EUROPE’S ROLE IN STOPPING NIGERIA’S ‘SILENT SLAUGHTER’

EVENT REPORT
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With the support of
Murderous attacks on Christians and ethnic minorities by the Fulani and Islamic terror groups in the northern regions of Nigeria have been going on for close to two decades, leaving more than 60,000 dead.

But little has been done by successive Nigerian governments, or by the international community, to tackle and defeat the terror groups.

Campaigners want the United States to create a Special Envoy for Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin to focus on terrorism, deteriorating human rights and the root causes of violence, food insecurity and poor governance.

But what can the EU – for whom Nigeria is an important potential partner, especially as Brussels seeks to overhaul its trade and political relations with Africa – do to stop the ‘silent slaughter’?
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With the biggest economy in Africa, Nigeria should be a key partner for Brussels as the EU seeks to overhaul its political and trade ties with Africa. But terrorism and insecurity that plague the country continue to be a concern.

The European Commission unveiled its EU-Africa strategy in March, with peace and governance among the thematic ‘partnerships’ it wants to agree on during a six-month negotiating process between EU and African leaders that is due to culminate in an EU-African Union summit in October.

Human rights campaigners want the EU to put pressure on President Muhammadu Buhari to finally tackle two decades of terrorist attacks that have killed tens of thousands and seen Nigeria rank third out of 163 countries on the Global Terrorism Index, behind only Iraq and Afghanistan.

While Boko Haram Islamic terrorists are confined to perhaps 5% of Nigerian territory, Fulani militants operate across the country, particularly in the agricultural Middle Belt, where farmers and nomadic herders have been in a long-running conflict over land and water resources. The attacks by the Fulani and Islamic terror groups have been going on for close to two decades.

The failure by President Buhari, elected for a second four-year term in 2019, and his government to halt the killing and accusations of complicity

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by the government and military has fuelled the perception that Buhari is failing on security and favouring his own Fulani people, who comprise about 90% of the country’s nomadic herders.

In March, the Human Rights Writers Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) said it would seek to have President Buhari and his Vice President Yemi Osinbajo indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to face prosecution for crimes against humanity, should the current wave of killings by armed herdsmen continue and the killers and their sponsors go unpunished.

Dr Richard Ikiebe, co-founder of the International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice (PSJ), says that there is “a state of denial” in Nigeria, particularly in the south of the country where the economic and political hubs are located.

Dr Ikiebe says that engaging EU policymakers remains a “work in progress”.

Yet the killings and attacks, which have left 1.8 million Nigerians internally displaced, are also one of the drivers of migration through the neighbouring Sahel region and eventually to Europe. Around 20,000 Nigerians have arrived in Europe from the Mediterranean since January 2017.

In January, a European Parliament resolution stated that “these attacks have been carried out with total impunity, with perpetrators rarely being held to account; whereas an Amnesty International report has demonstrated wilful negligence by the Nigerian Security Forces concerning the deadly attacks against farmers’ communities”.

In the accompanying debate on the floor of the chamber, EU foreign affairs chief, Josep Borrell, told EU lawmakers that the “human rights and humanitarian situation in Nigeria has significantly deteriorated”.

The EU is Nigeria’s second-largest donor, behind the United States, allocating the country €562 million through the European Development Fund (EDF) during the 2014-2020 budget period.

The question is what the EU can and is prepared to do.

“We discussed the implication of insecurity in Northeast, where an estimated 7.7 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and ways to ensure we come up with the best human rights conditions for victims of conflict,” said Ambassador Ketil Karlsen, Head of EU delegation to Nigeria following the most recent fifth EU-Nigeria Human Rights Dialogue in February.

In the meantime, the United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, is considering whether to create a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

Dr Ikiebe says that the EU should put “everything on the table” including the possible suspension of aid, until the Buhari government takes steps to stop the slaughter.
Dr Richard Ikiebe has led recent efforts to get international community backing to stop nearly two decades of ethnic and religious killing in Nigeria. “Now, people are listening to us”, he says.

Dr Ikiebe is a co-founder of the International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice (PSJ), whose recently launched ‘Silent Slaughter’ campaign is seeking to build international awareness to halt murderous attacks by the Fulani and Islamic terror groups in Nigeria’s northern and Middle Belt regions.

The US Department of Defense’s Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimates that 60,000 lives have been lost since 2001.

The groups may be different and operate in different regions but the pattern is similar. In the north-east, attacks by Boko Haram or the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) are against predominantly Christian and ethnic minorities. Farmer-herder clashes have been predominantly between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian farmers, exacerbating ethnoreligious hostilities.

In the 2019 Global Terrorism Index Nigeria ranks 3rd between Iraq and Syria as the countries most impacted

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by terrorism, and Fulani extremists as being responsible for the majority of terror-related deaths in the West African country.

Dr Ikiebe tells EURACTIV that PSJ has been campaigning on the issue for just over two years. “We’ve always been involved in this space.”

The question is why Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, a stern former general who was re-elected for the second four year term in February 2019, is failing to protect his country’s people.

For Ikiebe, the inaction of President Buhari’s government borders on complicity. “Even in his home state there are killings,” he points out. “You can’t have people being killed so brutally, so consistently, and in such large numbers, and nobody is arrested,” he says.

“Of course there are things in north-east with Boko Haram – almost like a lawless territory. It is nothing short of complicity.”

The Governor of Delta state, Senator Ifeanyi Okowa, has also accused “unidentified military personnel” of helping the herdsmen following a spate of murderous attacks in January and February.

“We have listened to over 50 victims who have told us that there were helicopters flying overhead,” Ikiebe says.

It is the government’s failure to listen and act that has prompted Dr Ikiebe and PSJ to go to the international community. “We are not getting any traction in the country. We are speaking to deaf ears,” says Ikiebe, adding that there is “a state of denial” in Nigeria.

PSJ has launched its campaign in the United States and United Kingdom, and Ikiebe is confident that the tide is starting to turn among the international community.

“Now people are listening to us,” says Ikiebe, adding that “several weeks ago, we had an audience with the US Secretary of State, asking for a special envoy as they did in Darfur.”

That proposal would expand the existing position of US Special Envoy for Boko Haram to cover Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to cover terrorism by Boko Haram and Fulani militants, deteriorating human rights and the root causes of violence, as well as food insecurity and poor governance.

Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, was “quite open” to the proposal, says Ikiebe.

That was followed by a debate in the UK Parliament on the security situation in Nigeria.

“We are using every open door to try to speak to those in power.”

WORK IN PROGRESS

Getting Europe into motion is a different challenge, however. “Engagement with the EU is still a work in progress,” Ikiebe says, adding that there is often a reluctance by the EU and other world leaders to get involved in anything that has its roots in ethno-religious conflicts or the colonial past.

“People are afraid, tired of anything with religious connotations. If you call it what it is – ethno-religious killing – then everyone takes a dive,” he says.

“There is hypocrisy when it comes to persecution of Christians.”

The combination of militant Fulani herders and Jihadist terror groups in Nigeria is similar to the situation in the neighbouring Sahel countries, where France has been leading Operation Barkhane and has sought to persuade other European countries to contribute troops and aid to the G5 Sahel mission which has been tasked with combating jihadist groups in the region.

“The EU should take more interest in the Sahel and do more to hold the government of Nigeria to account over what is happening to its people,” says Ikiebe.

He adds that the insecurity in the Sahel and northern Nigeria is also fuelling migration from the region to Europe.

“80-90% of Africans crossing into Europe (from the Sahel) are Nigerians. And they will keep coming. If the EU is going to keep giving aid – they should put everything on the table,” says Dr Ikiebe.
As different global crises jostle for the international limelight more than ever, a humanitarian disaster intensifies in Nigeria, gaining little attention among the international community and suffering crucially from the inaction of the country’s own federal government.

The International Organization for Peace Building and Social Justice (PSJ) is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which exists to promote peace building and social justice in Nigeria.

This crisis has been marked by unrelenting violence, perpetrated by extremists such as Fulani militants, Boko Haram or the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) against predominantly Christian and ethnic minorities, but also any other religious group refusing to surrender to their terror. In the 2019 Global Terrorism Index Nigeria ranks 3rd between

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Iraq and Syria as the countries most impacted by terrorism, with the Islamic State terrorist group finding an ally in Boko Haram. This fact nonetheless seems to have escaped Europe’s collective consciousness. Meanwhile a crisis rages in Africa’s most populous country – the EU’s 4th biggest trading partner on the continent – plaguing its most vulnerable communities with an ever-mounting body count.

The human cost of the crisis has been considerable and extensive. The U.S. Department of Defense’s Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimates that since 2001, 60,000 lives have been lost to the violence. As with any major conflict, large-scale displacement (over 2.5 million are currently internally displaced in Nigeria) and a high poverty rate has ensued. Internal displacements have been further worsened by the inevitable effect of the climate emergency, overpopulation and food insecurity in the West African sub-region. Some of the consequences include exponential external effects with capabilities to massively activate regional instability and mass migration.

Devastation of this magnitude is hard to imagine or comprehend, but the consequences for victims remain very real. Victoria Daniel recounts through an interpreter how she and her children stayed in hiding during an attack on her village on June 26th 2018. “When I came out I found everybody dead”, her husband and other family members among the estimated 86 killed. Now “we are in internal displacement camps and the only source of help is from NGOs from time to time.”

Recent statistics show a consistent trend in the attacks. A spate of intense attacks in January triggered an emergency resolution from the European Parliament. Commissioner Lenarčič announced an emergency aid package of €26.5 million during his visit to Nigeria, and a statement made on behalf of High Representative Borrell in front of the European Parliament expressed deep concern for the deteriorating humanitarian and human rights situation.

The violence takes place against a backdrop of historical-cultural tension and has long manifested in conflict over land-use. According to Professor Yusufu Turaki the attacks have become more prevalent due to the radicalised religious beliefs of the Fulani aggressors, and a perceived ethnic hierarchy introduced during Nigeria’s British colonial past. Professor Turaki is a founding Board member of an NGO seeking an end to the violence – The ‘International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice’ which this week launched its campaign, #silentslaughter in Brussels following a successful UK and US launch earlier this month. The campaign decries an apparent massive deficit in Nigeria of federal leadership, and a systematic lack of preventative action so severe that it borders on complicity. With Nigeria’s highly disproportionate balance of political power and wealth further exacerbating the conflict, peacebuilding requires challenging the status quo and speaking truth to power.

In February, EU diplomats met with Nigerian officials at an annual human rights dialogue, finding the time to address pre-agreed human rights issues in “a technical session that lasted for almost four hours”. Meanwhile, in February alone, the #silentslaughter campaign’s incident tracker recorded 221 killings, 64 abductions and 38 injuries as a result of the crisis. In the case of Nigeria only so much can be achieved through the traditional channels of high diplomacy.

Our elected representatives and lawmakers in the EU must join in calling for effective preventative action from President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration, but also for the continued vocal support of local NGOs and civic society on the ground. Solving these deeply rooted internal issues will require the facilitation of many interethnic and interfaith dialogues. To put this mildly, Nigerian society is in great distress, but at its grassroots are those best equipped to build the bridges necessary to turn the tide on the violence. The international community must answer their call for help.

As Brussels turns its attention to Africa, with the publication of the Commission’s EU-Africa strategy and anticipated conclusion later this year of the replacement to the Cotonou Agreement, the moment is opportune for the EU to advocate for lasting peace in Nigeria.

Contact your MEP and urge them to take action, sign the petition, and encourage others to do the same on social media with #silentslaughter.
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