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Separatist Violence and Opportunistic Brigandage in Southeastern Nigeria: The 'Unknown Gunmen' Scourge

Al Chukwuma OKOLI, PhD
Department of Political Science, Federal University Lafia

Corresponding Author:
Al Chukwuma OKOLI
okochu007@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper examines the 'unknown gunmen' scourge in South-eastern Nigeria in the context of the ongoing separatist agitations and violence. Relying on secondary sources, the paper posits that the separatist pressures in the region has created an enabling climate for organized criminal indulgence, opportunism and impunity, leading to dire implications for the security and stability of the region and the wider polity.

Keywords: unknown gunmen, Southeast Nigeria, Biafra, Eastern Security Network, insecurity

Introduction

The neo-Biafra separatist agitations in the Southeastern Nigeria have been associated with waves of violence, which some sources have referred to as an emerging insurgency (Nwangwu, 2022). The violence has been largely orchestrated by the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) whose militant arm, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), has been engaged in a military confrontation with the Nigerian state. Following the escalation of the crisis in January 2021, the Nigerian Army moved to crush the ESN at one of its main operational strongholds situated in Orlu area of Imo State (BBC, 2021). Subsequently in February 2021, IPOB declared a state of war between Nigeria and Biafra (Sahara Reporters, 2021). This was followed by the declaration of the formation of a Biafran interim government by another separatist formation allied to IPOB (The Cable, 2021). Since then, the Biafran separatists have been involved in series of violent and subversive activities to which the Nigerian government has often responded rather arbitrarily (Okoli & Anjide, 2022). Although the separatists have often claimed that their militant activities were mainly geared towards protecting and defending the Biafran homeland from the activities of from armed herders and bandits (Okoli & Anjide, 2022), their operations have essentially challenged the sovereign and territorial integrity of Nigeria. In late June 2021, IPOB leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, was arrested in Kenya and extradited to Nigeria to face multiple treasonable charges. Kanu's arrest and extradition further escalated the separatist crisis in South-eastern Nigeria, bringing about a reign of aggravated violence and brigandage.

Essentially, the ongoing neo-Biafra separatist agitations in the Nigeria's South East have engendered an atmosphere of violence and criminality wherein disparate non-state actors, often operating in the guise of agitators, perpetrate mayhem against both the government and the citizenry. Among the actors are infiltrators, interlopers, and fault-liners, who are exploiting the volatile security situation in the region to advance their diverse criminal enterprises. The 'Unknown Gunmen' phenomenon represents a culmination of this trend.

Separatist Violence and the Rise of Criminal Opportunism

Separatist violence in Southeastern Nigeria could be traced to 1967 when Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu led a movement whose aim was to establish the Republic of Biafra. The movement met with stiffly resisted by the Nigerian national government, which mobilized its military to counter the insurrection (Ekpu, 2012). What followed was Nigeria-Biafra Civil War which spanned between 1967 and 1970. Although the Civil War ended in a 'no victor, no vanquished 'scenario (Oyovbaire, 1985), the fundamental issues underpinning it were not

adequately addressed and resolved. Sequel to the return of civil rule in Nigeria in 1999, there was a recrudescence of sectionalist agitations across the country. One of the groups involved in such agitations was the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Founded by Ralph Uwazuruike, MASSOB was committed to the self-determination of the people of the former Eastern Nigeria (Onuoha, 2012). As a result of its anti-state activities, MASSOB met a violent confrontation by the then Obasanjo's government (1999-2007). In 2013, the group were severely clamped down by the government on treason-related charges, resulting in the arrest and detention of some of its members, including the leader. MASSOB's activism subsided significantly in mid-2010s, but the grievances driving it remained in place.

In 2012, a number of radical elements of the embattled MASSOB regrouped under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu. Subsequently known as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the emergent group sought to, among others, galvanize and liberate the Biafra natives from the hegemonic Hausa/ Fulani political establishment of Nigeria. Ultimately, it strives towards the realization of independence and statehood of Biafra through a self-determination struggle (Nwangwu, 2021). IPOB won populist identification among the Igbo people of South East Nigeria. Incidentally, it also incurred the anger of the Nigerian government, which declared a military offensive on its leadership and structures (Maingwa, 2021). The movement was formally proscribed and re-classified as a terrorist organization in 2017, following the increasing violent campaigns of its militia named Eastern Security Network (ESN).

IPOB remained dogged and active despite its proscription. In September 2017, its leader, Nnamdi Kanu escaped death by a whisker when his country-home was bombarded by the Nigerian military personnel. Kanu subsequently left for the United Kingdom from where he continued to champion the neo-Biafra separatist activism. In June 2021, Kanu was arrested in Kenya and forcefully extradited to Nigeria to face treasonable charges. Kanu's extradition and detention has impacted the operations of IPOB in some decisive manner:

i. It has led to the de-structuring of the once disciplined and coherent movement, leading to contending factions: the embattled mainstream group and the Auto-Pilot group led by Simeon Ekpa [1] are the most dominant of these factions.
ii. The de-structuring and splintering of the movement has exposed it to criminal co-option and infiltration, with some disgruntled and opportunistic dissidents of the mainstream formation defecting to form their own gangs while some elements of the underworld have enlisted in the rank and file of the extant factions, thereby infiltrating their operations.
iii. The emergence of interlopers, counterfeiters and entrepreneurs who capitalize on the prevailing volatile situation to profiteer: spiritualists, herbalists, informants, drug dealers, gun runners, and merchants.
iv. The criminalization of the separatist militancy, whereby existing armed groups (established and emerging gangs of cultists, ritualists, bandits, militants, and mercenaries) exploit the existing climate of insecurity and instability to aggrandize in criminal indulgence and impunity - the phenomenon of 'unknown gunmen' typifies such a trend.

The 'Unknown Gunmen' (UGM) Phenomenon and the Rising Opportunistic Brigandage

The 'Unknown Gunmen' (UGM) refers to a nebulous corpus of brigands that emerged in South-eastern Nigeria in early 2021. They comprise diverse syndicates of cultists, robbers, kidnappers, ritual killers, militants and mercenaries who are ripping off the chaotic security situation in the region to perpetrate violence and criminality. Although without a unifying structure, command and ideological cohesion, different formations of the UGM operate different patterns and modalities of criminality, often in loose syndicates and cells that split and splinter over time.

Major syndicates of the UGM are characterized by some degree of criminal sophistication and discipline. They operate stationary camps (see Table 1); maintain an expansive network of spies, informants and conspirators; and practice a command and control procedure that enables them to optimize organizational effectiveness and resilience. Also, they maintain varying patterns of instrumental but mercenary linkages with some elements of

[1] This faction is led by a self-ordained successor of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. It became prominent following the extradition of Kanu in Mid-2012.

the underworld as well as the civil populace. The activities of the UGM are more pronounced in parts of Imo and Anambra states. Their operational domains are mostly situated in the rural and forested areas of Anambra/ Imo borderlines, where they have established camps and safe havens (See Table 1). These sites and their immediate neighbourhoods depict ungoverned spaces from where gang brigandage is simulated and effectuated. Essentially, the camps are theatres for kidnappings, ritual killings, as well as cult idolism and cannibalism.[2]

Table 1: Some UGM Camps in Southeastern Nigeria

Camp	Local Government Area	State
Unubi/Ukpor camp	Nnewi South	Anambra
Lilu camp	Ihiala	Anambra
Orsu camp	Orlu	Imo
Orsumoghu camp	Ihiala	Anambra
Agulezechukwu/ Ogboji camp	Aguata	Anambra
Nkwere Inyi camp	Oji River	Enugu

Source: Author's compilation (2022).

The disruptive activities of the UGM caught national and international attention, following the April 5th (2021) jailbreak at Owerri (Maingwa, 2021)[3], south East of Nigeria in which over one thousand inmates escaped. In addition,,there have been pockets of isolated or coordinated attacks on security personnel and facilities in Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi and Enugu states (Maingwa, 2021). In effect, from October 2020 to June 2021, a total of 178 security operatives were killed in such circumstances (Malami, 2021). UGM's violence aggravated in the mid-2021 amidst the escalating separatist pressures in South-eastern Nigeria. In the immediate aftermath of the arrest and extradition of Nnamdi Kanu, in June, there was an unprecedented surge of separatist militancy in the region. In tandem, there was a sudden spike in gun-related violence by criminal gangs, especially in Anambra and Imo states. The crisis climaxed in the weeks leading up to the November 2021 Governorship Election in Anambra State (Nwangwu, 2022),

Although it is not certain the kind of relationship that exists between the UGM and IPOB, corroborated anecdotes and circumstantial evidence point to a close synergy between the two groups. The linkage is widely acknowledged in spite of IPOB's several pronouncements have disclaimed involvement in the violent activities of the UGM.[4] Whilst IPOB may not be wholly blamed for the gale of criminality in the focal region, it cannot be exonerated of all forms and degrees of involvement altogether. It is widely held that opportunistic elements within IPOB's fold must have been involved in such acts. The need to curb the disruptions of UGM has led to a number of militarized security operations in the affected areas since 2021. While these operations have yielded some positive results in terms of arrest of culprits and degradation of their operational arsenals, they have often occurred at a huge expense for human rights and human security. An Amnesty International's (AI's) report indicates that no fewer than 115 persons were killed by government security operatives who were engaged in the effort to counter the spiralling brigandage in South-eastern Nigeria from March to June, 2021 (Amnesty International, 2021).

Strategic Implications and the Way Forward

The separatist violence and criminal opportunism in the South-eastern Nigeria have plunged the region into dire insecurity. Part of the problem is the existence of swathes of competitive control where disruptive non-state actors engage the state in territorial contest. A lot of government security facilities in the region (prisons, police stations, checkpoints, etc.) have been attacked. In fact, uniformed security operatives are sparingly operate in the region, apparently for fear of mortal risks. In the face of the unfolding scenario, the coercive competences of the

[2] Cult idolism and ritual-based cannibalism are practiced by some castes of the gunmen; this has been confirmed following the successful military raids on some of the camps in Anambra State.

[3] The jailbreak marked the arrival of the UGM as a sort of emerging insurrectional force.

[4] Confessions extracted from some of the arrested and repentant gunmen suggest that some elements of IPOB and its factional allies have been involved in such activities.

state appears to have been eroded amid the rising influence of the underworld. This awry trend highlights the reign of civil disorder and anarchy within the civic domain.

The unrest in the South East has also led to consequences that undermine human security and dignity. Households and villages have often been displaced from the neighbourhoods occupied by the UGM. People have been molested, extorted, kidnapped, killed, and dehumanized by the brigands (Musa, 2022). In some cases, people have been compelled pay 'protection levies' to the criminals in exchange for their safety in their communities. Properties belonging to the government and private individuals have been lost in the prevailing orgy of destruction. Government's efforts at countering the crisis have equally led to unbecoming outcomes as a result of excessive or abusive response. Essentially, the unfolding scenario depicts a reign of siege, with dire consequences for peace and stability. The spread of violent criminal gangs in many parts of the region poses a mortal threat to civil order and security. More disturbing is the sedentary incursions of these elements into communities through camping and civil infiltration. In view of the ramifying impact of the crisis on human lives, rights and livelihoods, but also its strategic implications for Nigeria's sovereign and territorial integrity, it will be reasonable to submit that the crisis portends a fatal danger ahead.

Mitigating the crisis under review necessitates dealing pragmatically the circumstantial and substantive grievances that underlie the Biafra agitation. This requires a conscious and deliberate effort at inclusive governance that gives all segments of Nigeria a proper sense of belonging and protection within the framework of the federation. Concerning the 'Unknown Gunmen' (UGM) scourge, a robust, comprehensive and pragmatic anti-banditry strategy is an immediate necessity. Such a strategy must recognize the need to distinguish between legitimate agitations and criminality. As such, the gangs of criminals that masquerade as the UGM must be systematically annihilated. As actors who are also challenging the authority of the state, they must neither be underrated, pacified nor forgiven. On no account should the government negotiate with them, whatever the terms are. Instead, the government should brace up to the challenge by undertaking the following strategic measures:

- Infiltrate their networks and vicious chains of collaborators: arms and ammunition suppliers, drug suppliers, charm makers, spiritualists, spies, informants, sponsors, and a host of other cohorts.
- Dominate their operational enclaves and bases, such as forested landscapes, difficult terrains, trans-state frontiers, et cetera.
- Disrupt and undermine their under-worldly structures and capabilities for organized brigandage, including their syndicates, cells, circuits, camps, shrines, cults, etc.
- Liquidate them alongside their critical assets, franchises, and material and non-material arsenals

Conclusion

This article examined the rising trend of violence and brigandage in the context of the ongoing Biafra separatist agitations in Nigeria's South East. It posited that the waves of violence associated with the separatist activism in the region have given rise to an atmosphere of criminal opportunism of which the activities of the 'unknown gunmen' is a culmination. The activities of this group highlight the dire state of public security and order in the region. Such a situation requires an urgent remediation in order to forestall a slide into a possible underworld insurrection.

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AuthorBio

Al Chukwuma Okoli holds a PhD in Defence and Strategic Studies from the Nigerian Defence Academy. He teaches Political Science at Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. Dr Okoli is a triple laureate of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa CODESRRIA. He is a member of CORN-West Africa.