



Nigeria's Internal Insecurity State

By Doug Bandow

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ABUJA, NIGERIA—Like so many developing states, Nigeria showcases poverty while exhibiting potential. People are entrepreneurial but the state is exploitative. Wealth is made but too often stolen. Evidence of security—which really means insecurity—is everywhere.

Americans also suffer from crime, of course. But most of us fly around the country without giving the matter much thought. We hop into our cars without a bodyguard joining us. There are areas a smart traveler wouldn't go. But most folks in the U.S. rarely imagine the potential of a daylight robbery or kidnapping.

Not so in Nigeria, however. I traveled with a journalist group on a business tour. We were met by representatives of the organizer, along with a driver and two national policemen armed with AK-47s. When we convoyed with figures of business or political note the guard multiplied dramatically.

All of my hotels around the country—Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt—had metal detectors. High walls and gates manned by armed security personnel. And multiple security guards, at the entrance, wandering the grounds, and even stationed by the elevators on each floor overnight.

Nevertheless, Abuja, as the seat of government, is relatively safe. Former Gov. Orji Uzor Kalu, a successful businessman considering a presidential run, complained that “without a police escort you can't move” in much of the country: “You can move in Abuja, maybe some parts of Lagos, but you cannot move elsewhere.”

Security checkpoints on major roads were common as we traveled outside of major cities. It wasn't clear what the cops were looking for and they didn't pull many people over. But our armed escort helped us pass around the long lines of autos.

While trapped in traffic just a few hundred yards away from our hotel in Port Harcourt, which acts a bit like Nigeria's Houston, given the heavy oil industry presence, we suggested walking to our destination. Too dangerous, we were informed. Energy companies never allow their employees to go anywhere without an armed escort. Every major firm employs armed guards at their facilities.

In fact, the Niger Delta, host to manifold energy and maritime operations, is particularly risky. Residents resent northern domination and perceive that, as one businessman put it, money being

extracted from the ground and water isn't going to the local people. These attitudes have prompted violence ranging from kidnappings of foreigners to attacks on facilities and ships.

Being careful isn't enough. Nor is hiring protective personnel. Company officials privately acknowledge more directly buying protection, spreading cash throughout local communities. The government runs a Joint Task Force, including the military and other security-oriented agencies, to confront violence from militants. An executive at one local firm said the situation is better than a few years ago, but extremists still must be paid off to avoid attacks.

The smart outsider makes sure he has a well-armed friend or two. A sign on the door leading from the pool to the hotel proclaimed: "All Escorts Terminate Here. Fire Arms Are Prohibited In This Facility." In back of the pool another sign sounded even more threatening: "Emergency Assembly Muster Point." Apparently there are contingency plans if something goes wrong.

Nigeria has had its share of conflict—four decades ago the central government brutally suppressed the attempted secession of the eastern region as the state of Biafra, resulting in anywhere between one and three million dead. More recently ruthless military dictators ruled. Today the greatest problem may be internal divisions within the population of about 175 million divided into roughly 500 ethnic groups. The country is almost evenly divided between Christian and Muslim, leading to complicated political bargaining. Recently the terrorist group Boko Haram has been slaughtering Christians and moderate Muslims.

The country already suffers from the usual Third World maladies of the over-politicized state. Like many other nations, Abuja inherited dirigiste policies from the colonial era which were expanded by exploitative elites after independence. Bureaucracy is pervasive and corruption is rife. One expatriate worker observed: "Nigeria is not a country. It is an opportunity." Pay-offs are a way of life, despite increased efforts to challenge the practice.

These economic disincentives are greatly exacerbated by problems of insecurity. A publishing executive complained that it was dangerous to send trucks out at night to deliver the next day's newspapers. The company hopes to establish more satellite plants to cover the nation.

Investment requires not just legal protection but physical protection. That adds to the cost of doing business. A potential investor or trader cannot move freely as in the U.S., Europe, or leading East Asian states. Expatriate employees much watch their backs. And the costs roll down to indigenous peoples, who lose when investment and trade opportunities are limited.

Kalu, who is considering a presidential run, emphasized the need for deregulation and privatization and professed his admiration of Ronald Reagan. He also highlighted the problems of corruption and energy for his oil-rich nation, where bribes are expected and power outages are constant. But he suggested that the lack of personal safety is even more basic. During a recent interview in Abuja he noted that "internal security is crucial." Without security, he said, "I don't know how we can develop. We need internal security so citizens and non-citizens can move more freely."

Nigeria's security problems underscore the country's extraordinary unmet potential. It has Africa's largest population and Nigeria's GDP will soon surpass that of South Africa. Nigeria's energy reserves are an envy of the continent.

Moreover, the Nigerian people exhibit both hard work and entrepreneurship. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Nigerian landscape is the pervasive enterprising spirit of Nigerians. People are everywhere on the move, hawking products. Stalls dot even the most isolated roads while markets appear wherever one travels. What Nigerians lack, one businessman complained to me, was an "enabling environment" from the government.

Which should include security, perhaps the most foundational government responsibility.

Nigeria has many advantages lacking in its neighbors, and other developing states. However, so much of its potential is yet untapped. Nigerians are capable of prospering. But they lack the secure, encouraging environment necessary to succeed. It is well past time for Nigeria's leaders to put their people's interests first.

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