convex

Security risks report – Nigeria

March 2026

Executive summary

- The rising tide of insecurity continues unabated in Nigeria, as evidenced by daily reports of a wide range of violent incidents across the country.

- In particular the security situation has continued to deteriorate in several sub-regions of Nigeria, including the north-eastern and northern States where violent jihadist groups have long been active. Borno State remains the epicentre of jihadist violence.

- However, there has also been increasing activity in the North-Central region of the country, previously considered a relatively benign security environment. Kwara and Niger States have been particularly affected in this reporting period.

- A key factor in this deterioration has been the relocation of a faction of Boko Haram to the Kainji forest area in Niger State in mid-year. Led by Abubakar Saidu 'Sadiku', this faction is believed to be responsible for a number of major incidents in Kwara and Niger States, including the kidnapping at a school in Niger State in November 2025 and the attacks on two villages in western Kwara State in February 2026.

- Attacks on schools, churches and mosques have continued throughout the reporting period, with students or worshippers killed or kidnapped at these sites on at least eight occasions. Schools throughout the North-Central region closed for seven weeks after the incident described above, and many churches and mosques cancelled services.

- The US military launched missile strikes on Sokoto State in December 2025, claiming to be acting to defend against what President Donald Trump described as a 'genocide against Christians'. The Nigerian government rejected this characterisation, stating that all communities were affected by the current wave of violence.

- Islamist groups have increasingly been working in conjunction with criminal elements (known as 'bandits'), blurring the lines between two previously distinct attack types.

- Generally, while the lack of current reliable statistics makes it difficult to parse out kidnap risk from security risk more broadly and to identify trends, kidnap risk nonetheless remains very high.

- Kidnapping in the last quarter has focused more on large numbers of local residents, with ransom demands that are small by Western standards, but beyond the reach of almost all local families. Even if the majority of kidnap victims are local nationals, predominantly in the areas most affected by violence, anybody can be at risk.

- Public confidence in the security forces continues to dwindle in the face of the increasing severity and widening geographic spread of incidents.

Review of recent developments

US missile attack and troop deployment

On 25 December 2025 US warships launched a missile attack on targets in Sokoto State, close to the international border with Niger, striking several settlements and a number of remote forested areas. The US Africa Command Stated that the attacks targeted Islamic State terrorists and that 'multiple terrorists were killed in the camps'—the US administration Stated that the attacks were a response to attacks against Christians in Muslim-majority States in Nigeria's north. However, neither Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) nor Lakurawa, the two related Islamist extremist groups with a significant presence in Sokoto State, have made attacks on Christians a major feature of their current offensives.

The missile attack followed a steady deterioration in the security environment in 2025, and discussions in December between senior personnel from the US Departments of State and of War and Nigerian officials, led by National Security Adviser Nuhu Ribadu. A further round of talks took place in January 2026. In February, a detachment of US forces arrived in Nigeria, on a mission to train local troops in counterterrorist action. The majority of the US personnel appeared to be stationed in Borno State, the traditional heartland of jihadist group Boko Haram in the north-east of the country. A smaller group flew to an airbase near the Kainji forest on the border of Kwara and Niger States —a Boko Haram offshoot, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (JAS, the style by which Boko Haram is sometimes still formally known), led by long-term Boko Haram cell leader Abubakar Saidu 'Sadiku', is believed to have used the forest as its base for attacks in these two States and beyond in 2025-26 (see **In Focus**).

The expansion of JAS and Sadiku's attack focus throughout Niger and Kwara States appears to have taken place in mid-year, after the reported arrest of the leader of the Muhamadu faction previously based in the Kainji area.

Papiri and Woro/Nuku gain international attention

The JAS/Sadiku faction is believed to have been responsible for some of the most serious and prominent attacks in 2025-26, including the kidnapping of 315 students and staff from a Catholic school in Papiri, Niger State, in November 2025 (all subsequently released) and the mass attack on the Muslim-majority villages of Woro and Nuku in the west of Kwara State in February 2026, which resulted in the death of at least 162 villagers and the kidnapping of at least 38 others. The federal government declared a national security emergency in response to the Woro/Nuku incident, boosting deployed personnel in Kwara and Niger States in a mission dubbed Operation Savannah Shield. Other village attacks resulting in multiple deaths and/or kidnappings in February took place in Adamawa, Kano, Katsina, Niger and Zamfara States.

Targeting of religious gatherings

The surge in mass kidnappings from schools and places of worship identified in the previous report in this series continued during this reporting period, with the Papiri incident just one of a number of similar attacks. Schools in the North-Central region closed for several weeks in response, and there were numerous reports of rural churches and mosques temporarily closing to the public. Attacks on churches drew international headlines particularly after the kidnap of 38 worshippers from a church in Kwara State in late November (the victims were released unharmed after six days) and two subsequent incidents in Kogi State, in which more than 50 people were abducted, with one killed in the latter attack. Islamist extremist groups were suspected of responsibility in each case. A co-ordinated attack on three churches in Kurmin Wali, Kaduna State, in January 2026, saw 177 people kidnapped.

Nevertheless, the idea that the deteriorating environment in Nigeria reflects solely Islamists targeting Christians is misplaced. The Woro/Nuku incident saw extremists target Muslim villages whose leaders had rejected the opportunity for the group to 'preach' there. Gunmen attacked a bus carrying people to an Islamic event in Plateau State in mid-December, kidnapping all 28 passengers A bombing three days later at a mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State in December killed seven people.

Attacks on the authorities

Islamist rebel groups have also maintained their campaigns against the Nigerian military, with notable incidents in January 2026 including an ambush that killed five soldiers in Zamfara State, and four attacks in Borno State that killed a total of 36 personnel (two of these occurred a short distance from each other on the same day, one seemingly the responsibility of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and one by BOKO HARAM). ISWAP also launched lethal attacks against military bases in Borno State in February and March.

Kidnapping/killing of foreigners

While the mass kidnappings and shootings targeting locals or worshippers in remote villages have attracted international headlines, the targeting of foreign or internal migrant workers has continued. Most are workers from other African countries or other parts of Nigeria, as shown in the attack on a work camp adjacent to a mine in Plateau State in January 2026, in which 12 Christian workers were killed apparently by Islamist extremists. However, an increasing willingness to target Chinese and Indian workers has been noted in 2025, though no significant incidents emerged in this reporting period. These workers are generally involved in infrastructure or mining projects in remote locations, and can be easily removed a significant distance from site.

Deterioration in security in North-Central region

- While the worsening security environment in the North-Central region has been a matter of concern for some time—with bandit attacks creeping ever closer to the northern suburbs of the federal capital Abuja—this became particularly notable in the second half of 2025.

- The timing is likely linked to the consolidation of Boko Haram faction JAS, led by Abubakar Saidu 'Sadiku', in the Kainji forest in Niger State over the middle part of the year. The area has long been home to bandit groups, with occasional co-operation with jihadists, but JAS has appeared more willing to use extreme violence in Niger and Kwara States than those previously based in the area.

- The most significant example of this was the attack on two villages in the west of Kwara State, Woro and Nuku, in February 2026, in which at least 162 local residents were killed and about 200 others kidnapped. These villages are populated almost entirely by Muslims, and reports suggest that the attack followed a letter to the village leaders from JAS, asking permission to come and preach.

- A number of other villages have subsequently received similar letters, though none have resulted in attacks, and it is in any case likely that some were financially motivated copycat attempts by actors without the capability or intent to attack.

- Previously, in November 2025, Sadiku's faction had kidnapped more than 300 staff and students from a Catholic school in Papiru, in Niger State, on the northern shore of Lake Kainji. All had either escaped or been released by December, but the case attracted international attention, and may has been a factor in the US administration's decision to launch a missile strike in Nigeria in December.

- Kwara and Niger are both large, sparsely populated States with relatively little infrastructure, and both (particularly Kwara) have been relatively benign security environments until now. Attacks in these areas can take advantage of rare security patrols (though increased since the Woro / Nuku incident under Operation Savannah Shield), and poor communications.

- The US Department of State has so far kept both States within its overall Level 3 rating for Nigeria, not escalating them to Level 4 as with numerous States in the north and south-east of the country.

US State Department advice

The US State Department ranks Nigeria overall at Level 3: Reconsider Travel. The risks listed are crime, terrorism, civil unrest, kidnapping, armed gangs and health. The list of states classed at Level 4: Do Not Travel is as follows:
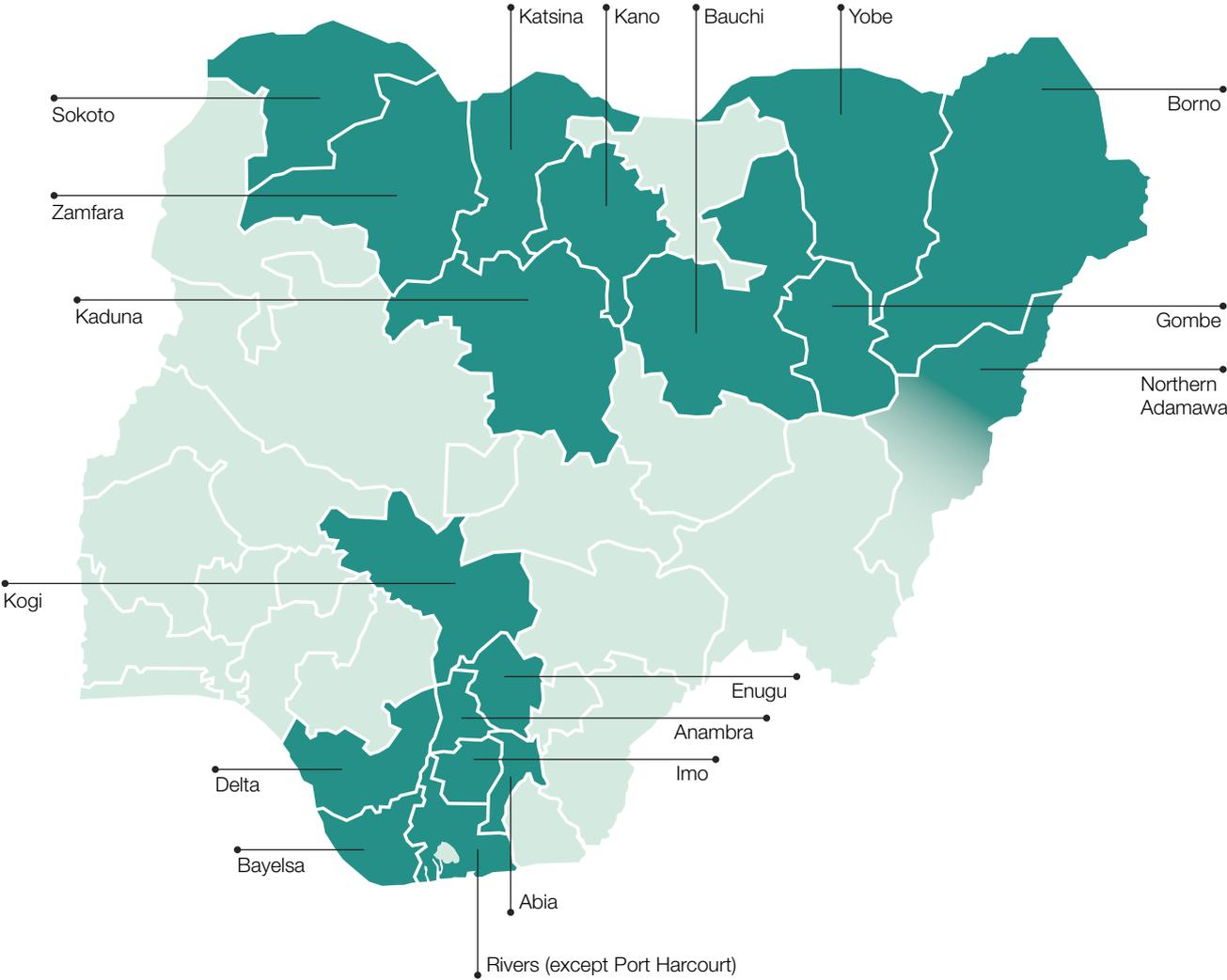
Convex notes the need for security awareness when travelling in the FCT, even if the territory is not included in the Do Not Travel list issued by the US State Department. Travelling in some suburban areas of Lagos State also warrants caution.

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 kidnapping 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 seen as the historical epicentre of the current banditry and has the highest incidence of kidnapping in the country, followed by Kaduna and Niger States, respectively.

- Marine piracy and kidnapping of cargo – mainly oil cargo – is another lucrative revenue stream for criminal groups in the Niger Delta.

  - The groups involved are experienced and professional in terms of their modus operandi, meaning their financial expectations – and therefore the average demands, settlements and durations in such cases are higher and longer.

  - The scale of the resources required to conduct these operations – including oil tankers to transport the cargo to Europe – suggests that powerful political figures must be involved.

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.

- There has been a resurgence of an 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 Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra** (MASSOB). IPOB is the more recent of the two, and the more violent; it was founded in 2012, and in 2020 its leader, Nnamdi Kanu (sentenced to life imprisonment on terrorism charges in November 2025), founded the **Eastern Security Network** (ESN) as a militant fighting wing of the organisation.

- 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.

Current State of play

- Banditry has been spreading across the North and creeping down towards the FCT for some time, endangering the federal capital, Abuja. Residential eStates in the suburbs of Abuja have been targeted by gangs based in Kaduna State and may become targets for the new jihadist gangs operating in Kwara and Niger States.

- The distinction between pure banditry and attacks motivated by ethnic conflicts or religious affiliation has become extremely blurred, and indeed none of the most high-profile attacks appear to have been perpetrated by groups with any specific affiliation.

  - Surveys of internal refugee camps in April 2024 showed that the most frequent reason given for displacement by far (45% of those surveyed) was banditry and kidnapping, followed by farmer-herder clashes (36%).

  - However, these numbers are likely to have changed with the frequency of high-profile attacks on villages and places of worship attributed to Islamist extremists in 2025-26.

Islamist groups

Three prominent militant Islamist groups operate in Nigeria, historically concentrated in the North-East of the country, around Lake Chad, but increasingly found in other areas.

- **Boko Haram** (Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad – People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad) emerged in 2002 and was originally affiliated with Al-Qaida. 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. Shekau killed himself in 2021 during a battle with ISWAP that Boko Haram was losing.

  – A splinter of Boko Haram is **JAS** (an initialism for the original full name of Boko Haram, given above, but now rarely used by the main group), led by a former lieutenant of Shekau, Abubakar Saidu 'Sadiku'. This group has sought to spread Boko Haram's influence into other areas of Nigeria, and in 2025 settled in a forested area of Niger State, close to the border with Kwara State. JAS has been particularly active in late 2025 and early 2026, including the large-scale attack on and kidnapping from Woro and Nuku villages in Kwara State. The group appears likely to remain active throughout 2026 as it seeks to expand its territorial control.

- **Islamic State West Africa Province** (ISWAP) is the offshoot of a splinter 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.

- **Ansaru** (Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan – Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) announced its formation in 2012. The group broke 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 it claimed the killing of six soldiers in an ambush in Kaduna State. Since then, the group has officially declared its allegiance to and common purpose with Al-Qaida, but has again weakened after the arrest of its leader in August 2025.

- Since the military takeover in Niger, joint efforts to patrol the Niger-Nigeria border have collapsed and Nigeria is thus facing an increased risk that Islamist groups operating in Niger and Mali will establish a strong presence in north-western Nigeria. **Lakurawa** is reportedly an offshoot of these foreign groups, and this is likely at least part of the motivation behind the US decision to target its missile attack at Sokoto State.

  – One leading group is J**ama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen** (Group for Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM), a conglomeration of Al-Qaida affiliated groups operating in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Since its foundation in 2017, JNIM has been consolidating its chain of command and tightening control over its territory.

  – Another such group is JNIM's main rival, **Islamic State Sahel Province** (ISSP) – also known as **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara** (ISGS). ISSP was established in 2015 and in 2019-22 operated as a branch of ISWAP before branching out on its own. JNIM and ISSP have been engaged in a turf war since 2018, although the entry of the Russian Wagner Group/Africa Corps into West Africa has caused them to redirect their military efforts towards it instead. **Lakurawa** is allied with ISSP.

All Islamist 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 present as Zakat – a religious obligation in Islam to donate a proportion of one's income.

Current State of play

- **Boko Haram** (main faction) and **ISWAP** are both based in Borno State, North-East Nigeria, where they have been fighting each other for control. Borno State is strategically important because it allows for the conduct of operations in Chad, Cameroon and Niger, and numerous attacks have taken place there in late 2025 and early 2026, the two groups seemingly attacking in the same location on the same day in January 2026.

    – **JAS** is based in the Kainji forest area of Niger State and is attacking primarily in Kwara and Niger States. Its leader Sadiku appears intent on reaching the personal notoriety of his mentor Shekau, in part by resuming the use of extreme violence (such as in the Woro/Nuku incident), associated with the earlier incarnations of Boko Haram.

- **Ansaru** is based in Kaduna State, and was reportedly moving towards other States in the North-West before a reduction in activities in 2025. Authorities announced the arrest of its leader in August 2025 and the group has been largely inactive since that date.

- **ISSP** and **Lakurawa** remain active despite the US operation in December 2025, and continue to conduct cross-border activities in the North-West of Nigeria, into Mali, Niger and Benin, while maintaining a strong presence in Sokoto State.
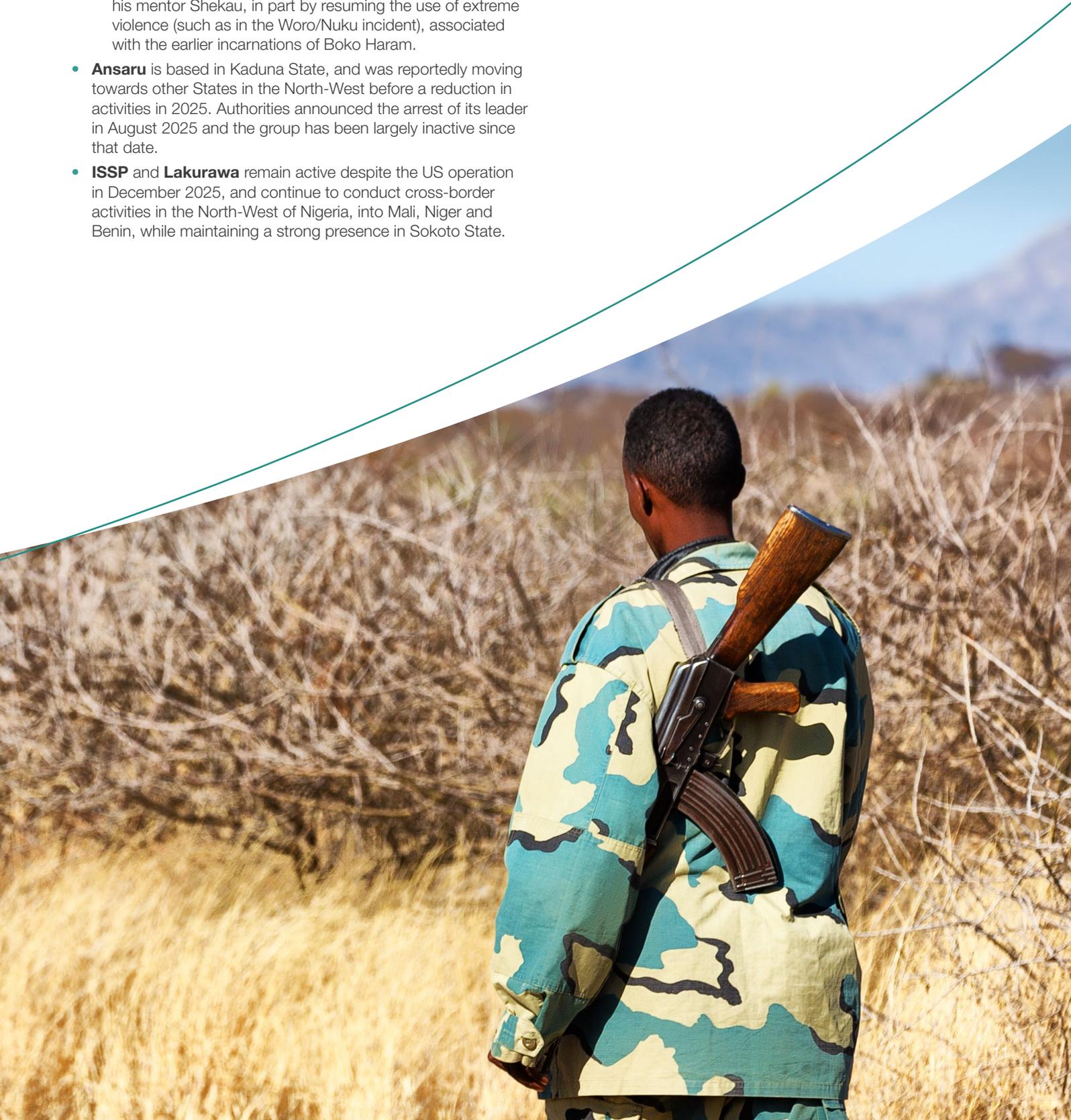
Kidnapping and extortion: overview

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.

- High inflation and rising poverty are fuelling abduction rates, driving increasing numbers of predominantly young men to resort to kidnapping.

- Since around 2020, there has been a surge in kidnap for ransom by herdsmen.

- Religious groups engage in kidnapping for both financial and political purposes. This is especially true when groups lose control of territory, as ransoms replace the lost revenue derived from controlling villages and farms.

- Extortion by police officers and other state security agents is also a widespread problem.

Targets

- Victims of kidnap for ransom are overwhelmingly local inhabitants, especially in rural areas where mass kidnappings have become the norm.

- Foreigners are estimated to account for only around 1% of cases, according to various non-official sources and Convex's own estimates.

- Foreigners are targets of kidnap-for-ransom mainly in the oil-rich Niger Delta. However, in less developed areas of the country, foreigners working at mining sites, on infrastructure projects or for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can also be targets of kidnapping – the latter not only for ransom but also for political reasons.

- Extortion targets vary depending on the perpetrators. The transport sector is specifically vulnerable to police extortion, with truck drivers being routinely stopped at checkpoints and forced to pay arbitrary "tolls".

Statistics

- Crime statistics made available by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on its website are not comprehensive or up to date, not having resumed effectively since a cyberattack in late 2024.

- 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.

- The data available suffer from limitations and almost certainly fail to reflect real levels; for example, many instances of kidnapping happen in rural areas and are not reported.

If you would like to discuss this or how Convex Crisis Response can support you, contact your broker, agent or Convex Crisis Response on: **crisisresponsemanagement@convexin.com**

Principles of security

There are seven fundamental principles of security:

Layers of security

Planning

Communication
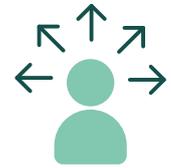
Situational awareness

Profile

Routine

Information security

These principles are applicable in any environment, however they are most relevant in unfamiliar surroundings or in areas with high levels of crime, terrorism or civil unrest. In terms of kidnap prevention, experience shows that given the relatively opportunistic nature of many kidnaps adherence to these principles can reduce the likelihood of someone becoming a victim of kidnapping.

- **Layers of security:** there is no single measure that enhances personal security, instead the focus should always be on applying several layers of mitigation involving physical, procedural and behavioural measures, as well as adopting a generally proactive attitude towards security.

- **Planning:** individuals can reduce risk simply by making an effort to understand the general security environment in their location and then pre planning appropriate security precautions (for example insurance, airport pick-ups, security escorts and/ or other local support).

- **Communications:** identifying in advance key points of contact in emergencies (for example local office, hotel, police, embassy, security providers) and have a back-up method of communications in the event a phone does not work locally for network or other reasons. In higher threat environments share itineraries with others in advance and consider establishing lost contact plans involving periodic 'check ins'.

- **Situational awareness:** being aware of your general surroundings at all times but particularly with regards regular routines (for example arriving or leaving at home, the office, schools, or restaurants or shopping malls). Be aware of higher risk areas along routes you travel and be alert to unusual or suspicious incidents, behaviours, people or other occurrences in your vicinity. Avoid situations where you could become isolated and, above all, always trust your instincts.

- **Profile:** kidnappers – and criminals in general – normally target their victims because that individual has come to their attention for some reason. It is therefore important that individuals adopt a low profile in high kidnap threat environments. This should involve minimising overt displays of wealth, not unnecessarily sharing unnecessarily details of itineraries or business trips, and ensuring personal information such as home addresses, phone numbers and email address and family information are not easily accessible.

- **Routines:** kidnappers are most easily able to target and abduct victims who have a predictable routine. It is important therefore in higher threat kidnap environments to avoid setting predictable patterns of behaviour, particularly regarding places you regularly visit. Most kidnaps occur at the beginning or end of journeys, so it is critical to be alert during these phases.

- **Information security:** to reduce vulnerability to both kidnapping but also extortion it is important individuals and their families regularly undertake periodic reviews of their online profiles – including all corporate and social media – to enable an assessment of what personal information is easily accessible and could be utilised by criminals.

Kidnap and Extortion

INITIAL ACTIONS

IF YOU SUSPECT YOU ARE THE VICTIM OF A KIDNAP OR THREAT EXTORTION

DO

- ✓ Start a log of calls, events and any actions taken
- ✓ Form a small family crisis cell / company crisis team
- ✓ Preserve any physical evidence carefully (e.g. letters or parcels received)
- ✓ If possible record any telecommunications with the kidnapper/extortionist, or carefully note all details of what is said
- ✓ Note details of all demands, deadlines or threats received
- ✓ **If you are a Convex client call the 24/7 Response Helpline and ask to speak to the Convex Crisis Response Duty officer**

DON'T

- ✗ Agree to anything, make any offer or start negotiating
- ✗ Acknowledge, agree to or self-impose any deadlines (e.g. "I can get that for you in an hour")
- ✗ Discuss the incident with anyone who does not need to know about it or, if it is not yet publicly known, report the incident without first receiving advice
- ✗ Make any decisions until advised by Convex Crisis Response.

If a kidnapping

Prepare for a possible first call from the kidnappers by:

- Identifying someone (not a decision maker) to act as a 'Communicator' to speak on behalf of the family/company
- Identifying anyone who could potentially receive a call from kidnappers and brief them on how to respond if they are contacted (to say and promise nothing and direct the caller to the Communicator's number).

If communication from someone claiming to hold the victim is received the Communicator should:

- Listen carefully to what is said and ask the caller to repeat anything that is unclear
- Reassure the caller you wish to cooperate
- Explain that you are not authorized to make any decisions as you have to consult other family or company members
- Ask to speak with the victim to confirm that they are alive and well, or ask for other evidence of their well-being (e.g. the answer to a question that only the victim(s) can answer)
- If you do speak with the victim(s) reassure them you are doing everything you can to secure their release and that their family(s) are being looked after
- Stay calm in the face of threats, these are normal, but challenge threats of violence towards the victim(s) (e.g. 'We want to resolve this without anyone getting hurt')
- If possible arrange a time for a call back
- Stall for time pending the arrival of the Convex Crisis Response consultant.

REMEMBER

If in doubt call the Convex Crisis Response Helpline – we would rather help you prevent an incident than help you respond to one.

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