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Reversing rising insecurity in Nigeria

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There is hardly any cheering news in Nigeria these days. Pervasive insecurity has cowed people with citizens taking to praying and fasting seeking divine help for protection. Truth be told, insecurity is not peculiar to Nigeria, as it is a global phenomenon. However, while many other countries have found creative ways of tackling and taming this monster, Nigeria seems to be paying lip service to her security challenges.

Banditry, kidnapping for ransom, insurgency, cultism and street gangsterism, robbery, pipeline vandalism, rape, arson, ritual murder, Internet scamming, herder-farmer clashes and burglary are some of the heinous crimes being perpetrated in Nigeria with near impunity. Many citizens are having sleepless nights while the Very Important Personalities now live in fortresses and drive armoured vehicles with armed police and private security escorts. The hapless majority are left to cater for themselves too by hiring private security guards to secure their communities while some others join in mounting guards to ward off criminal elements from their neighbourhoods.

Nigeria is surely slipping into the Hobbesian state of nature where life is short, brutish and nasty. Little wonder the 2020 Global Terrorism Index put Nigeria at number three in the world. According to the report produced by Vision of Humanity, "Nigeria is the third country most impacted by terrorism...Boko Haram, Nigeria's deadliest terrorist group, recorded an increase in terrorist activity mainly targeted at civilians by 25 per cent from the prior year. Additionally, Fulani extremists were responsible for 26 per cent of terror-related deaths in Nigeria at 325 fatalities."

There is no gainsaying that poverty, unemployment and corruption are among the drivers of insecurity in Nigeria. According to the "African Liberty" publication of April 11, 2019, Steve Hanke, a Professor of Applied Economics at The Johns Hopkins University and a Senior Fellow at Cato Institute, in 2019, ranked Nigeria and South Africa as Africa's most miserable countries. According to Hanke, he arrived at this ranking by considering the "sum of unemployment, inflation and bank lending rates, minus the percentage change in real GDP per capita." Among the countries ranked in his 2018 edition, Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt are in the top 10 of most miserable countries.

Most Nigerians are hungry because they are poor, and as the saying goes, a hungry man is an angry man. The hunger and anger of many Nigerians were demonstrated last October during the #EndSARS protests that engulfed many states in Nigeria. The invasion of the warehouses where COVID-19 palliatives were stored by multitudes shows that the country may not survive a similar uprising in near future. Already, Nigeria has slipped into her worse recession in over three decades by the end of last year. Thus, poverty, unemployment and inflation have continued

to soar. As the saying goes, water must find its level. Many Nigerians without prior criminal records are now taking to crime in a bid to survive the deplorable economic situation.

The porous nature of Nigeria's borders with over 1,400 illegal entry routes have made the smuggling of small arms and light weapons as well as hard drugs into the country very easy. Africanews in its online publication of August 4, 2016 reported that the United Nations has raised alarm over the illicit proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Nigeria. The global body said that more than 350 million out of the estimated 500 million of such weapons in West Africa is domiciled in the country. According to the UN, this has highlighted, more than ever before, the critical need not only to control the flow of arms in the non-state sector, but also the state-owned actors through the effective management of the armoury and weapon stockpiles." Easy access to small arms and light weapons as well as psychotropic substances by criminally-minded people facilitates crimes.

Unfortunately, the huge size of Nigeria and limited number of security agents have given room to non-state actors to operate with impunity in the widely ungoverned spaces in the country. With less than 400,000 officers and men recruited to police a country of 206 million people, a country whose total strength of its combined Armed Forces is less than a million and which also operates largely manually, it shouldn't come to anyone as a surprise that the country ranks high on the Global Terrorism Index.

What do we need to do? The change of the service chiefs is a step in the right direction. Though not the silver bullet or panacea for resolving the growing insecurity and insurgency, it will boost the morale of the troops and encourage them to perform better. The real antidote to the festering insecurity lies in two broad approaches. The hard and the soft approaches. The hard approach includes recruitment of more security personnel, building of more police stations and military cantonments to enable them secure the ungoverned spaces, procurement of security hardware such as Armoured Personnel Carriers, Rifles, operational vehicles, sophisticated communication gadgets, building and equipping of forensic laboratories, data capturing of arrested criminals, deployment of technology in the fight against crimes such as use of all-weather drones, Closed Circuit Television cameras, automated scanner machines, jammers, trackers, etc.

All these will aid intelligence gathering by security operatives and with better coordination and information sharing among the security agencies, a significant headway in the fight against insecurity will be achieved.

However, the hardware approach alone will not solve the problem. There is a need to complement it with the soft approach. This other approach includes job creation and economic empowerment especially for the teeming youths who constitute over 60 per cent of the population. There is a need to also scale up social safety net through pro-poor measures. Conditional Cash Transfer is a good case in point. Beyond these, it is needful to fix the decadent and insufficient infrastructure especially affordable electricity supply. This will reduce the cost of doing business and grow the informal sector including the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises. In addition, we should embrace value re-orientation.

Above all, it is imperative to break the culture of impunity. As the saying goes in the USA, "if you do the crime, you will do the time". Arrested criminals should be diligently and effectively prosecuted in a competent court of law. The blanket issuance of amnesty to criminal elements can be very counter-productive.

