

Widespread violations



Obstacles to human security in Nigeria are widespread. Governments have been high-handed, secretive and corrupt, and not accountable to the electorate. Discrimination on grounds of sex, ethnicity, tribe, colour, race, religion or political belief is rife. Massacres and forced evictions are common, while the fight to control or manage resources accruing from oil and other minerals has led to loss of hundreds of lives. The only conditions for peace and development are respect for human rights, the rule of law and the possibility to change governments through democratic and peaceful means.

Socio-Economic Rights Initiative
 Concerned Professionals of Nigeria
 Rural Women Empowerment Network
 Legal Defence & Assistance Project
 Gender & Human Rights/Social Watch-Nigeria
 South East Budget Network

Ray Onyegu / John Onyekwu / Mma Odi
 Itolo Eze-Anaba / Gina Iberi / Cletus Onyegu

The role of the Government

Human security can only be attained either when conditions leading to conflict are avoided or such conditions are abated and conflicts resolved.

Obstacles to human security in Nigeria are widespread. Governments have been high-handed, secretive and corrupt; and have not been accountable to the electorate. There are ethnic and religious conflicts; and forced evictions have been common, while the fight to control or manage resources accruing from crude oil, gas and other minerals has led to loss of hundreds of lives. The examples that follow are pointers.

Forced evictions

The Government is duty bound to protect the right of Nigerians against destruction of their homes by third parties; and has the obligation to provide housing for all people threatened by the absence of roofing over their heads. Forced eviction, which constitutes a violation of a variety of human rights, is common in Nigeria. This report cannot cite a single instance where the Government took steps to respect, protect, fulfil or enforce housing rights.

In December 2001, the Lagos State government earmarked for demolition the sprawling slum of Ajegunle, home to over two million people - the majority of them women and children. Residents were not consulted and there were no plans for their resettlement. To halt the planned demolition, the former Shelter Rights Initiative (now named Socio-Economic Rights Initiative) mobilised the community and filed a suit at the Federal High Court challenging the eviction. An injunction restraining the Government was obtained. Rallies and protests were organised, and the Government was forced to abandon the project. The World Bank assured the communities that no further money would be released to the Lagos State government until the disputed issues were settled.

Towards the end of January 2001, due to the military authorities' negligence, bombs stored at the Ikeja Military Cantonment, Lagos, exploded, destroying houses in the barracks and its environs and leading to the death of over a thousand people, the majority of them women and children. Many of the people rendered homeless and unable to find alternative housing, were provided temporary accommodation at a police college. One year later, in what turned out to be a bitter anniversary gift, the victims were evicted. They were not paid any compensation.

Until 1 July 2000, Rainbow Town in Port Harcourt was home to about one million people, most of them in the lower income bracket. Backed by about 1,000 armed policemen standing guard, bulldozers of the Rivers State government levelled the town, sending women and children, whose husbands and fathers had left for work, into the streets. Lawsuits challenging the action were still pending in court, but the Government alleged it had taken this action for purposes of urban renewal and because the environmentally degraded shanty town was a hideout for common criminals. However, it had no plans to re-settle the inhabitants. The land was later parcelled out to wealthy local residents.

A year earlier, the army killed 2,483 inhabitants of Odi town in Bayelsa State, home to about 50,000 people. All the houses in the town were razed to the ground and set ablaze. Survivors scamped to the bush and took refuge in neighbouring towns. The invading soldiers raped many of the women and young girls. To date, no compensation has been paid to the victims and the destroyed houses have not been rebuilt. The Government has neither apologised nor given any guarantee that this will not be repeated.

A similar fate befell some towns and villages in Benue State in October 2001. Soldiers again destroyed every building in sight in Pera, Kyado, Gbeji, Chome, Ifer, Joolashitile, Torja, Vaase, Zaki-Ibiam, Ise Adoor, Sunkera and Tor Donga. The soldiers used heavy artillery, alongside rocket propelled grenades. When they ran short of ammunition, they used petrol and dry gas to touch off the buildings. Zaki-Ibiam, to take an example, was a town of 20,000 inhabitants, reputed to have the largest yam market in the country.¹

Governments in Nigeria have made a routine habit of demolishing markets and shops, which, due to the shortage and high cost of renting residential premises in major cities, serve as both commercial and residential habitats. Boundary Market in Lagos and several markets in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, were laid to waste. The Lagos stalls and shops had been built and let out to the victims by the Ajeromi/Ifelodun local government. The state government subsequently declared the buildings illegal. Many families were thus deprived of their means of livelihood.

In Satellite Town, a suburb of Lagos, 15 major corporations including the Central Bank of Nigeria, are engaged in a struggle to evict more than 2,500 families who acquired their property under the 1997 Federal Government Housing Policy. Under that scheme, the Government provided land to companies employing over 500 people on condition that they built houses and allocated them to their workers on an owner-occupier basis. The lands proved to be marshy; the cost of acquiring and reclaiming them, providing roads, drainage and electricity, were all borne by the Government. The outstanding costs were to be defrayed from the rents paid by allottees over a period of time until full amortisation. Today, although allottees have paid the cost of the buildings by over 2,000%, some companies are threatening to evict them.

Over the past four years there have been outbreaks of communal, ethnic, religious and political violence in different parts of the country resulting in loss of lives, destruction of houses and displacement of people. These crises, which took place in Jos, Kaduna, Modakeke, Idi-Araba, have had a far-reaching impact on the population. Violence in Warri is still raging. In all instances, the Government and its security agents have proved grossly incapable of performing their statutory function of protecting lives and property, particularly as the genesis of most of these clashes can be traced to their own acts and omissions. Payment of compensation to the victims has been completely abandoned.

Buildings collapse on a daily basis in several parts of Nigeria, and many people have lost their lives trapped inside them.

Lack of safe drinking water; energy for cooking, heating and lighting; sanitation; washing facilities and refuse disposal are still serious problems which the Government is not making any effort to tackle.

¹ Yam is a staple food that is commonly consumed in Nigeria.

Women's rights and property ownership

As a result of the work of NGOs and other gender rights advocates, more women have become educated, and a higher awareness of women's rights has been created. These developments have entailed more access to public office and employment opportunities for women. The capacity of women to acquire property and secure higher economic status has increased. But the percentage of women involved is negligible.

Most women in Nigeria are still victims of discrimination regarding property inheritance. In spite of a decision of the Court of Appeal striking down discriminatory inheritance laws, it has been largely ignored in practice. Inheritance of landed property by means of written wills has remained the principal way of access to property for women in parts of Nigeria. But since the writing of wills is not common, only a small percentage are able to own landed property by inheritance. Many women who would have inherited property and who might have then wished to dispose of it to enable them to start small businesses have none to sell.

The practice of discriminating against women in the area of rented accommodation is still prevalent. Landlords presume that single girls or women are either prostitutes or at least sexually available.

In the North, where *purdah* is practised - an Islamic religious tradition whereby women stay indoors during the day, coming out only in the early hours of the evening with their heads covered - the story of entrenched poverty is the same. The result is malnutrition, health deterioration and other diseases.

Education

The percentage of Nigerians who have access to basic education is marginal.² Rural areas are the worse hit. The problem of education cannot be divorced from the dwindling economic fortune of Nigeria arising from corruption and declining income from crude oil, the mainstay of the economy. The inadequacy and lack of education deprives the young of the capacity to act as agents of change. Schools in rural areas - where they exist - are poorly equipped, and do not have enough teachers, most of whom prefer to work in urban areas. Those posted to rural areas would rather resign than take up their new posting. As if this were not enough, parents in rural areas still prioritise the education of their male children due to the belief that women are useful only in the kitchen.

2 The "Study on the Right to Education in Nigeria" carried out in 1998 on behalf of Shelter Rights Initiative by Professor Osita Eze of the Nigerian Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolutions put it at 40%, p. 7.

Budgets

Public finance still operates in a clandestine style and information on budgets is treated with the utmost secrecy. The only way to guarantee transparency, accountability and popular participation in the budget process is to make available to the general public information on budgets at all levels of government.

Civil society actions and recommendations

Respect for human rights, rule of law and the possibility to change governments through peaceful means are among the basic conditions for peace and true development. Gross injustices and personal insecurity are antithetical to life, peace and freedom. Discrimination on grounds of sex, ethnicity, tribe, colour, race, religion or political belief are incompatible with human security. Since injustice is so prevalent, a number of NGOs are seeking to act as agents of change by advocating the following:

- The 1999 Constitution provides for incorporation of international treaties: after a treaty has been ratified, the National Assembly is required to pass laws for its implementation. This report recommends the amendment of the Constitution to make way for either the domestication or the automatic incorporation of all treaties ratified by Nigeria.
- It is high time the National Assembly passed the Access to Information Bill, so that the public can access information on the activities of public officials.
- Government officials should be more tolerant and stop hounding people who disagree with official positions.
- Conscious efforts should be made to reduce electoral malpractice.
- The Government should increase development in rural areas to reduce rural migration to urban centres. Rural schools should be equipped like their counterparts elsewhere, thus encouraging teachers to accept posts in rural areas.
- The education of more women is an effective tool for tackling cultural practices that discriminate against them.
- More vocational skills centres and facilities for adults should be built, especially in rural areas.
- Mass education should be instrumented through the media, workshops and other educational modes.

- Women living in slums and rural areas should be encouraged to form co-operative societies through which they can access funds from public institutions and raise funds for self-help community projects.
- The Government should make a conscious effort to ensure that funds for poverty alleviation programmes are disbursed as credit facilities to low-income-earning women in order to facilitate their economic empowerment and liberate them from poverty. Public funds for the poor should reach the target groups.
- There should be more transparency in governance in Nigeria. ■