

Special Issue (Policy Brief)

Zamfara State:

The Seat of Illegal Mining and Banditry in Nigeria

Copyright | **PREMIUM Times**

Overview

Illegal mining is today ascribed to fuelling armed conflicts such as banditry and terrorism in Nigeria. In affirmation, President Bola Tinubu reiterated the known fact during the [2024 African High-level Meeting on Counterterrorism](#) that illegal mining is linked to terrorism financing. He linked the relentless financing network of terrorist organisations to illegal mining in various sites in the country. Illegal mining sites in Nigeria have attracted cutthroat attention from criminal groups and altered socio-economic activities in such locations, leading to armed fighting and instability. With the country [losing about \\$9 billion annually](#) to illegal mining, it agitates the minds as to where the proceeds of the illegal mining go to and why some states in Northern Nigeria with illicit high-scale mining activities are also the states with the highest amount of incidents of banditry, kidnapping and armed violence. These states are mainly Zamfara, Kaduna, Kastina, Niger and Plateau. Illegal mining has continued [to sustain criminal networks](#) in the

affected communities as well as drive violent conflicts among local solid mineral-bearing and impacted communities. Also, in many instances, [bandits have taken over the running](#) of the illegal mining sites, forcing the locals to work for them. In an investigation by Premium Times Nigeria, one of the respondents stated that;

Bandits decided to join mining to diversify, especially because most of the communities they (terrorists) target are no longer financially strong enough to pay ransom or levies. It's good to know that banditry has transformed from cattle rustling, abduction, kidnapping of school children, imposition of levies and tax to mining (Premium Times, December 24, 2023)

These unchecked mining sites ultimately provide socio-economic incentives for armed groups. The lucrateness of mining gold, uranium and other in-

demand natural resources is an attraction for terrorist groups to plug in as a source of funding. Militia groups also emerge due to the fierce struggles around mining sites and artisanal mining communities. To assert dominance, armed groups use proceeds from mining to purchase weapons and affiliate with terrorist organisations for backing. Illegal mining is prevalent in northern Nigeria, where it happens alongside violent conflicts such as jihadist terrorism, banditry, and communal conflicts. For instance, Zamfara state is a hotspot for illegal mining in Nigeria, with the Nigerian government banning mining activities in a bid to stem the tide of illegal mining activities and armed conflict. However, the violence, illegal mining and instability in the hotspots have persisted, same as the exploitation of the environment and the mining communities.

Northwest Nigeria has extensive solid mineral deposits like gold, tin, lead, and zinc. However, [reports](#) have it that an estimated 80% of mining in the region is carried out illegally and on an artisanal basis by the local population. This illegal act is also associated with [rural banditry](#) within the area, especially in Zamfara state. According to reports, more than [40 per cent](#) of the gold deposits in Nigeria are believed to be in the state. However, the resources that present economic potential have also attracted a surge of criminal

groups, resulting in disputes and instability in rural communities through the unauthorised extraction of minerals.

The Intersection: Illegal Mining Activities and Banditry

Due to high revenue generation and identity regulations, illegal mining and banditry cannot be interrogated separately, especially in Northern Nigeria. Although there are policies on mining and other mineral exploration in the country, most miners are unknown or have not been profiled, which prohibits regulating proceeds from the mines. Since the proceeds cannot be controlled, they are sometimes used to fund illicit crimes like banditry and kidnapping (Akintunde, 2020).

The intricate relationship between this unlawful act and rising insecurity within the region and Zamfara state, in particular, has led to the death of hundreds. According to the Nextier Violent Conflict Database, between June 1, 2020, and March 15, 2024, the Northwest region is the most volatile region of the country, mostly plagued by the menace of “banditry”. It recorded 6,104 casualties (5,489 fatalities and 615 injured persons) and 5,617 kidnap victims from 1,151 violent incidents.

Regional Overview of Violent Conflict

Period: 1st June 2020 - 15th March 2024

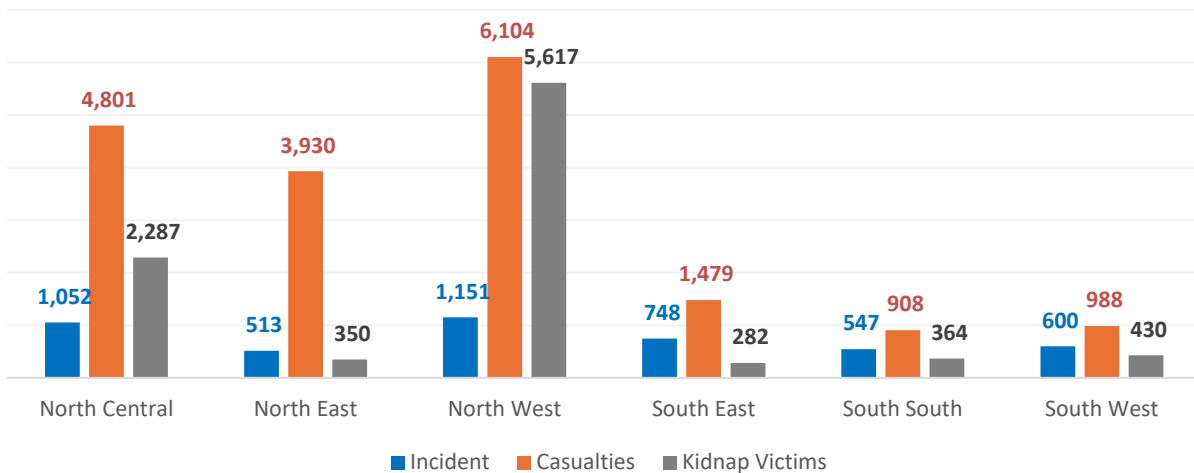


Figure 1: Regional Overview of Violent Conflict (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

In the region, Zamfara state leads with 2,145 casualties and is second highest in terms of violent incidents and kidnap victims, with 246 and 1,833 respectively. Also, the state has led the casualty tally for three years, with 824 casualties in 2021, 740 in 2022, and 446 in 2023.

Northwest Overview of Violent Conflict

Period: 1st June 2020 - 15th March 2024

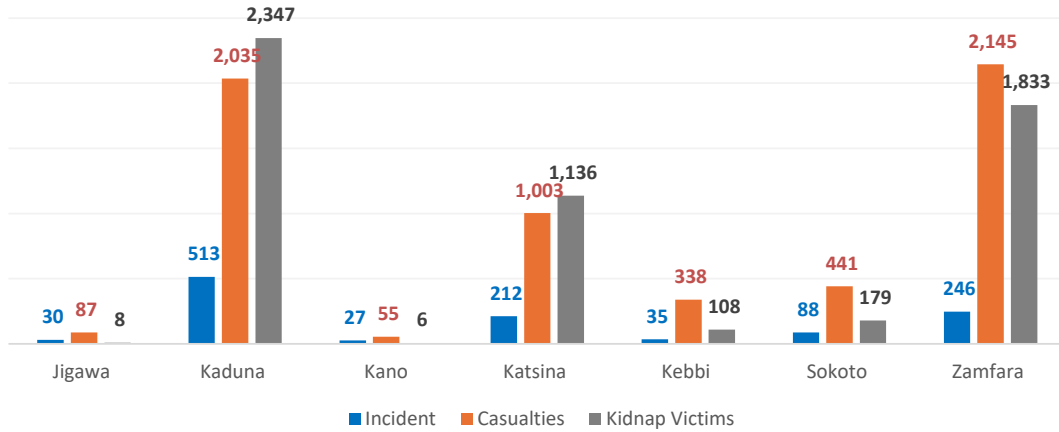


Figure 2: Northwest Overview of Violent Conflict (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

According to the database, local councils like Maru, Maradun, Gusau, Tsafe, Anka and Bungudu are hotspots for bandit activities, and coincidentally, these locations have large quantities of gold deposits. Like the old proverb, “Where there is sugar, there are bound to be ants”.

Zamfara State Situation

Period: 1st June 2020 - 15th March 2024

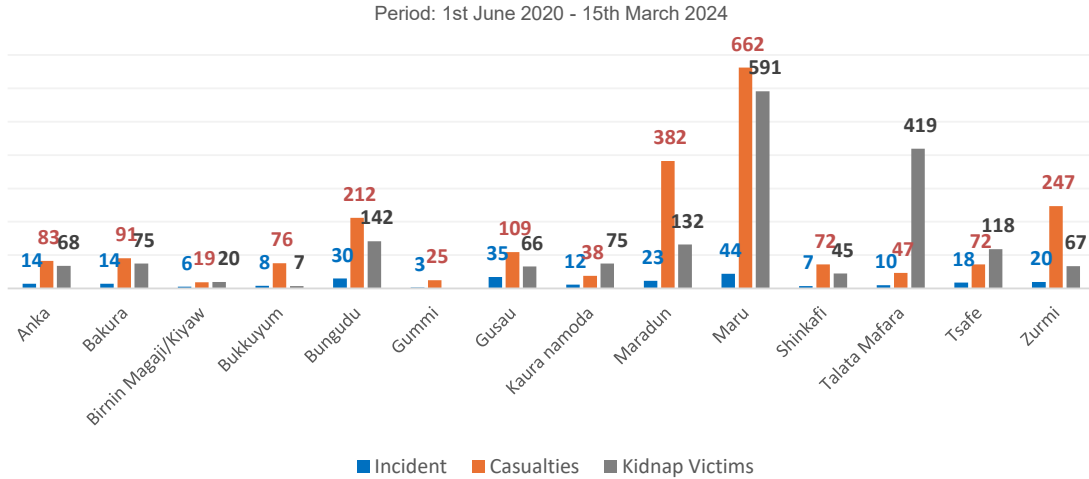


Figure 3: Zamfara State Situation (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)

Most Affected Communities in Zamfara

Period: 1st June 2020 - 15th March 2024

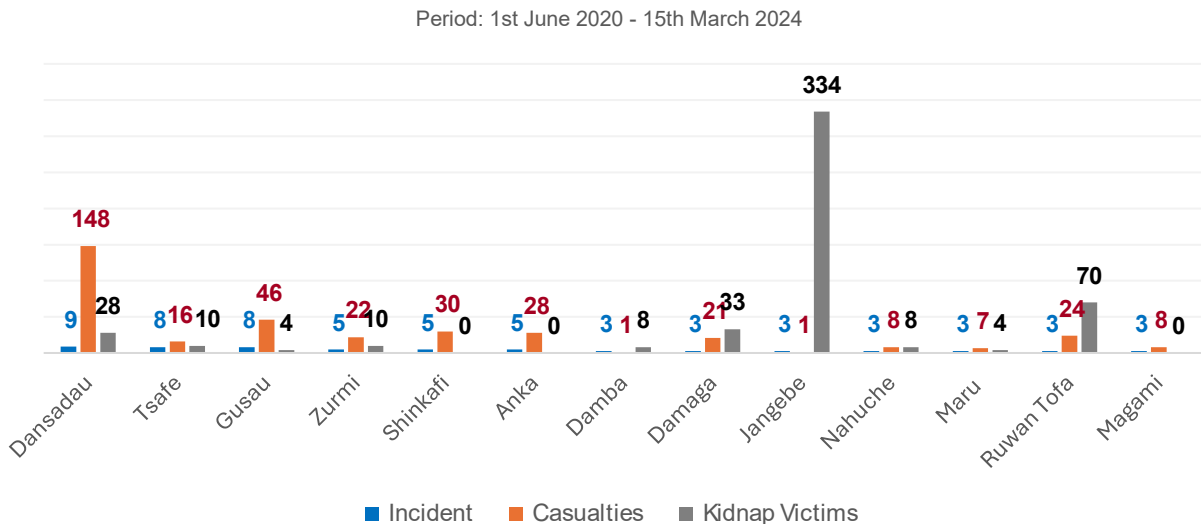


Figure 4: Most Affected Communities in Zamfara (Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database)



Most of the communities in Figure 4 above are mining communities. For example, in Rufa'i's (2021) article "I am a Bandit: A decade of research in Zamfara State Bandit's Den", Dansadau is referred to as one of the major mining areas in Zamfara. The state's porous boundary with the Niger Republic reinforces the ability of the bandits to operate freely between the two countries as they trade their illicit minerals and ferry in their arms. The fierce violence in the mining communities is in many folds. First, there is armed violence by bandits against solid mineral-bearing communities in order to take over, occupy and mine such resources. Secondly, bandit groups operate independently and are rivals. Thus, they fight against each other for ownership and control of mines and illegal mining activities. In all these, it is important to understand that some of the common variables in Nigeria's illegal mining operations are the roles of bandits, terrorism and illicit financing, human and weapon trafficking, kidnapping and slave labour, bribery and corruption, willing and fearful local communities, ungoverned areas and spaces, weak governance and state enforcement and international criminal networks.

Government Responses

The Nigerian government has taken various measures to address the security challenges in Zamfara State. For instance, In April 2019 and 2021, the federal government of Nigeria banned all forms of gold mining in Zamfara state in response to the situation, and the military was deployed to enforce the ban. Despite such deployments, the minings are still ongoing, depicting weak enforcement. In addition, the state governments in the region have [led negotiations](#) and held dialogues with criminal groups and illegal miners. Despite these responses, unlawful mining and rural banditry in the North West have continued unabated, along with associated conflicts.

More recently, in September 2023, the [Zamfara state government](#) banned illegal mining activities with a shoot-on-sight order against violators. Also, amidst efforts to curb the insecurity caused by illegal mining, the state governor, Dauda Lawal, signed an executive order prohibiting traditional rulers from issuing consent letters for mining across the state.

References

- Akintunde, B. (2020); Shady Practices by Registered Mining Companies Cost Nigeria Billion, Punch Newspaper Page 42, June 23.
- Rufa'i, M. A. (2021). I am a bandit: A decade of research in Zamfara State bandit's den. 15th University seminar series. Sokoto, Nigeria: Graphic Concept Academy.

Mohammed Babagida(2023).INVESTIGATION: Inside illegal mining operations of notorious Nigerian terrorist, Premium Times Newspaper, December 24, 2023. Accessed 4/30/2024. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/653658-investigation-inside-illegal-mining-operations-of-notorious-nigerian-terrorist.html?tztc=1>

Further reading

[Illegal Mining in Nigeria: Hotspots and Complexities](#)
[Bloodletting Gold in Zamfara State: Reflecting on Illicit Mining and Violence](#)
[Blood Mines: Artisanal Mining and Conflicts in Nigeria](#)

Authors:

Dr Ndu Nwokolo is a Partner at Nextier and an Honorary Fellow at the School of Government, the University of Birmingham, UK.

Samuel Oluwajobi is a Data and Research Analyst at Nextier.