COVID 19 AND NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN AFRICA: ANALYSING THE RESPONSES TOWARDS COUNTERING ARMED BANDITRY IN NORTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

COVID 19 pandemic has become a global health issue that transcends towards the political economy of international security especially in African countries where most of the countries are battling with various forms of insecurity. The outbreak of the virus in Africa halted political, economic and social activities including countering armed violence. Nigeria is one of the African countries that is bedevilled with insecurity challenges in all its characteristic ramifications ranging from Boko Haram insurgency, rural banditry, farmers-herders clash, kidnapping, robbery and piracy. In the wake of COVID 19 pandemic, much attention was paid towards arresting the spread of the disease and to provide palliatives that can cushion the effects of the scorch of poverty exacerbated by the abrupt stoppage of formal and informal economic activities. This study examined how the Nigerian Government is approaching the menace of armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria during the lock down. The armed bandits intensified attacks using the alibi of the inter-state travel ban. The Government in its own part devised new strategies of responding towards the assaults. The study gathered data from documented sources and media reports. The data obtained were discussed and analysed using descriptive conceptual analysis to subject the diverse literature into the rigours of academic dexterity. The work discovered that armed bandits utilised the COVID 19 lock down to increase their attacks on villages in Northwestern Nigeria. The resultant effects of their action led to increased offensive on air and by land from the Nigerian security. This study has practical contributions to policy making because it recommends among others that the government should increase surveillance and adopt strict measures of censoring necessary movements to curtail the attacks.

Keywords: Africa, Banditry, Challenges, COVID 19, National Security, Nigeria
INTRODUCTION
The novel Coronavirus popularly known as “COVID 19” became a global pandemic officially as declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in January (Osler, 2020). The virus emanated from the industrial city of Wuhan in China in December with a mysterious and a devastating character, rapidly leading to rampant cases and deaths untamed by all scientific medications. The global nature of interconnectivity in contemporary world made the activities of mankind disentangled and inevitable (Hochberg, 2020). A spread of a pandemic in a remote place today in the world can easily permeate and spread across the world owing to international travels and relationship. Thus, within a month, COVID 19 spread across the continents of the world in a speed of light infecting millions and leading to death of hundreds of thousands (Zizek, 2020). Within a couple of months, the COVID 19 epidemic grinded the world economy into a halt and it has grounded global politics into comatose (Rosberg & Knell, 2020). Economies were sharply affected, policy responses and analyses became intensified, social conditions and activities deteriorated worldwide, collective global security suffers setback, and virtually, global activities were stopped abruptly (Hruby, 2020). Several efforts (Wang, Wang, Ye & Liu, 2020; He, Pang & Tanaka, 2020; Chen, Hu, Zhang, Jiang, Han, Zhuang, Hu & Zhang, 2020; Liang, 2020; Grant, Lahore, McDonnell, Baggerly, French, Aliano & Bhattoa, 2020 and Joseph & Ashkan, 2020) from scientific perspective to provide remedy to the virus indicated progress but not a breakthrough since the current status is still revealing the virus as a disease without any valid sacrosanct cure or treatment.

Africa is one of the continents that were affected by the effects of COVID 19. The virus hit the American, European and Asian countries harder in terms of reported cases and total number of deaths but the African territory suffers more economically and socially. Africa, a continent which is the second most populous after Asia is the most impoverished in terms of incidences of poverty, diseases, unemployment, insecurity, weak political institutions, malnutrition and hunger and several other indicators of a poor standard of living. Amidst the above malaise of socioeconomic and political troubles, COVID 19 emerged in Africa. Nigeria is the biggest country in Africa by population and GDP and it is one of the most affected countries by the spread and impact of COVID 19. The country was, prior to the emergence of COVID 19, exhibiting a poor sign of healthcare in terms of high HIV/AIDS prevalence, maternal and infant mortality rate, hunger and malnutrition and malaria (WHO, 2020). Besides, the country, like other numerous African countries, is bedeviled with a long term protracted and exacerbated insecurity across the six geo-political zones especially in the Northeast which is battling with Boko Haram insurgency for over ten (10) years and Northwest which is presently suffering from armed bandits. The assaults by the armed groups threatened the national security of Nigeria (Campbell & McCaslin, 2020). Responses towards arresting the insecurity were ongoing in the country through military strikes, negotiation and deradicalisation when the COVID 19 suddenly broke out. Measures taken such as lock down and ban on inter-state travels affected the response towards curtailing armed banditry in the Northwest. Drawing from the above background, this study found it imperative to investigate how the armed group violence threatened the national security of Nigeria and the prevailing impact of COVID 19 towards escalating the challenges of responding in countering the violence, and by extension how the Nigerian Government responded using the Northwest armed banditry as the premise of study.

METHOD
The study utilised documented sources and media reports as the means of data collection. Books, journal articles, reports, internet and media sources were consulted for relevant data. The data obtained were discussed, analysed and interpreted using descriptive analytical analysis where themes and sub-themes were identified related to the subject matter of discussion for findings. Where necessary, the study designed tables, charts and a model for clarity of illustration.
Framework of Analysis: Strategies of Containing Armed Group Violence

The policies, methods and techniques that the states used in countering terrorism and its attendant consequences is what is called counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism (Silke, 2016, p.8). There is no single or a universally acceptable strategy for countering armed group violence. Different countries use different strategies and military as well as non-military techniques in countering insurgency and terrorism of armed groups based on the effectiveness and conveniency of the adopted approach. This is because “Great powers can lose small wars when their opponents refused to fight them conventionally” (Cassidy, 2006, p.67). For instance, one of the strategies identified for countering armed group violence is the use of cultural anthropology by studying the political, strategic and military organisation of the armed groups to counter them in a most convenient way for the state and in a most wretched and undesirable means for the armed groups. The influence of history and geography can be used also in countering armed group violence as a strategy by identifying the root of the groups and the way in which the terrain can be situated for an advantageous approach (Cassidy, 2006 and Johnson, 2018).

One of the ways to counter armed groups violence is the use of multiple approach and a combination of strategies. Some sets of techniques are presented by Wellman (2013) which consist of surveillance on the groups, detention, interrogation, trials, targetted killings, invasion, intrusion and just cause. However, some of the strategies presented above may not work in some environments of Africa particularly Nigeria. For example, for detention, interrogation and trials to occur, the insurgents must be apprehended. Most of the armed groups while are identified including their locations in Nigeria, the ability to capture them and the feasibility of subjecting them to trial in most cases is practically impossible. The processes of class formation and capital accumulation heralded armed battles over territory, resources control and influence over the populace. In some cases, multinational corporations, illicit armed groups, paramilitary bodies, exist either alongside the state authorities or against them. It is an open secret that state collaborate with non-state actors to forge a process of subjecting the state and its citizens for the operation of the economy and politics in the society. These processes created a social conflict that ushered in violent armed groups. Countering them requires strategies using the means of social equality and a just economic distribution (Gill, 2016). This is presumably a long term strategy that African countries might integrate in policymaking but swift response is also needed especially in red zones like Nigeria.

The Islamic perspective on countering armed group violence is the use of educational system, deradicalisation and censorship. Al Qaradawi (1991), for instance presented six stages of extremism that the Muslim society should pay closer attention to because once they manifested, the youth would turn violent and can carry arms against the state. These stages are bigotry and intolerance, commitment to excessiveness, uncalled for austerity, severity and harshness, thinking ill of others and takfir stage (Al Qaradawi, 1991). There is a view that another measures which the Islamic states should take in countering violence from religious perspective is regulation and modification of syllabuses for Islamic teaching especially areas of Jihad (Henne, 2016). However, while censorship for radical and extreme teaching outside the teachings of the Quran and Prophetic tradition is supported wholeheartedly, the alteration of Quranic verses whether Jihad or any other provisions in the Quran and Hadith is not supported by this work for some reasons. One of the reasons is because violence and terrorism is not the monopoly of any religion as other religions too are reported to have perpetrated the same (Deflem, 2004) and Islamic law does not preach for compulsion or violence (Al Hageel, 2002). Nevertheless, it is good if the method of instruction and preaching are monitored strictly and it is better if censorship measures are put in place to deter radical or fundamentalist armed groups.

Understanding and profiling the psychology of armed groups is vital in countering their activities. Techniques of interviews and interrogation of the members, strategies of intervention, perceiving their
methods, tactics, mode and strategies and counteraction are found to be effective in addressing the challenges of armed groups in various parts of the world (Hamden, 2019). A more comprehensive strategy is presented from two perspectives: Criminal Justice Model (Clutterbuck, 2016) and Military Model (Boyle, 2016) adequately supported by the role of intelligence (Richards, 2016) and legislation (Walker, 2016). The Criminal Justice Model emphasises that armed violence is a crime and their activities such as kidnapping, assassination, bombing and armed attacks. The end results of such action are usually deaths, destruction of lives and properties, infliction of injury and terrorising the people to live in a subjective fear. Criminalising armed groups and their activities performs the role of deligitimising the groups which enables for emphasis on punishing them as criminals and not as a political, economic, religious or an ideological group which will require a separate law (Clutterbuck, 2016, p.375).

Crelinsten (2016) presented various models and strategies of countering violence and terrorism which have the advantage of providing wider varieties of choice. One of the models is the Criminal Justice Model as espoused above. Crelinsten (2016) stressed that this Model is a coercive one which involves the use of force. The War Model on the other hand presumes that violent armed groups attacks are an act of war and therefore, the groups are treated in an equivalent of nation-states in warfare. The violence is countered in this perspective, using greater spontaneous violence against the groups by the nation-states’ government. However, Crelinsten (2016) provided some proactive measures in which one of them is the Intelligence Model. This approach aims at gathering information not necessarily for criminal prosecution but to discover the plan, target, strength and weakness of the groups for an easy counter. Surveillance is what countries like Nigeria needs more than the above two strategies because of the pattern and nature of the Nigerian state. Persuasive counter-terrorism is the process of using Communication Model. Persuasive Model has the goal of sending a specific message to the perceived armed groups, their sympathisers and sponsors with a view to form an opinion that will discourage their activities. Another pattern of counter-terrorism identified by Crelinsten (2016) in his comprehensive study is the Defensive Model which is an effort towards preventive model, mitigation or the natural disaster model or response, the public health model and the psychosocial model. Finally, a long-term model was suggested by Crelinsten (2016) which is the Development Model including the human security/human right model, the gender model and the environmental protection model.

All the above expositions so far analysed provided some plausible and reliable tools for countering armed group violence such as insurgents, terrorists and armed bandits. The usage of any model depends on the nature of the group, pattern of their activities and the culture, anthropology and geography of the affected states. In the case of Nigeria and drawing from all the diverse traversed views, this study settled for a combination of Criminal Justice Model, Intelligence Model and Development Model. This by interpretation means that the study proffered that both short term and long term countering measures should be adopted in Nigeria to curtail armed groups’ violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The study is a thorough study of the challenges of national security in Nigeria in the wake of COVID 19 pandemic. Thus, it is germane to review some vital and relevant issues surrounding the subject matter of study. In this regard, the literature was reviewed thematically under the following sub-headings: COVID 19 pandemic: a global and African perspective, nature and dimension of rural banditry and armed violence in Northwestern Nigeria, manifestations and effects of rural violence in Northwestern Nigeria and the response of the Nigerian Government towards countering rural banditry and armed violence in Northwestern Nigeria.
COVID 19 Pandemic: A Global and African Perspective

The COVID 19 pandemic is a global pestilence that became mysterious and pervasive in its nature and character. In December 2019, the virus emanated from China and it quickly spread into other parts of the world. The virus, which is related to difficulty in breathing, transmit through direct or a close contact with the carrier. Although, it is not an airborne disease so far, the level of interaction in contemporary world is making the virus easier to spread than the previous global pandemics (Wang et al. 2020). Historically, the world has witnessed about twenty (20) major global pandemics including Hamin Mangha circa 3,000, Antonine Plague in AD. 165-180, Plague of Cyprian AD. 250-271, Plague of Justinian AD. 541-542, Black Death in 1346-1353, the Cocoliztli Epidemic in 1545-1548, the American Plague in 16th century, the Great Plague of London in 1665-1666, the Great Plague of Marseille in 1720-1723, the Russian Plague of 1770-1772, the Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic in 1793, the Flu Pandemic of 1889-1890, the American Polio epidemic in 1916, the Spanish Flu 1918-1920, the Asian Flu of 1957-1958, the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic from 1981 to date, the H1N1 Swine Flu in 2009-2010, the West Africa Ebola of 2014-2016, the Zika Virus of 2016 and recently the COVID 19 epidemic of 2019 (Jarus, 2020). However, out of all the above global pandemics, COVID 19 is the most fearful because of the cobweb nature of the globe in modern times. The world has practically become one in its history more than any time ever. National boundaries are gradually and systematically collapsing. The global population has risen unprecedented in the history of the world. Such a phenomenon may lead to a number of casualties if the disease is not tamed properly more than the previous pandemics in the world. Already, the global economy is in comatose affecting the lives of billions of individuals through loss of jobs, depletion of the means of survival and capital and the sharp effects of lock down which halted all economic activities. International politics has taken a new dimension where the war of words and blame game between the United States and China ensued on the causes and spread of the virus while socially, governments are raising expenditure, closing schools, stopping commercial activities and social gathering (LiveScience, 2020). Summarily, the world is suspended by COVID 19.

COVID 19 continues to spread rapidly and randomly affecting the young and old, both male and female. The global total cases as at 13th July, 2020 stand at 13,107,962 million, total deaths 572,831, total recovered cases 7,632,663 and total active cases 4,902,468. The nature of the spread indicates that the US is the most affected followed by Brazil. As at the time of writing this work, the live update of the virus globally revealed that the following countries are having the highest cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Total Deaths</th>
<th>Active Cases</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>3,430,726</td>
<td>137,839</td>
<td>1,774,633</td>
<td>331,065,797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,866,176</td>
<td>72,151</td>
<td>580,513</td>
<td>212,607,642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>898,680</td>
<td>23,569</td>
<td>308,447</td>
<td>1,380,418,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>733,699</td>
<td>11,439</td>
<td>218,239</td>
<td>145,936,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>326,326</td>
<td>11,870</td>
<td>97,345</td>
<td>32,984,938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>315,041</td>
<td>6,979</td>
<td>24,160</td>
<td>19,121,318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>300,988</td>
<td>28,403</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>46,755,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>299,750</td>
<td>35,006</td>
<td>79,980</td>
<td>128,973,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>289,603</td>
<td>44,819</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>67,897,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>276,242</td>
<td>4,079</td>
<td>137,289</td>
<td>59,330,493</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Africa, the HIV prevalence especially in Sub-Saharan Africa where about 64% of the total global cases are obtainable and the Ebola Virus are still not far from being overcome when the COVID 19 pandemic arrived. Initially, the African countries were not affected since as at February 2020, only two (2) African
countries recorded confirmed cases. By 13th of July, almost all the African countries recorded confirmed cases (WHO, 2020). The total recorded cases in Africa as at 13th July, 2020 indicate that there are 594, 955 infections, 13, 246 deaths and 295, 242 recoveries. The countries with the highest cases are presented below. Only top ten (10) are selected.

Table 2: Top Ten African Countries with the Highest Confirmed Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>276,242</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>82,070</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>32,558</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>24,518</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>19,195</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>15,173</td>
<td>Central Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>12,766</td>
<td>West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>10,250</td>
<td>Central Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>10,105</td>
<td>East Africa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Shaban (2020).

In Africa, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is concerned that the cases might be far more than what were officially reported due to low level of test and shortage of equipment for handling the virus. Nigeria, which is the area of study declared its first case on 16th February when an Italian who returned from an international journey was tested positive for the virus. By March 26, Nigeria had recorded over fifty (50) confirmed cases. The pandemic compelled for lock down and closure of almost all activities on April when over 1, 300 cases were reported with a total death of forty (40) (Campbell et al. 2020). The total samples tested were 183,294, confirmed cases 32,558, active cases 18,371, discharged cases 13,447 and death 740 as at 13th July, 2020 latest update. The states with the highest recorded cases included:

Table 3: States in Nigeria with the Highest Confirmed Cases of COVID 19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>States</th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Number of Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Lagos</td>
<td>12,427</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>FCT Abuja</td>
<td>2,576</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Edo</td>
<td>1,731</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>1,726</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Rivers</td>
<td>1,368</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>1,359</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>1,309</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>1,087</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Kaduna</td>
<td>989</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), 2020.

In essence, COVID 19 is a health phenomenon that is currently attracting the full attention of policymakers, health workers, global health institutions, civil societies, philanthropies and philanthropic organisations, researchers and all stakeholders. The target is to prevent the spread and counter the cases while devising means of living with it in safety and protection.

Nature and Dimension of Armed Violence and Rural Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria

Rural banditry is an old phenomenon in the world historically since the ancient Greek City States, Medieval Rome and ancient China. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rural banditry or armed violence was found in satellite areas of Central, Eastern Europe and Balkans. The expanding frontier economy in Latin America made banditry to flourish for several decades even in the 21st century (Cassia, 2019). In Africa, rural banditry is palpable and formidable in modern times in many countries particularly in West Africa.
where countries like Nigeria are recording rampant cases almost on daily basis. Different forms of conflict such as ethnic, religious, political, economic, social and cultural variations culminated in violence that resulted in banditry in several places in Africa. Banditry and armed violence is on the increase in Northern Nigeria, the most troubled zone in terms of insecurity in the country for over a decade. Some of the major security challenges in the North included the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast, farmers-herders clash in Northcentral Nigeria and rural banditry in Northwestern Nigeria (Le Van, Hassan, Kwaja & Nwankwor, 2018).

Rural banditry is conceived as armed violence with the motive of criminal intention to steal, plunder and waste community resources using either local weapons or sophisticated firearms to achieve the goal. Economic factor is seen as the motivating factor behind the act in most cases. The victims of rural banditry or armed violence are individuals, community, materials, farms, animals such as cattle and others (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). The most recent and commonly obtainable forms of armed violence and rural banditry in Nigeria are armed robbery, kidnapping, cattle rustling and village raid as found in Northwestern States of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara. Rural banditry in Northwestern Nigeria has reached an alarming rate in recent years due to intensified attacks and the damages that occurred from the events. Armed bandits settled in villages of Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara and other Northwestern States in fortified environment in the hinterland and on the frontiers where they plan, strategise, organise and carry their criminal activities (Okoli, 2019).

Central in the drivers of armed violence in Northwestern Nigeria are the remote location and arid nature of some locations in the zone with a minimal or virtually total absence of government in these areas. This has been followed by the prevailing socioeconomic situations in the geopolitical zone which have all escalated the precarious security situation in the area of study. With porous borders, climatic change, trans-national movement and connectivity of armed groups in West Africa, poorly equipped and ill-motivated security personnel, low level of intelligence gathering and a presumed invisible hands of powerful supporters, banditry continues to increase in influence and occurrences in the Northwest (Okoli, 2019). A problem that emerged as a localised conflict between farmers and herders escalated into an insurmountable violence posing a threat to national security in Nigeria and a regional security threats in Sub-Saharan Africa. The level of rural banditry became complex and compounded from 2014 to 2019 with a serious economic undertone affecting millions of farmers, depleting thousands of livestock and a political issue which motivated the run-up to 2019 General Election campaign. Widespread allegations of corruption against the security personnel in Nigeria is another factor attached to the causes (Suleiman, 2019).

Manifestations and Effects of Rural Violence in Northwestern Nigeria
The Nigeria’s Northwest is one of the six geopolitical zones in the country comprising of seven (7) states of Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara. The zone covers an area of 216, 065 sq km equivalent to 25% of the total landmass in the country nearly the size of the UK. The major ethnic groups in the region are Fulani and Hausa with an estimated population of 33 million based on the projection of the 2006 Population Census. The dominant religion of the region is Islam. Most of the population of about 80% are farmers, pastoralists and small-scale business merchants. The region has deposits of solid minerals such as gold, zinc, uranium, aluminium, limestone and coal. Even though, the region has economic potentials, it has the highest poverty rate in the country. School enrolment rate is lowest in Northwest, millions lack access to basic healthcare, clean water and immunisation coverage (International Crisis Group, 2020). The above background is necessary to enable for a better understanding of the manifestation and effects of rural violence in Northwestern Nigeria.
Rural banditry has led to casualties of 1,586 and a displaced number of 318,000 according to ACAPS Nigeria (2020). About 21 million of the 33 million population in the Northwest are made exposed and vulnerable to insecurity courtesy of the activities of the bandits. The current wave of banditry began in 2011 as a mild farmer-herder conflict in the Northwest. Between 2017 and 2018, the attacks became highly intensified with the highest death toll and destruction of lives and properties. The violence has affected 35 out of 92 local governments in the four (4) states of Northwest. The discovery of gold mine in the area compounded the armed groups struggles against the Nigerian authorities. The report by March 2020, indicated that more than 210,000 have been internally displaced and over 35,000 refugees have crossed communal borders of Nigeria into Niger Republic (ACAPS Nigeria, 2020). The most affected states are Kaduna, Zamfara and Katsina states surrounded by forests. The Kamuku, Birnin Gwari, Rugu, Kamara, Kunduma and Sububu forests served as a convenient shelter for the bandits who hide from there and stage their attacks on surrounding villages. They carted away with cattle, money and killed many villagers while raping women and children in the process (Suleiman, 2019).

Further report revealed that between 2011 and 2018, 6,319 deaths toll were recorded from banditry consisting of women and children. In addition, more women numbering 4,983 were widowed within the period, 25,050 children orphaned, with 190,340 displaced persons from the crisis in Zamfara state alone. In Katsina, over 2,000 have been killed, 500 communities destroyed and over 33,000 displaced. Between January and December 2019 alone, 1,058 people were killed in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto and Niger States. Additionally, over ten thousand (10,000) cattle were rustled, 2,688 hectares of arable farming land was lost to banditry due to displacement and forceful migration, ten thousand (10,000) houses destroyed and over 147,800 vehicles were lost in Zamfara State alone. Furthermore, four (4) thousand were internally displaced in Kaduna State with scores of thousands of death from November 2019 to March 2020 (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020). The following figure indicate the number of fatalities from banditry in Northwestern Nigeria between January to December 2019.

Figure 1: Number of Casualties from Armed Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria Between January-December 2019

![Figure 1: Number of Casualties from Armed Banditry in Northwestern Nigeria Between January-December 2019](image)

Source: Adapted from West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020.

The above data show the extent and manner in which banditry affected the normal life of the inhabitants of Northwestern Nigeria. Looming humanitarian crisis is indicating a terrible sign already from the effects
of the attacks. With nearly 300,000 displaced whom most are farmers and cattle rearers, food insecurity is an impending and an inevitable crisis in the end of the season. The halted commercial activities in the affected areas crashed several businesses and small scale enterprises leading to loss of jobs, a sign of increasing poverty. Women and children, the most vulnerable section of the society are the most affected who are left without a pillar of support due to death of their husbands and fathers. In this regard, food scarcity, hunger, malnutrition, communicable disease outbreak accompanied the crisis in the region.

**DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

In this section, some vital issues that were investigated in the work were discussed in detail including the impact of COVID 19 on increased bandits’ attacks in Northwest Nigeria and its implications on national security, the responses of the government towards the attacks and the policy implications.

**COVID 19, Increased Bandits’ Attacks in Northwest Nigeria and National Security Challenge**

In the wake of COVID outbreak in Nigeria, the government concentrated its full attention towards curbing the spread of the pandemic owing to the nature of the virus and the weak health care services delivery. One of the measures taken by the government is the enforcement of lock down in April when the virus seemed to be spreading rapidly. Additionally, a ban on inter-state travel was ordered. Initially, some states in the country on their own volition banned inter-state travel prior to the pronouncement by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Thus, movements, commercial activities, farming, fishing and social engagements were stopped immediately. This scenario affected the security situation in the country particularly in the Northwest where the armed bandits utilised the advantage of movement blockage to use motorbike for their criminal activities. From March 2020 to July 2020, several heinous cases were reported involving hundreds of deaths, destruction of properties, loss of livestock and displacement (Kola, 2020).

This section examined some of these scenarios answering why and how the armed violence increased despite travel ban and lock down and the aftermath of the attacks.

In the wake of COVID 19 pandemic, the bandits intensified attacks using the leverage of travel ban through motorcycles. According to Salem Maddeb Hamrouni, a reporting officer at the UNHCR refugee agency in Maradi, Niger Republic, the armed groups in Northwestern Nigeria have grown more active in their activities making the region separate with the Nigerian state. They followed the lean path and hidden route using speed bikes carrying AK47 and other deadly weapons against villagers in the Northwestern part of Nigeria. For instance, from April to June 2020, when the lock down was officially declared, not less than fifty (50) major attacks were recorded in Kaduna, Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto and Kebbi. Some of the attacks sometimes claimed at once nearly one hundred lives. For instance, on 26th May 2020, heavily armed bandits over 100 of them on motorbikes attacked the village of Sabon Birni leaving not less than 80 corpses and hundreds of casualties just in a day. Such attacks were reported between April and July 2020 claiming over a thousand lives (Akinwotu & Sanyinnawal, 2020). A report disclosed that from April to July 2020, over 30,000 refugees crossed the Nigerian border into the Niger Republic with most of them women and children. Those fleeing narrated terrible experiences of human suffering in the hands of the bandits and what they have encountered on their way to safety. Raping of women including minors, killings, burning of huts and houses in villages, sporadic shootings starting at midnight, destruction of farms and livestock, kidnapping and wanton destruction of wealth and properties, were all narrated by the refugees. Despite the lock down on international borders owing to COVID 19 pandemic, UNHCR ensured that the refugees were allowed entry into the Niger Republic territory. Currently, the refugees are being relocated to safety where they would be provided with water, food, shelter, access to health care and other basic needs (Hamrouni, 2020). Similarly, on May 30th, armed bandits worth 500 in number on motorbikes with AK 47 attacked several villages in Katsina in which they killed about eighteen (18)
villagers with one district head. They confiscated thousands of livestock precisely, cattle. This episode seemed to be just one out of the intensified bandits’ attacks in Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara while the country was under lock down (Campbell & McCaslin, 2020).

The activities of the armed bandits continued unabated when on June 10, bandits estimated at 150 on motorbikes wielding menacing weapons attacked six villages in Katsina State and killed over sixty (60) people injuring hundreds with thousands displaced from the scenes. Additionally, some residents narrated that the bandits raped women, rustled two hundred (200) cattle, looted every shop in the vicinity in an operation that lasted for over five (5) hours. Such attacks occurred just similar to what happened two (2) days earlier in the same manner in Northwest claiming nearly the same lives and destruction. These attacks created discord and discontentment especially in the Northwest where the youth displayed their anger through cancelling the celebration of ‘Democracy Day’ on June 12. They complaint that the government is exhibiting nonchalant attitude towards their plight and a lukewarm approach in terms of handling the conflict. They lamented that the government paid all its attention to COVID 19 and neglected them when the COVID 19 pandemic in over four months did not claimed what was lost to insecurity in the region in less than two (2) months (Campbell & McCaslin, 2020). From the above viewpoints, some fundamental questions that many Nigerians and researches like this one are asking include such issues like how can the bandits move freely under lock down and inter-state travel ban? Where are the Nigerian security personnel that are operating in these areas? What have the various governments did in their own part to provide compensating palliatives during the COVID 19 lock down in the areas bedevilled with a daunting challenge of unprecedented humanitarian crisis? More questions arose while answers could not be far-fetched from the usual Nigerian political, socioeconomic and cultural settings. It could be recall that the Northeast Boko Haram insurgency was not handled properly since 2009 as it is still ongoing with full force. The armed banditry which began in 2011 and exploded fully in 2017 onwards could be seen also along this line. Additionally, corruption and weak security architecture in the country could be the reason attributed to the increased attacks even on lock down state. Security sector in Nigeria has been converted into a money-making venture since 2013 without much regard to the effects on human lives and properties (Sule, Azizuddin & Mat, 2017). Low level of intelligence gathering is another factor.

In another report, immediately the lock down and inter-state travel ban was declared, the bandits took the advantage of the situation and intensified attacks. On Saturday 19, April 2020, bandits attacked several villages in Katsina and killed nearly fifty (50) people. The Police spokesman in the area disclosed that more than 300 armed men executed the attacks using motorbikes and AK47 weapon. Reportedly, the bandits demanded the villagers to surrender the food items and relieve materials distributed to them as a palliative for COVID 19 pandemic lock down, the local TV, Channel Television reported. The report further concluded that such attacks aggravated the security challenges and by extension, national security of the Africa’s most populous country which has the effects of regional security challenge in West Africa and beyond (Al Jazeera Africa, 2020). It is reported that armed banditry in Northwestern Nigeria cost over 8, 000 lives in the last decades and the rising incidences in recent months will double the figures if adequate measures are not taken. For instance, between April and June 2020, the period of lock down due to COVID 19, over 100 lives were perished by the armed bandits in Katsina State alone, the President’s home state. As observed above by Al Jazeera, the bandits targeted the relieve materials and palliatives that were distributed to the inhabitants. They were reported to have been about 200 in number on motorbikes carrying AK47 guns, the eye witness told the BCC Hausa. Kidnapping has now become a more lucrative business in the area than cattle rustling. A big fat cow can cost 200, 000 but the kidnapping of one single individual may result in ransom of millions of Naira, the report further disclosed (Orjinmo, 2020). In essence, this study understood from the narratives above that there were no serious efforts and
responses towards addressing banditry in the region. If anything, the palliatives that should have provide succour and relieve to the villagers that were affected by the extreme scorch of poverty and the effects of lock down, became a handout for the bandits and an invitation of the wrath and wreath for the beneficiaries. The wider scale of implication is that the villagers and the affected states at large are at the risk of exposure towards counteracting the COVID 19 virus in their unpractised precaution owing to the rush for rescue towards migration and other related measures. In this regard, the government’s efforts towards countering the spread of the virus is affected by insecurity., another threat to national security.

The above trajectories of the security dilemma in Northwestern Nigeria is not the only challenges that the country is facing. Already, the Northeast is battling with a full-blown insurgency for over a decade (Sule, Ahmed, Alhaji, Yahaya & Gambarawa, 2019). The Northcentral is also facing the farmers-herders’ crisis for many years now leading to loss of thousands of lives and properties estimated at billions of dollars (Nwosu, 2017). Fundamentally, the implications of all the above security challenges is, it has constituted itself as a crisis of national security in Nigeria. Nigeria, popularly known as one of the strongest countries in the world in terms of security architecture became pitifully vulnerable. The country, has been proactive in securing West African region, Africa by extension and a major player in collective global security. Nigeria was active in arresting civil strife in Liberia, Serra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur region in Sudan, Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Angola, liberation of Apartheid South Africa and a record of an active involvement in the United Nations’ peacekeeping mission across the world (Alkali, 2010). Nigeria was credited with a strategic role, professional conduct, philanthropic financial support and spearheading for the establishment of African political, economic and regional development (Yakubu, 2012). However, Nigeria found itself in the current situation because of combination of multiple factors. Buzan & Hansen (2009) argue that national securities of nation-states are no longer threatened by military threats more than the way they are facing the threats of non-traditional (non-military) threats of misgovernance, corruption, poverty, economic vulnerability, political incoherence, social inequality and fragmentation and other indicators of wellbeing. The elite’s kleptomaniac attitudes, misrule, corruption, deliberate inflicted poverty, orchestrated ethno-religious conflict, sponsored political violence, intended created social classes all contributed in abject deprivation and impoverishment of the larger segment of the society in the country leading to threats of national security. Thus, the trend can be reversed if the above raised-issues are intensively countered and addressed squarely.

The Responses
The Federal Government of Nigeria was not unaware of the linkage between illegal mining in some Northwestern states especially Zamfara State and rural banditry. Thus, the government suspended all mining activities in the State and in the zone at large. There were allegations and discoveries of sponsorship of the bandits by illegal mining cabals to continue to divert the attention of the government with insecurity for extortion of national wealth in an illicit manner (Okoli, 2019). Between January and April 2019, a number of operations were executed by the government security operatives in Northwestern Nigeria including Operation Harbin Kunama, Operation Diran Mikiya and Operation Puff Adder. The government has spent billions of Naira in the process as reported that the Zamfara State Government alone has spent over N17 billion in funding security operatives to tackle the challenges of banditry (Suleiman, 2019). The most surprising aspect of the Federal Government’s military response towards mitigating banditry in Northwestern Nigeria is that while some of the attacks were ward off successfully while others were blocked, still, the bandits’ attacks in Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina and Kaduna continue. This phenomenon raised several questions on the effectiveness of the responses. Many villages, farmlands and settlements remained deserted even with the presence of military operations in the region. Other measures taken included the ban of motorbikes in the Northwestern states since it was discovered that the
bandits used them to strike. Nevertheless, the policies could not counter banditry. The lock down in the emergence of COVID 19 set the clear path for the bandits to attack with impunity. Additionally, the FG and the state governments in the affected areas introduced peaceful initiatives such as dialogues, amnesty, involvement of rural heads and traditional rulers, community policing, community watch dogs, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and intelligence gathering (International Crisis Group, 2020 and West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020).

By June 2020, when the Nigerian Government realised how damaging the bandits’ attacks was causing to its reputation, the security service chiefs went to Katsina, Zamfara and other Northwestern states to see for themselves the security loopholes that are giving the bandits the edge to strike successfully despite the lock down and inter-state travel ban. The Nigerian security decided that since there is a total lock down and travel ban, except within the confines of the localities, highway travellers might be bandits. Air strike was intensified in June and July of 2020 which were reported as successful because hundreds of bandits are reported to have been killed in the forests, their camps destroyed and their logistics shattered according to the reports. Over 300 bandits were reported as being killed by the air strikes with a huge casualty. The Nigerian security now embarked in combing the forest where the bandits are allegedly reported to have been hiding from (Market Watch culled from Xinhua News, 2020). If truly the bandits are staying in those forests and the security operatives are genuinely combing the forests as they have declared, it will go a long way in minimising their strength of attacks and havocs in the zone (Al Jazeera Africa, 2020). But it could be recall that such a report had been severally presented before the Nigerians on Boko Haram insurgents in Sambisa forests in which later it always turned out to be untrue.

It should be understood from the above responses that the Nigerian Government is sometimes handling the bandits with kid gloves by responding in a lackadaisical way towards their actions. If the air strike is a plausible remedy, it should have been deployed since April this year when the bandits’ attacks became intensified instead of waiting until when thousands of lives are destroyed. This same approach towards Boko Haram insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria caused the crisis to prolonged beyond expectation. Furthermore, many analysts and researchers viewed the approach as one-sided and ineffective. The most vehement means that will ease the military operation in the zone is a proper and reliable intelligence gathering. The bandits relied on intelligence and informants’ sources to perpetrate their attacks without being countered in most cases. If the security operatives could pay much attention to intelligence gathering, the attacks could be overcome or drastically reduced in the near future. The study suggests that various strategies of counter-terrorism presented should be analysed and the most feasible adopted. As observed earlier, the Criminal Justice System, Intelligence Model and Development Model are preferred as the best approaches in this study as short-term and a long-term remedy.

CONCLUSION

The study is a policy response approach which has investigated sufficiently the alarming issue of banditry under the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic outbreak in relation to Nigerian national security. This is necessary because the challenges of national security in Nigeria is an extension of national security threats to West African region and Africa at large as discovered by this study. The study contributed immensely to knowledge and it has succeeded in building the strength of the existing body of knowledge on African security and COVID 19 pandemic. It was identified from the study that the COVID 19 outbreak in Nigeria encountered an already fragile and a fragmented state with challenges of military and non-military security. While measures were taken to mitigate the effects of the virus and at the same time to counter the armed bandits’ attacks in Northwestern Nigeria, the bandits utilised the opportunity provided by lock down and inter-state travel ban to wreck more havoc. The responses were found to have been inadequate according to this study owing to corruption, lukewarm approach, deplorable condition of
the security services and equipment of operation, terrain of the crisis and the socioeconomic and political contexts of the affected states. The study further concludes that the bandits’ attacks and COVID 19 pandemic further worsened humanitarian situation in the affected region leading to trans-border refugees, increase in death toll, depletion of farming land dominated by activities of banditry which will be the repercussion of food insecurity and other crises. Thus, the study suggested that this mishap should not continue. It must be arrested immediately. Therefore, some measures were presented based on the findings of the study as presented below.

The security agencies should employ more use of surveillance and intelligence gathering than other strategies adopted so far. The government must be sincere in providing the needed equipment and compensation that will motivate the security operatives. Community policing and information gathering are also vital. Most importantly, blockage is suggested. All the sources of funds, weapons, logistics and movements of the bandit groups should be identified and blocked accordingly to weaken them and force them into submission. Finally, it is suggested as a long term panacea that the policymakers should designed policies and programmes that will ensure equality and equity in resources allocation and distribution to extricate millions of the inhabitants in Northwest from abject penury and deprivation which is identified as a major cause.

REFERENCES


