

## **Democracy and the Menace of Small Arms Proliferation in Nigeria**

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In spite of significant gains made towards democratisation and improved economic performance, Nigeria is still a long way off from achieving political stability, peace and sustainable democratic development. Of all the numerous daunting challenges facing the country's nascent democracy one has a special urgency; the easy availability of small arms and light weapons. Since the inception of democracy in Nigeria in May 1999, more than 30 communal clashes, bordering on religious ethnic conflict have been recorded throughout the country with each claiming hundreds of lives and properties. Similarly, many people, including women and children had been displaced in the process, resulting in untold hardship and suffering for them.

In a very fundamental way, small arms means; revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifle and carbineer, sub-machine guns, assaulted rifles and light machine guns, Dane guns, local pistols and hand grenades. With the overall persistence and massive importation of small arms into Nigeria, the country is gradually shifting from the position of absolute stability to one of uncertainty and fear. This has become a thunderbolt that should jolt Nigerian patriots.

Since returning to civil rule in 1999, Nigeria has been wracked by ethnic and religious violence, in addition to the regular clashes in the oil-rich Niger-Delta region between armed youths, protesting lack of access to the wealth generated from the area, and security operatives drafted there to keep the peace.

The scale, spread and intensity of violent armed robberies have forced ethnic militant groups and other ad-hoc bodies to push aside the police, largely corrupt, inefficient and poorly armed, and take over the maintenance of law and order, usually dispensing instance justice to suspected robbers. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is resulting from experiences of many Nigerians killed, maimed or harassed during ethnic, religious, political and other violent crimes, who have lost confidence in the ability of the police to protect them, resort to illegal possession of firearms for self protection. The problem of small arms proliferation in Nigeria, which has soared alarmingly lately, reflects the exaggerated link between military disengagement from politics and the demilitarisation of the Nigerian society.

How do we for instance defend or explain a situation where we have more sophisticated arms and ammunitions at the disposal of arm bandits in a country like ours? The situation is that bad. In fact, it is such that residents in most cosmopolitan cities in Nigeria these days hardly witnessed any day passing without one bizarre case of robbery incident or another. Even in the rural setting that used to be a safe haven those days has now turned devil dens for arm bandits. With this psychological trauma, those innocent citizenry are now beginning to psyche themselves for what has become a daily fare of sporadic shootings, stampede, and actual armed insertion which appeared to have become the staple with which people in these cities and rural areas now live their lives.

Consequently, bankruptcy of our moral values and the corresponding increase in corruption and indiscipline over the militarised years, which have created deep frustration and a sense of hopelessness among the generality of our active population especially the youths could be attributed to this menace. Recently, the Delta State Governor James Ibori supervised the destruction of 10 AK-47 Russian made Rifles seized from militant Ijaw youth in the Warri, Oil rich Niger-Delta area. In 2002, the Defence Chief, Vice Admiral Ibrahim Ogohi also supervised the destruction of 2,241 illicit small arms and light weapons in Nigeria.

In November 1996 ECOWAS countries including Nigeria signed a moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of light weapons at Bamako, Mali. According to Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, scribe of the defunct OAU, "we must recognize that the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons in our societies has contributed to the development of a culture of violence, to massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, the aggravation of the plight of refugees and displaced persons besides causing millions of deaths and injuries among civilian population" this explains the merciless and brutal killings of 22 people in a town called Awkuzu in Anambra state. As a result of this kind of man inhumanity to fellow man, the consequences is an upsurge in the call for unorthodox crime-bursting groups like the OPC and Bakassi Boys in curbing these menace in our society whether they do it in a jungle justice way.

It may not be out of proportion to say that at least over 2 million illegal weapons could be in circulation today. In the absence of a reliable data, one can draw from a stem of empirical evidence of arms flow in communal clashes experienced so far in this country; Zango/Kataf, Ife/Modakeke, Aguleri/Umuleri/UmuobaAnam, Tiv/Jukun in Taraba state Azara in Nassarawa state, Kano State, Kaduna state, Lagos state and Oil rich Delta state. In the past, small arms trafficking and proliferation tended to be between countries. The trend seems to have changed, as there are more small arms dealings within states such as in Nigerian context.

The result has also tended to surface along ethnic or religious line. Since the assumption of office of the present administration, there have been several cases of religious riots across the country in which many lives and properties were lost. These forms of atrocities were carried out with the use of sophisticated arms and weapons in the hands of hoodlums. Beyond that, social inequalities and injustices arising from unequal

distribution of natural resources, marginalisation of minority groups, as well as the existence of 'fabled' democratic regimes are some of the underlying causes of small arms proliferation in Nigeria.

Apart from the aforementioned reasons above, there is also a high rate of poverty and the lack of equitable management of natural resources, absence of genuine democratic avenues for people to adequately express their concerns in the country. In such a precarious situation, people usually find it necessary to form or join social movements where they believe that they can express themselves and struggled to benefit from the resource of their country by taking up arms. These groups have resorted to kidnapping in making their point. To attract international attention, these groups have specifically targeted expatriates.

In Nigeria, there were cases of kidnapping of expatriate oil workers and engineers in the Niger Delta that captures several media headlines and international attention. On 28 July 2003, a multinational oil company Chevron Texaco raised alarm that a faction of the warring militant Ijaw youth in the Niger Delta has kidnapped one of his workers. On 24 June 1999, armed militants near Warri in Niger Delta region took 16 employees of Shell hostage. Two weeks earlier, there was a case of a helicopter and two British engineers working for shell-contracted Bristol Helicopters that were seized at gunpoint by militant youths who demanded for US\$100,000 in ransom for their release

Indeed, small arms proliferation initially escalated in the country immediately after the civil war in the 70's then later, as a genuine attempt at struggling against autocratic regimes {both military and civil}. Arms dealers, security personnel and corrupt state officials have also teamed up to operate an illegal gun-market linking neighbouring states and the Niger Delta via the sea. Adversely, this has brought untold hardships when the original intention is to address inequalities. Apart from these internal problems, it has been noted that the international community and some multinational corporations in one way or the other, directly or indirectly has contributed to this evil menace in their attempt to pursue or profits their interest. Following the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta, oil companies reached an agreement with the government to import weapons for Nigerian troops and the special security personnel employed by these oil companies. Some of these weapons have been illegally sold to youths and criminal gangs by such security forces, as well as by ECOMOG troops redeployed to that region. Here lies the bane of the argument against globalisation.

Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala, undersecretary-general UN Department for Disarmament Affairs once said that "the proliferation of such weapons has led to the triumph of the bullets over the ballot in too many countries as effort to stem the flow of such arms continue to suffer from lack of finance and technical supports" Hence we have seen a vicious cycle of underlying social and political conflicts escalating all too easily into armed attacks, followed by retaliatory blows. The result has been a series of setbacks for development and reconstruction, unattainable peace and eventually leading to a prevailing sense of hopelessness among the entire society especially the present and the up coming generation of our great country Nigeria. This on-going tragedy is already

setting back the country's economic development by creating new distinctive to foreign investment and also obstacles to the achievement of human rights objectives including the most fundamental of all the "right to life".

It is against this backdrop that president Olusegun Obasanjo reiterated in one of his Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) monthly press chat, that democratic dividend has been so slow in some sectors due to scaring away of foreign investors as a result of series of criminal, ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria in recent times. There have also been too many incidences of political killings in Nigeria. Many political leaders like Harry Marshal, and the former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation Chief Bola Ige were also victims of slaughters possessing illicit arms.

With the complexity of small arms proliferation in Nigeria, the phenomena has been linked to historical, political, and socio-economic process that have shaped the country since independence. In order to promote a secured environment for peace, stability and a sustainable democratic polity and economic development, it is vital to address the problem of illicit proliferation and trafficking in small arms in a more comprehensive and efficient manner.

The government should further endeavor to enhance adequately, the capacity of national law enforcement, security agencies and officials to deal with all aspects of arms problem including appropriate training in investigative procedures and various border control. The government should also put up an appropriate measure in controlling arms transfers by manufacturers, suppliers as well as shipping and transit in a transparent fashion. A legislative and other legal measure should be put in place in establishing a stricter and effective criminal offence and punitive measures against any one caught in the act of manufacturing trafficking in and illegally possessing ammunition and other related materials.

There should be a well-developed and implemented public awareness programmes with the incorporation of Micro-disarmament where both government and international bodies should embark upon capacity building into technical cooperation packages. Assistance should be targeted at local NGOs as well as police and customs officials. In the words of Dr. Aribisala the Deputy Executive Secretary of ECOWAS, the government, apart from evolving a viable social security system for its citizenry, must seriously address their issue of economic and social problems associated with poverty, corruption, illiteracy, youth unemployment and marginalisation just as serious effort must be made to develop the border communities, which have always felt they have no stake in the country for lack of development in basic amenities.

Finally and more importantly, there should be a sincere package of economic blue print that is geared towards poverty alleviation and promoting good standard of living in Nigeria.

**July 2003**