

Nigeria: a country at war?

Ongoing violence and land occupation by Fulani
in Central and South East Nigeria

By Johan Viljoen,
Director of Denis Hurley Peace Institute



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With the Boko Haram insurgency in the north claiming global headlines, the rapidly deteriorating situation in the south has gone largely unnoticed. Land invasions by “Fulani Cattle Herders” have increased in the south. Ogun State, Cross River, Benue, Ebonyi, Imo and Anambra are particularly severely affected. Local sources in all these states say that these are not cattle herders. Cattle herders have been around for decades, leading to conflict with local communities over grazing land. In the past they were young pastoralists who carried knives and sticks. Locals describe the current wave as “armed Fulani militias”. Many carry AK47’s and wear battle fatigues. The militias have established camps in the forests near local communities from where they attack local farmers, killing the men and raping the women. In many areas there are now food shortages and hunger – farmers are too scared to go to their lands. Consequently there is no food in local markets.

Local residents say that the militias are being transported by trucks from the north, and are then supplied with arms once they have established themselves in the south. On 10 May a truck carrying arms overturned on a road in Imo state, fuelling speculation that this is the case. On 16 May a truck (belonging to the Dangote company) filled with Fulani, heading towards the east, was intercepted in Imo state.



House destroyed by Fulani in Umuchukwu, Orumba South, Anambra State

The Fulani operate under the umbrella of an organization known as Miyeti Allah – originally founded to promote Fulani interests. The patron of Miyeti Allah is President Buhari.

Local analysts describe the situation in the south as a concerted, well coordinated occupation, saying that the ultimate goal is to occupy the entire country and establish a Caliphate, giving the Fulani access to land and mineral resources. They point to the fact that the government has to date not prosecuted single Fulani for violent incidents. The government has been resisting proposals from governors of southern states to ban uncontrolled grazing. Fulani have been posting on social media that “all Nigeria

belongs to them” . Apprehension in the south has been increased by Fulani members of the House of Representatives saying that all oil in the south belongs to the Northerners .



House destroyed by Fulani in Umuchukwu , Orumba South, Anambra State

There are no consolidated statistics of the number of people killed – not even on the websites of conflict monitoring organizations. This could be the case because the current violence is being reported as clashes with cattle herders, not as occupation of land by armed militia. This is, however, a matter of semantics. Sources in Nigeria say that more than 36 000 have been killed to date

Nigeria crossed the threshold long ago where “widespread violence and insecurity” can be called “war”. During the first two weeks of September, DHPI sent a representative to Benin City and Anambra for an on site assessment of the situation. The report from that assessment is what we present today.





Houses destroyed by Fulani in Owerre Ezukala, Orumba South, Anambra State. A now deserted village shows houses that were burnt and damaged after the armed Fulani militia attacked Owerre Ezukala village. According to local sources, houses are in a detrimental state and many of the roofs were taken off and stolen before being set alight. Most of the farms can be seen as overgrown and the ground is dry and hard, making it impossible to farm on. The people from the village cannot return to their farms in fear of being killed, thus leaving them displaced and severely traumatised.

The situation in Anambra is critical. The visit focused on the Orumba South Local Government Area in the Diocese of Ekulobia. It confirmed reports received to date. There is widespread destruction of houses and farms. No crops are being grown. The way the crisis presents itself differs from Benue State, in as far as there are no camps or settlements for IDP's – they have taken shelter with friends or relatives in safer areas, or are wandering the streets as homeless people. DHPI representative James Obi says: "In the visit to the Diocese of Ekulobia, there is no camp for the IDP's instead the people are scattered around the state and trying to survive on the streets. This is because they were forced to leave their houses unexpectedly when the armed Fulani militia raided their villages, destroyed their homes and livelihoods and murdered their loved ones right in front of them. These IDP's live in constant fear of being attacked and they are left hiding in bushes, sleeping in abandoned houses and salvaging for what food they can find. The level of trauma these people have been through is incomprehensible, as they have watched family members killed, their bodies dismembered, women and children raped; leaving them mentally deranged, starving and fighting for survival on the streets as no counselling or support is provided. Their farmlands were taken away from them and destroyed as the Fulani flattened the land with cattle, leaving it barren and infertile. The Fulani's take over an area of farmlands and establish a station with a tent so that people are unable to enter the area where their farms are. This causes desperation and major food shortages across the whole of the Southeast of Nigeria."



Woman injured during Fulani attack, Umuchukwu, Orumba South, Anambra

Sr Nkiru Ezedinachi, of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus in Umuchukwu, Anambra, confirms this. She says:” The Fulani use their weapons to threaten people, to terrorise people, even here they are living in the bushes here, and because they are there living inside the bush we have a lot of fear. Women have fear, men have fear, everyone has fear to go inside their farms to farm, because of the raping women, everyone has the same problem, our men are being killed all around us because of the attacks on us by the herdsmen with their ammunitions. So, the church has been looking into that, the Bishop conference has been came out with some opinions channeled to the federal government that this is happening in our country is becoming too much, enough is enough. Nothing has been done about it, our brother, the head of state is not bothered about what is happening and that is why so many people are dying, there is no point. There is no money and no food.

The Sisters themselves have fallen victim to the situation. Each one of them living in the Convent has been kidnapped – sometimes kept for as long as four days.



Sr Nkiru Ezedinachi on pastoral visits to the homeless victims of Fulani attacks

Of particular concern is the mental health of victims of attacks. Having witnessed great violence and having lost everything, many survivors have had complete mental breakdowns, and are wandering the streets or sheltering in the bush, without access to any support or intervention. Mr Obi reports that:” The needs and levels of intervention that is required in Nigeria are unfathomable. Firstly, rehabilitation programs are required to help with trauma and PTSD as many Nigerians are left mentally unstable, as they do not know how to deal with what they have been through and this affects their ability to create a better future for themselves.”

Sr Nkiru has located many of the mentally ill in her area, and visits them weekly, providing them with food and counselling. However, there is great need for a properly structured, systematic program providing trauma counselling and psycho social support to the survivors.

Looking at other needs, Mr Obi continues: ”There is no access to education for children as they are not living in a camp, they cannot afford the school fees in Anambra state and the IDP’s are spread out so there is no organised school system. Looking at the health needs of the community, girls need to be taught reproductive health and how to keep hygienic and make sanitary products, as there is no access or money to buy them. Similarly, programs need to be implemented to empower the community, for example teaching women how to sew to be able to make their living and not rely on anyone. This will create a poverty alleviation program to allow IDP’s to become self-sustainable.”

Winston Churchill said that those who do not learn the lessons of history are bound to repeat its mistakes. Although the causes are different, this is not the first time that the people of South Eastern Nigeria are being starved into submission. My generation can remember the Biafra war of 1967 to 1971 – the Federal government blockaded the South East. The resulting famine is estimated to have killed as many as 2 million people – many of them children. Historians are increasingly referring to it as genocide. This time around food production has been stopped by Fulani land occupations and destruction. We pray that the global Church and the international community will intervene before we are faced with mass starvation in the South East again, like during the Biafra war.