



Killings in Nigeria: It is Time to Consider General Theophilus Danjuma's Self-Defence Option

Written by

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Introduction

There is hardly any day one wakes up in Nigeria without the news of attacks by hoodlums on some parts of the country. As a result of this, thousands of people are being sent to an early grave, while many more are being maimed or rendered homeless. These incidents also destroy properties worth billions of naira continuously. For instance, the nine-year Boko Haram insurgency is estimated to have claimed over 20,000 lives, displaced more than 2.6 million people, created over 75,000 orphans and caused about \$9 billion worth of damage in Nigeria between 2009 and 2017. Since 2009, the Nigerian armed forces have been battling the insurgents, but complete success has not been achieved, as from time to time, the insurgents strike to show they have not been decimated.

However, as Nigerians were basking in the euphoria of overcoming the terror of Boko Haram, they were once more jolted to yet another deadly killer squad, the Fulani herdsmen, rated to be more lethal than Boko Haram. The Fulani herdsmen have been terrorising Nigerians since 2015, especially in the Middle Belt states of Benue and Taraba. Other states in the Middle Belt and the southern part of the country have also had their fair share of the carnage. The menace started as clashes with farmers who frown at the destruction of their farms by the herdsmen and their cattle, and gradually snowballed into brazen attacks and mass murders by the rampaging killer Fulani herdsmen. Each attack leaves behind the trail of blood, pains and death of the people.

The concern is becoming particularly acute against the background of weakness or failure on the part of the government to address this rising form of extremist violence. Hence, a former defence chief, General Theophilus Danjuma (rtd), whose many fellow indigenes of Taraba State have fallen

to the swords of these attackers, have called on the indigenous peoples of Nigeria to pick up arms and defend themselves. He warned against continued reliance on Nigerian security forces whom he accused of complicity in the killings going on in several parts of the country.

Too Many Killings

In December 2015, there were attacks in different parts of Southern Kaduna. According to the vicar-general of the Catholic Diocese of Kafanchan, Rev. Fr. Ibrahim Yakubu, about 880 people were killed in the attacks; 1,422 houses were burnt down, and 18 churches and one primary school were also torched. In all, 53 villages in the area were affected in the carnage by the invading marauders. In February 2016, few weeks after the attacks on Southern Kaduna, herdsmen invaded Agatu villages and farm settlements in Benue State, gunning down children, men, women and the elderly. *Premium Times* reported that at the time the gunshots subsided, over 500 villagers were reportedly massacred and over 7000 were displaced in 10 villages which included Aila, Okokolo, Akwu, Adagbo, Odugbehon and Odejo. All these happened in broad daylight. After the Agatu massacre, herdsmen went on to raid Tarka, Logo and Buruku communities, where over 20 deaths were recorded.

Former Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, in October 2016, released some grim statistics about the killings and maiming in clashes between Fulani herdsmen and peasant farmers in four states – Plateau, Nasarawa, Kaduna and Benue. According to him, in 2016 alone, 2,500 people were killed, 62,000 people were displaced, \$13.7 billion worth of investments and property lost to the clashes and 47 percent of the internally-generated revenue in the affected states lost. Abubakar warned that if nothing were done urgently by the government, these killings would spread beyond the four states. They have since gone beyond the four states. In 2017 alone, it was reported that clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Adamawa, Benue, Taraba, Ondo, Kaduna, Enugu, Zamfara, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger, Cross River, Delta and the Ekiti States resulted in the death of about 549 people, while thousands were also displaced. According to Amnesty International, at least 168 people were killed by the herdsmen in January 2018 alone across Benue, Adamawa, Taraba, Ondo and the Kaduna States. The worst and most senseless of these killings took place in Benue State where 73 persons were massacred on the eve of the new year of 2018.

On 24th April 2018, two Catholic priests and 17 parishioners of St. Ignatius Quasi Parish, Ukpor Mbalom, Ayar Mbalom village, Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State were gruesomely murdered by men suspected to be Fulani herdsmen. The priests were celebrating early morning mass for their parishioners when the attackers invaded the church and massacred the worshippers. The attackers, according to several newspaper reports, also burnt down over 100 houses during the attack and sacked the entire community. The attack came barely four days after the murder of ten persons by herdsmen in Guma Local Government Area of the state and the destruction of several houses by men suspected to be military personnel in Naka, Gwer West Local Government Area of the same state.

When it was thought that the era of the bombing was over, Nigerians were once again jolted to reality in the afternoon of 1st May 2018 when two bombs went off in Mubi, Adamawa State. The twin bomb blasts shattered the popular second-hand clothes and the foreign exchange lines and a mosque. When the dust settled, no fewer than 60 people (mainly worshippers) were killed and about 68 others injured. Four days later, on the 5th of May 2018, shooters invaded Gwaska village

in Birnin Gwari Local Government Area of Kaduna State and opened fire on the locals. By the time they left, 45 people had died. *Premium Times* reported that several houses were also burnt to the ground as the bullets rained. The list is endless.

Describing these killings as clashes, as government officials and most people do, gives the impression that there is a balance of terror between the attacker and the attacked. It is wrong to describe these killings as clashes. A clash is a violent conflict between two groups of people with the likelihood of the two groups suffering casualties. Since the Fulani herdsmen menace began, their manner of attack makes it difficult for them to suffer casualties and there is no evidence that those attacked ever faced them or that they even had a chance to fight back. These killings are usually unprovoked, and the attackers choose where and when to strike. In several places where they have attacked, they came at night when the villagers were asleep and killed and sacked whole villages and disappeared before daybreak. In some cases, they strike early in the morning as they in the attack on St. Ignatius Parish, Ukpok Mbalom, Benue State. Was the killing of the priests and their parishioners also a clash? There is still no evidence that the church in Ukpok Mbalom provoked them or even had a chance to fight back. They did the same thing several times in Agatu in Benue State. In no case was there any evidence that Agatu people provoked them or had a chance to engage them.

What is the Government doing?

More disheartening is the fact that the government is not doing enough to protect communities from these violent deaths. While these killings occur on a daily basis, the federal government and security forces have either shown gross incapacity to stem the ugly trend, or have deliberately refused to act. This their inaction has fuelled the speculations in several quarters that the Fulani herdsmen always have a field day because they have their kith and kin as Commander-in-Chief and as heads of several other militaries, para-military and intelligence agencies. Otherwise, how else can one explain the fact that these herdsmen roam about openly armed with AK-47 rifles and the security forces turn blind eyes to them? Meanwhile, the Inspector-General of Police was quick to ask Nigerians who have legitimately acquired arms for self-defence to turn in their arms to the authorities. This request includes community vigilante groups who were legitimately constituted to defend their communities against these marauding herdsmen.

It is also in line with the above thoughts that people view the reactions of government and its officials to the killings as not only mere window dressing but also annoying. For instance, while reacting to the Agatu massacre, President Muhammadu Buhari, through the Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, said:

I deeply sympathise with all those who lost dear ones, as well as those who lost their properties, in the attack. I have directed the chief of defence staff and the inspector-general of police to secure all communities under attacks by herdsmen and to go after all the groups terrorising innocent people all over the country. This government will not allow these attacks to continue.

This has always been the response, and the attacks have always continued with innocent people always being killed. Worse, the killers have always gotten away with the mass murder. The most disturbing part of this is when government/security officials whose duty it is to provide security

for the people try to justify these killings. A security chief once remarked that it was the enactment of the anti-open grazing laws in Benue and Taraba States that triggered the killings, and advised that such laws should be abrogated for peace to reign. In fact, the Inspector-General of Police was so insensitive to the killings in Benue that he told a bewildered nation that the killings were a result of communal clashes. With such posture by officials who are paid with taxpayers' money to protect the citizens, it seems the only alternative left for the people is to find a way to protect themselves as General Danjuma admonished. It is becoming clearer by the day that security officials can no longer do the job for which they were hired.

In an exclusive interview session with the Voice of America, Hausa service, in Washington, United States in May 2018, President Buhari said he had approved the recruitment of 6,000 additional police officers as part of fresh measures to address the nation's security challenges including the farmers/herdsmen clashes across the country. This recruitment is a laudable objective, but if entire Nigeria's armed forces could not stop the killings, 6,000 policemen can do very little. The fact is that considering the boldness with which the herdsmen attack, kill and sack people from their ancestral homes, and the fact that government and the security forces do virtually nothing to stop them, people have lost confidence in the ability of both the government and security agencies to protect them. In fact, the ordinary man on the street assumes that the herdsmen have an unofficial licence and support from high places to kill. Otherwise, there is no reason why the government should keep on making verbal promises of ending the carnage without taking concrete and proactive actions, at least by arresting and prosecuting the culprits. Each time such massacre occurs, the best the government does is to deploy soldiers and police officers to the affected areas who, in some cases, end up terrorising the already traumatised citizens further, as was the case in Naka, Gwer West Local Government Area of Benue State. Secondly, the herdsmen also seem to be enjoying the protection of the government. The Global Terrorism Index ranked Fulani herdsmen as the fourth deadliest terror group in the world, yet the Nigerian government has refused even to acknowledge the fact that they are terrorists.

The Way Forward

Given the number of people that have either been killed or maimed and the number of communities that have been destroyed by the Fulani herdsmen in particular within this short period, it is safe to say that these are not ordinary times. The matter is made worse by the fact that the government and security agencies are failing in their primary responsibility, which is to protect the lives and property of Nigerians. Abnormal circumstances require abnormal solutions, and extraordinary times require extraordinary remedies. The killings are getting worse by the day, and it is morally wrong to ask people who are being killed not to defend or protect themselves when those paid to secure or protect them do not do their job. Therefore, General Danjuma's call for people to defend and protect themselves is apt. Contrary to government's belief that this will bring anarchy, it will make the job of security officers easier. The government should, therefore, support local vigilante groups and neighbourhood watch groups and equip them so that they can defend their communities in the event of unwarranted attacks. The order by the Inspector-General of Police for people to surrender their legitimately acquired arms to the Police is, may not be the right option now especially as some surrendered theirs while others are still roaming about with theirs, killing people and destroying properties.

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