state in November 2021, which led to the death of one soldier, resulted in reprisal actions in which the soldiers burnt and destroyed many properties in the town. Also, in September 2023, some unknown gunmen targeted and killed eight security personnel comprising the Army, Police and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps in [Ehime Mbanjo](#) in Imo state. Fearing the expected consequences, members of the community deserted the town while the soldiers returned and torched several houses and properties.

Irrked by the incessant killings of police officers by unknown gunmen in the South East, the former Inspector General of Police, Mr Baba, had instructed his men not to be bothered about [human rights](#) and to shoot on sight suspected members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). This instruction resulted in indiscriminate mass raids, arrests and killings by the [police](#).

The most recent of these attacks is the killing of 17 military men and officers in [Okuama](#) Delta state by a local militia. This act has caused reprisals of [killings and arson by soldiers in](#) the community. Members of the community are said to have escaped into the bush and swamp and are suffering from different degrees of life-threatening hazards.

We note with most profound concern that the very act of attacking law enforcement agents is utterly reprehensible. It represents a direct affront to the state to attack its security agents or obstruct their legitimate task of maintenance of order. Collective punishment based on guilt by association is equally concerning. Indeed, it contributes to deepening the chasm between the citizens and the state. Consequently, civil-military relations in Nigeria have yet to leave its earliest colonial character of invasive armed constabularies used for the despoliation and pacification of the local population. This mentality of coercion and disparagement of the colonial populace pervaded the early histories of the army, the police and perhaps other armed services and is yet to be transcended.

On the other hand, the civil populace is still stuck in suspicion, locked up in their primordial identity cocoons, which they consider superior to the state. Indeed, for the sake of these primordial identities with which the people have deeper sociocultural alignment, citizens are willing

and often hurt the state and its suppressive agents to preserve local communal interests. Primordial sentiments explain why it is sometimes easy for community-based criminals to disappear without any trace. However, there are cases where the local armed actors use threats of terror to frighten the community from giving information about them. Frustrations occasioned by the ease of disappearance of criminal actors and the deeply felt anger of losing their comrades to civilians often combine to fire the vindictiveness of the armed services when they lose men to local armed civilian actors.

The generic problem between the armed services and citizens is simply fractured state-building. The institutions, including the state bureaucracy, tax collection system, and armed services, evolved without incorporating the citizen or making the citizen's interests its overarching aim. State-building comes with violence and coercion as the interests of groups outside of the process are often threatened, leading to resistance and subjugation (Newman, 2013). Understanding this factor, especially in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural country like Nigeria, means that building peace and common community ideology as part of state-building will reduce the tendency of violence and coercion to achieve state-building. Such an approach opens the room for positive attitudinal and behavioural change towards the state and its agents.

Recommendations

1. The mutual suspicions and attacks against each other by the armed services and citizens are caused by age-long distrust. Thus, strategies for trust and confidence-building in the civil populace should be part of training soldiers, police officers and other men of the armed services.
2. In operations of sensitive nature, especially ones involving warring parties, part of the trust-building measures by men of the armed services is to conduct all their affairs with the disputants transparently so that no party suspects that collaboration is taking place between the armed services and their adversaries or embark on actions in response to such suspicions.
3. While police-community relations committees have evolved and become a feature of policing in Nigeria, their potential needs to be enhanced in communities where operations are sensitive and risky. This is to be done by creating safe spaces for information sharing to nip major incidents in the bud.
4. The government should strengthen the police force and only sparingly send military assistance to them where the need arises for reinforcement. Thus, they may work better as joint forces with other civilian-oriented armed services. Under such an operation, the armed services involved should leverage the

police-community relations committees to navigate societal complexities without compromising their operations.

5. The members of the armed services must recognize human rights in their operations.
6. There is a significant need to create avenues for educating the populace on citizens' obligation to obey the law and maintain order. They also need to be educated on the unique role of the men of the armed services and the need to support and honour them.
7. Peacebuilding remains the key to achieving state-building in states like Nigeria with primordial interests and existing traditional suspicions.

Conclusion

The Nigerian state does not stand like an objective force alongside society. Instead, it stands above society. Its agents project the state like a coercive invasive force while the citizens recoil into their primordial shelves, from which they avoid and resist state agents' invasion of their spaces. Sometimes, they stretch the resistance to the extreme of killing officers of the law, usually with severe consequences from the state. Mutual education of citizens and the armed services is crucial to remaking this relationship regime.

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