

Security Risks Report - Nigeria

January 2023

Executive summary

- Insecurity in Nigeria is on the rise and will only intensify ahead of the February-March 2023 elections. Aside from the violence that is a feature of Nigerian political competition, armed non-state actors – particularly Islamist groups and Biafran separatists – will seek to disrupt the electoral process itself.
- All the anecdotal evidence suggests that kidnapping and extortion are on the rise as banditry is becoming more prevalent. While Islamist groups also engage in kidnap and extortion, most kidnap for ransom is carried out by armed bandits for purely financial aims.
- Bandit groups are reputed to be mostly composed of Fulani herdsmen; this tends to be the default assumption in the wake of assaults. As the Fulani are a Muslim ethnic group, there appears to be an increasing crossover in northern Nigeria between Islamist and bandit groups.
- In January, there was a second assault and mass kidnapping involving Nigeria's railway infrastructure; as the number of rail passengers is rising with an expanding network, there is a risk that trains and train stations may become the next target sites of choice for kidnappers.
- Moves by the central bank to gain control of cash held outside the banking system are driven primarily by monetary policy but are also in part intended to curb crime. However, such measures will not significantly impact the kidnap rate, which is instead driven by a deteriorating economic environment and further facilitated by the widespread availability of assault weapons.



Review of recent developments

- The challenge posed by bands of armed gunmen (see **Criminal Groups**) continued to be evident at the start of 2023 with the high-profile abduction of 32 people from Igueben-Ekehen train station on 8 January in Edo State. According to the police, the attack was carried out by armed herdsmen.
 - According to early reports, the authorities are treating this as kidnap for ransom. Mass abductions are an emerging trend in kidnap for ransom in Nigeria; such large-scale operations are feasible in part because of the wide availability of assault weapons across the country.
 - The January abduction is Nigeria's second large kidnapping-related attack on the railways: in March 2022, gunmen bombed an Abuja-Kaduna train and abducted 62 passengers. Hostages were released piecemeal, the last of them in October.
 - The January attack may thus herald another new trend of targeting trains. Nigeria's rail infrastructure has developed rapidly over the last decade on the back of Chinese loans and investments; passenger numbers have risen as people seek to avoid the roads, where kidnap risk is high. However, it appears that kidnapers may be making the same shift.
 - According to law enforcement and the intelligence services, the Abuja-Kaduna attack was the result of co-operation between bandits and jihadist groups (**see Groups engaged in kidnap and extortion**).
- Also in Edo state, Customary Court president Precious Aigbonoga and parliamentary deputy Festus Edughele were kidnapped on 9 January, both by unknown gunmen. Ms Aigbonoga was rescued by law enforcement on 13 January; she was being held in the forest.
- Mr Edughele's fate was not known at the time of writing this report; equally, it is not known whether it is a coincidence that Mr Edughele had been supposed to be at the Igueben station when the mass abduction took place.
- Political violence in Nigeria tends to rise ahead of elections; it could be that the kidnapping of Mr Edughele is related to the looming parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for February 2023 (see In Focus). However, as affluent members of society, politicians and public officials tend to be targets of kidnap for ransom regardless of the electoral cycle.
- The authorities do not generally provide details of ransom demands and payments, but non-official sources suggest that the median payment may be around USD11,000 – although there is likely to be a high standard deviation from the mean.
 - For example, when Benue state commissioner Ekpe Ogbu was abducted in December, media sources reported that the kidnapers demanded NGN11m (USD25,334) but later reduced that figure to NGN5m (USD11,515).
- Amid considerable outcry, in April 2022 the government passed a controversial bill to criminalise ransom payments, with jail terms of at least 15 years for anyone who pays a ransom. As expected, this has not had the desired effect of curbing either the rate of kidnap or the payment of ransoms. Moreover, the release of Mr Ogbu suggests that the authorities do not implement the law – at the very least, not when the victims are public officials.



In Focus: Naira redesign

The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) has redesigned the Naira's large-denomination notes (NGN 200, 500, and 1,000) and placed limits on cash withdrawals and cheque payments over the counter (OTC). Cash withdrawal machines will contain only denominations below NGN200.

The primary goal of the redesign is to bring the money supply under control by forcing Nigerians to exchange hoarded cash outside the banking sector for new notes. The CBN also has other objectives, one being that making access to cash more difficult will somehow make kidnapping less attractive. However, there are ways to work around the problem – such as demanding ransoms in foreign currency.

A shift to hard-currency ransom demands is likely in any case, given the fact that, with the Naira at record lows against the US dollar, the Nigerian economy is experiencing increasing dollarisation. Already in November 2022, the IMF cautioned the government about this issue. In this economic context, the redesign has not had a positive impact at this stage.

The immediate effect of the currency redesign was to crash the Naira's black-market exchange rate to a reported NGN900:USD1 in early November from NGN760:USD1 in October. The black-market rate recovered to around NGN700:USD1, but the official exchange rate has continued to depreciate steadily since the redesign.



In Focus: February 2023 election

Nigeria is to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on 25 February 2023, and state-level elections on 11 March. President Muhammadu Buhari has reached the two-term constitutional limit on the presidency and will step down. This means that the election will be Nigeria's third transition of power since the advent of democracy in 1999. Although Nigeria has a plethora of registered parties, the country has effectively operated as a two-party system alternating between the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC, currently in power). However, for the first time since 1999 there is a credible third candidate from the small Labour Party.

There being three candidates in the race risks aggravating the violence that has characterised Nigeria's electoral campaigns. The multiplicity of ethnic and religious rivalries in Nigeria, together with a "winner takes all" electoral system, means that political competition is acute. This leads to riots, protests and other politically motivated violence at election time, especially in urban areas. In the 2019 election, for example, **Boko Haram** and **ISWAP** conducted large-scale assaults on military and government targets in a bid to disrupt the polls.

Additional political tension is likely to come from the resurgence of the Igbo-led Biafran separatist movement in the Niger Delta, composed of two main groups: the **Indigenous People of Biafra** (IPOB); and the **Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra** (MASSOB). IPOB is the most recent of the two, and the most violent; it was founded in 2012 and in 2020, its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, founded the **Eastern Security Network** (ESN) as a militant fighting wing of the organisation. Since 2020, IPOB/ESN has reportedly been engaged in the systematic destruction of electoral infrastructure.

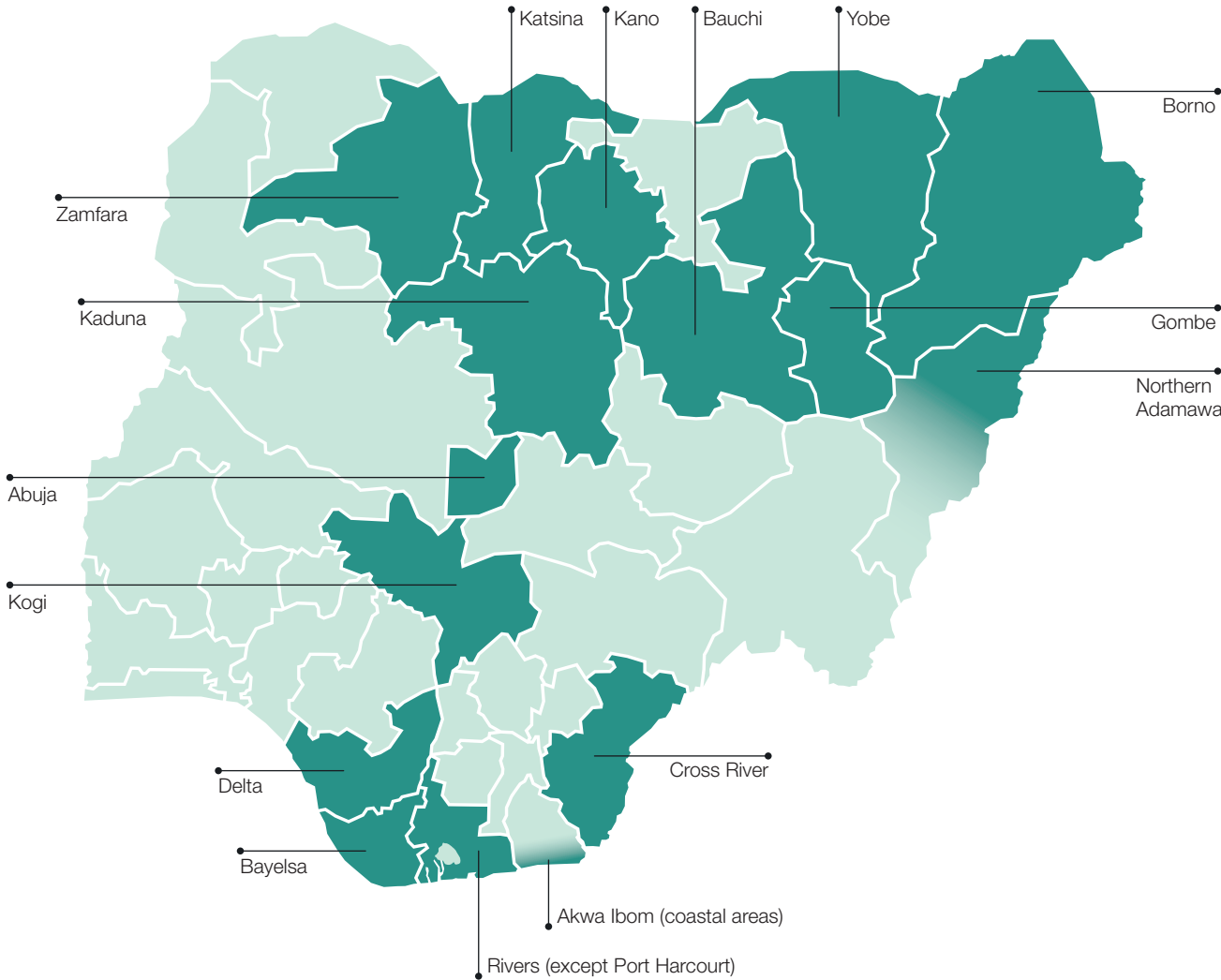
The chair of the Independent National Electoral Commission warned in January that endemic violence and insecurity threaten the general election, as it could lead to the cancellation or postponement of polls in sufficient constituencies to jeopardise the result. The combination of heightened insecurity, threats from non-state actors, economic hardship and polarised political agitation on social media will make the coming elections a litmus test of Nigeria's democracy.



US State Department advice

In October 2022, the US Department of State ordered the departure of non-emergency US employees and families of US employees from Nigeria.

The US State Department ranks Nigeria overall at Level 3: Reconsider Travel. The risks listed are crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping and maritime crime. Additionally, 16 states are classed at Level 4: Do Not Travel, with the risk of kidnapping listed as a concern in all but Abuja:



Groups engaged in kidnap and extortion

Petty criminals and criminal groups

- Kidnapping, extortion and financial scams are widespread in Nigeria, carried out at all levels from petty criminals – street youths and gangs – to larger, more organised groups. The victims of these crimes will vary depending on the reach and resources of the perpetrators involved (see **Targets**), but the overall effect is to make Nigeria one of the countries with the highest security risk in the world.
- Autonomous, opportunistic armed groups – referred to interchangeably as **bandits** or **militias** – carry out a wide range of crimes, with kidnap for ransom and extortion being two of their most common activities.
- While armed banditry is endemic in Nigeria, it is especially prevalent in the North-West; Zamfara State is considered to be the historical epicentre of the current banditry crisis.
- In the South, oil wealth has fuelled a criminal industry based on kidnapping prominent figures, whether they be government officials or their relatives, senior businessmen or expatriates. Marine piracy and kidnapping of cargo – mainly oil cargo – is another lucrative revenue stream for criminal groups in the Niger Delta, although it tends to fluctuate relative to the global oil price.

Ethnic groups

The territory of Nigeria is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, the smallest reported number being 250. Most of these groups are very small. The three largest ethnic groups by population are the **Hausa-Fulani**, who are Muslim and based mainly across the North of the country, and the **Yoruba** and **Igbo** (or Ibo) in the South – both Christian. The disparity in religious affiliation between ethnic groups means that interethnic conflict often overlaps with religious conflict. An additional dimension is that, historically, the Fulani are nomadic pastoralists, whereas the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are settled farmers.

Current state of play

- Herder-farmer conflict in Nigeria, which has a long history, is mainly attributed to so-called Fulani militias; some Nigerian media observers talk about a single **Fulani militia**, but there is little evidence of the existence of a single, centrally organised group.
 - In the last two years, a new feature of attacks by herdsmen has been a rise in kidnap for ransom. The targets are usually local farmers. There can be a religious dimension to these attacks, as the target communities are often Christian, whereas the Fulani, as noted, are Muslim.

Islamist groups

Three prominent militant Islamist groups operate in Nigeria, historically concentrated in the North-East of the country, around Lake Chad. All three groups engage in violent terrorist activities and kidnapping – whether it be to wrest political concessions from the government or as a source of funds. To finance their operations, these groups also rely on extortion, which they often present as *Zakat* – a religious obligation in Islam to donate a proportion of income. Fishermen around Lake Chad are a key target group.

- **Boko Haram** (*Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad* – People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad) emerged in 2002. From 2009 it was led by Abubakar Shekau and gained international notoriety for its large-scale and indiscriminate attacks on both government and civilian targets – most notably the abduction of around 300 schoolgirls in April 2014.
- **Ansaru** (*Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan* – Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) announced its formation in 2012. The group splintered off from Boko Haram after Shekau ordered a large-scale attack in which 200 civilians, mostly Muslim, were killed. Ansaru carried out several high-profile attacks in 2012-13; however, the group was under constant attack from Shekau's Boko Haram. Weakened, it seemingly lay dormant until 2020, when they claimed the killing of six soldiers in an ambush in Kaduna State.
- **Islamic State West Africa Province** (ISWAP) is the offshoot of another fracture within Boko Haram. In 2015 Shekau publicly pledged Boko Haram's allegiance to Islamic State (IS) and renamed his group ISWAP. However, IS recognised Habib Yusuf – a rival leading figure in Boko Haram, also known as Abu Musab al-Barnawi – as *wali* (leader) of ISWAP instead of Shekau, reportedly owing to the latter's willingness to attack Muslims. Shekau and his followers abandoned ISWAP and went back to using the Boko Haram name.

Current state of play

- **Boko Haram** and **ISWAP** are both based in Borno State, North-East Nigeria, where they have been fighting each other for control. The state is strategically important because it allows for the conduct of operations in Chad, Cameroon and Niger.
 - According to US military estimates, by 2018, Boko Haram had only around 1,500 fighters to ISWAP's 3,500. In May 2021, ISWAP invaded Boko Haram's stronghold in Sambisa Forest and surrounded Shekau. Reportedly, Shekau blew himself up rather than yield to ISWAP.
 - After Shekau's death, ISWAP produced propaganda materials to show that Boko Haram was no longer operational. However, events since then have shown that remnants of Boko Haram continue to wage war against ISWAP.
 - In 2022 the UN Security Council estimated ISWAP's fighters at 4,000-5,000; Boko Haram's remaining numbers are not known.
- **Ansaru** is based in Kaduna State and is also strong in Kano State. It is currently moving further into the North-West, where there is widespread banditry and economic hardship.
 - On the one hand, Ansaru reportedly offers to "protect" local communities from bandits as part of its drive to recruit new members...
 - ...but on the other, Ansaru is also reported to be liaising with and arming local bandits, thus blurring the line between banditry and jihadism.
 - Since its resurgence in 2020, Ansaru has officially declared its allegiance to and common purpose with Al-Qaeda.



Kidnapping and extortion: overview



Perpetrators

- Armed bandit groups across the country and petty criminals are the main perpetrators of kidnap strictly for ransom. Extortion is another key source of revenue for both these groups.
- Since around 2020, there has also been a surge in kidnap for ransom by herdsmen, who are usually reported as belonging to the Fulani ethnic group.
- Religious groups engage in kidnapping for both financial and political purposes.



Targets

- Victims of kidnap for ransom are overwhelmingly local inhabitants.
- Foreigners are estimated to account for only around 1% of cases, according to various non-official sources.
- Foreigners are targets of kidnap-for-ransom, mainly in the oil-rich Niger Delta. However, in less developed areas of the country, foreigners working for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other humanitarian agencies can also be targets of kidnapping, not only for ransom but also for political reasons.



Statistics

- Crime statistics made available by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on its website are not comprehensive. Instead, a public domain source often used in reports of crime in Nigeria is the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), a US-based NGO.
- According to ACLED, there were over 1,000 cases of abduction in Nigeria in every quarter of 2022. The data almost certainly fails to reflect real levels, as many instances of kidnap happen in rural areas and are not reported.
- In any case, Nigerian media sources suggest that kidnapping and extortion – and indeed violent crime generally – are on the rise.

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