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## Briefings

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### **Mitigating Conflict and Eradicating Poverty in Nigeria's North Central Region: A Critical Assessment of Current Efforts**

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#### **Introduction**

The explosion of communal, inter-ethnic, inter-religious and resource-based conflicts immediately after the return to civilian governance in Nigeria in May 1999 has placed the country under siege. While the government is under pressure to provide what Nigerians have come to refer to as 'democratic dividends', conflict is destroying lives and hard earned community resources and plunging the country into deeper poverty. Whether these conflicts are due to the machinations of political competitors out to undermine the present government, as public officials have tended to claim, makes little difference. A more compelling focus *should be* on what the government is doing to bring things under control. The persistence of these conflicts is raising public concern about the survival of Nigeria's fragile democracy and the fate of the growing poor.

This briefing discusses some history and root causes of current conflicts, highlighting the social and economic consequences in Nigeria's North Central Region. Federal and state government efforts are discussed, alongside civil society and donor agency attempts to mitigate these conflicts. Conflict in the North Central Region is highlighted here

because it represents both a microcosm of Nigeria and the region which has the largest number of on-going conflicts — conflicts which by their nature have potentially grave implications for Nigeria's economy and national development.

As the 'food basket' of the country (I-IDEA 2001:235), the dislocation of the farming population over a long time and the threat to Nigeria's meat industry will lead to deepening poverty as a result of food shortages and a decline in the social quality of life. The political consequences of a state of permanent guerrilla warfare between the people of the North Central and Fulani/foreign mercenaries, remnants of Chadian rebels and Nigerian bandits often hired by Fulanis or Muslims during communal conflicts, may change the balance of power and the nature of politics in the country, creating further national instability.

#### **Background to the Conflict**

The explosion of conflict after the installation of civil governance in 1999 may not be unconnected to the resurgence of the divide-and-rule historical process, which led to the atomisation of ethnic minorities that rendered them easy prey for exploitation by the colonial ruling classes and the local dominant ethnic groups. The continuation of that same practice by the military for 34 out of 42 years of Nigeria's independence has further compounded the situation. In the North Central Region where these conflicts are more widespread and ferocious, these historical forces have been invigorated by a growing wave of migration of Nigeria's northern economic refugees made of peasant farmers, unemployed youths and

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herdsmen. These have been forced to move by, on the one hand, the rapid encroachment of the Sahara Desert (I-IDEA 2001:263) and, on the other hand, southern businessmen and traders running away from newly introduced Sharia law.

This population pressure has ignited conflicts of various dimensions but particularly between local farmers and nomadic herdsmen on the one hand, and local communities referred to in Nigeria as 'indigenes' with Hausa/Fulani populations generally referred to as 'settlers', on the other. These conflicts have created massive dislocations of vast populations. Moreover, they threaten to block the movement of cattle herdsmen who migrate southwards during the dry season and northwards during the wet season to ensure the survival and health of their herds. Nigeria's North Central Region is critical to this migration not only due to its rich savannah fields, but also as a result of its strategic location for this bi-annual herd crossing.

Persistence of conflict in the region will wreck Nigeria's delicate food situation and threaten food supply to countries like Niger and Chad. This will in turn set in motion a chain reaction including the possible blocking of the Niger River by the Niger Republic to undermine Nigeria's electricity supply. All these are likely to further increase poverty and human insecurity in the entire West African sub-region.

### **Colonial Roots of the Conflict**

In the pre-colonial period, migrant bands from the North founded satellite trading or grazing settlements called 'Zangos' near the villages of the 'natives' to enhance their access to local markets. During colonialism, which in the North took the form of 'indirect-rule', these squatter settlements were made the administrative headquarters of the colonial districts with the squatter Hausa-Fulani as district

heads, while the 'natives' in the North Central Region were to groan under double colonialism — British and Hausa/Fulani (I-IDEA 2000:284).

This process continued after Nigeria's Independence in 1960 as the North Central Region then known as the Middle Belt, was incorporated into the Northern Region. This marked the period of the struggle for self-determination from domination (LHR 2001:161)<sup>1</sup>. This struggle took the form of mini-civil wars and communal conflicts that started with the Tin mine riots of 1945 in Jos (Paden 1986), and Tiv 'riots' in the early 1960s — all as forms of resistance to northern domination (Anifowose 1982). These protests were to transform into the various resource-based conflicts of the late 1980s and the 1990s, for instance those of the Mambilla (1982), Kafanchan and Tingno-Waduku (1987), and Zangon Katab (1992), to mention but a few (Egwu 1999:1-6).

The end of military rule in 1999 and the shift in the balance of power in Nigeria against the north combined to set the stage for another round of resource-based conflicts that is often expressed in both ethnic and religious forms. This has been made worse by massive immigration into the North Central Region of a large population of land-hungry northern peasants and herdsmen who are not only asking for land, but for the status of full 'indigenes' with a complement of traditional institutions (dRPC 2002:9).

Population pressures and competition for resources have rekindled old conflicts and generated new ones. The Tiv, possibly the largest nationality in the North Central Region, are voracious land users and have over the decades spread into neighbouring community land in Taraba, Nasarawa, Cross River and Plateau states. The southward movement by the Hausa/Fulani peasants and herdsmen has on most fronts in the North Central Region, met with Tiv resistance. This is the origin of the

so-called Tiv question and the various conflicts involving them.

As a consequence of these conflicts, there has been massive internal dislocation of people, mostly farmers in Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue and Taraba states. These farmers have not only lost their crops due to the conflicts, but also their homesteads, seedlings and relations. Most of the victims of the various conflicts having lived in refugee camps for over a year are indeed starting from scratch and are presently living on handouts from relief agencies and government. Another dimension of the problem is the semi-permanent state of guerrilla warfare that currently exists in most parts of the Plateau State where Fulani herdsmen assisted by Chadian and Nigerian mercenaries are waging war against 'indigene' communities. Unless this warfare is brought to a halt soon, the annual migration of herds for dry season grazing in the southern parts of the country may be impossible. Consequently, Nigeria may face acute scarcity of food for years to come.

### **Mitigating Conflict and Eradicating Poverty**

The response of the new democratic government in Nigeria to conflict for most of its tenure has been more or less a rigid law-and-order regime. The police have been used to disperse and suppress conflicts and when things get out of hand, soldiers are called in to wage war on the population in the conflict area. This is what caused the massacres at Odi, and Zakibiam in which many people died, including 12 policemen at Odi and 19 soldiers at Zakibiam (Yakubu 2002). The growing cost of conflict and the public pressure for 'dividends of democracy', in addition to various campaigns by local civil society organisations (CSOs), is gradually helping to foster a change of attitude in government. How far this change will go is still a matter of conjecture.

As a consequence of the above, government at the federal level has become more attentive to persistent advocacy and the blossoming of conflict resolution awareness and mediation efforts nation-wide sponsored by CSOs and funded by foreign donor agencies. The law-and-order approach to conflict resolution is being visibly modified, as the government appears increasingly ready to seek other forms of conflict mitigation and management instruments.

In February 2000 the government established the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) with a mandate to provide research and advisory services to the Nigerian government's peacekeeping efforts in Africa. This mandate was later expanded to cover domestic conflicts. The Institute has just concluded a nation-wide Strategic Conflict Assessment with joint funding from the World Bank, DFID, UNDP and USAID (IPCR 2002). This was followed by the appointment of a presidential envoy on conflict.

With the escalation of violent conflicts in the North Central Region, the president held a meeting with all governors. A local NGO that pioneered conflict mediation training in Nigeria, the Academic Associates Peace Works (AAPW) facilitated the meeting and was then mandated to work with authorities to design conflict management programmes.

In an attempt to deal with some of the structural causes like land hunger engendered by desertification in the North, a multi-donor group led by the World Bank has designed a programme to expand cultivation of Nigeria's inland valleys. The programme aims to reduce competition for resources and evolve ways and means to mitigate the conflicts arising from this competition. A report on Phase I of the programme (Haans 2001) identified a rising level of conflict and advised the Second Fadama Development Programme

to integrate pastoral peoples and fishermen in the decision-making process on resource allocation and investments in the fadamas. This, it argued, should prevent major conflict and violence.

A second strand of the effort to reduce poverty, identified as a key cause of conflict, is the ongoing negotiation between the government of Nigeria and the World Bank on a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). Initiated in 2000, Nigeria's draft presented in 2001 was rejected by the Bank because it did not meet the Bank's requirements of broad civil society and private sector participation in its development. Nigerians are back to the drawing board to do a better job. The Bank is organising a one-day workshop on conflict management in Abuja, intended to help them manage the PRS process and broaden their perspective about the role of conflict in creating and escalating poverty.

Though many NigerianS view the Bank with great suspicion and have little faith in the potential of the PRS to impact positively on poverty (CAPP 2002:9), some think that the process provides an opportunity for the poor to organise and articulate their own perspectives on poverty. Beyond that, most CSOs see the PRS as another 'bitter pill' from the Bank.

A deeper look at the principles of the PRS may explain why Nigeria is having problems with meeting its deadlines. Participatory processes are alien to the Nigerian public service which for decades has operated in secrecy. Nigeria has the 1962 Official Secrets Act in its statutes and has decreed other statutes to protect public information over the years. The PRS process has attracted CSO attention and a coalition is evolving (CAPP 2002:13) to campaign for greater participation and popular monitoring of both the PRS and the government's budgetary process. The unintentional outcome of the PRS for Nigeria may be the increase in demand for

transparency and participation by members of the public.

At the state level, a few governments have also responded positively to the growing advocacy for peaceful management of conflicts. The Plateau State government is presently conducting a series of peace summits as a way of mediating the various violent conflicts that the state currently faces. Taking a cue from conflict mitigation programmes organised by local CSOs with funding from donor agencies, the government is training religious leaders, youth and women leaders and representatives of ethnic groups to prepare them for dialogue and negotiation.

While these are steps in the right direction, the Nigerian government needs to make a quantum leap in its search for peaceful resolution of conflicts. As a young democracy of a divided society that is steeped in poverty, Nigeria needs a sophisticated conflict management system that is directed at building a culture of peace, mitigating conflict and creating a conflict early warning mechanism. Communal conflicts like those described here destroy lives, property and social infrastructure, and undermine community safety nets, cohesion and collective will.

At the level of conflict mitigation, CSO efforts supported by foreign donors have demonstrated that communities can be trained to manage their own conflicts (OTI 2001). More effort needs to be made to bring public servants who have responsibility for conflict management on board so that they can break their law-and-order mode of operation. The biggest challenge, however, lies with the police. The Nigerian Police is moulded not as a civil force, but as the junior partner to the military. As an armed force that is poorly trained and motivated, its operational practice has no respect for pacification. Police intervention in conflict is therefore mostly fatal. Rather than address this problem, the Obasanjo government has

increased the population of the police by 40,000 yearly. This has compounded the problem.

Given the number and scale of conflicts in Nigeria, efforts at mere mitigation will fail. The key is prevention. The government has often depended on the police and security services to inform it about possible conflicts. As the case in Jos shows, the mere access to information by state actors is not enough to prevent conflict. Weeks before the September 7, 2001 conflagration in Jos, the streets were flooded with stories about plans by different parties to strike. Government itself was in possession of several petition and press statements indicative of coming conflict (dRPC 2002:19).

To address the issue of conflict prevention, the IPCR is planning a conference on Early Warning Systems. This conference has been delayed because of lack of funding. The question is worth asking: if government is not ready to fund a mere conference on early warning, would it be ready to shoulder the cost of developing and maintaining an early warning mechanism?

Nigeria can be said to have made progress since 1999 in its efforts to cope with conflict. It has failed however, to move beyond coping with the problem. Currently there is no policy on the issue or any attempt to develop one. A conflict prevention strategy is also lacking and government bureaucracy may delay such a strategy to be developed soon. And yet, conflicts continue to increase in number and ferocity as the country struggles to find lasting solutions to its onerous problems.

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## Endnotes

1. See Air Commodore Dan Suleiman's article, 'The Peoples of the Cultural Middle Belt: A Cultural Perspective.'

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