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Commentary

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Abstract

Northern Nigeria is currently facing a twin crisis of both coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and insecurity. They have made it difficult for the people to follow government containment efforts to control the pandemic and also have impacted on the socioeconomic and health aspects of the society. We have discussed on the impact of insecurity amid COVID-19 in Northern Nigeria. It is opined that, if the insecurity in Northern Nigeria is not tackled, it will expose the region to more escalation of cases and deaths. Thus, it is recommended that proactive steps should be implemented by all stakeholders concerned to tackle insecurity, particularly the government to revive the security architecture, provide an environment for training and retraining of all security personnel and enhancing intelligence gathering to pave the way for resolving this issue.

Northern Nigeria is currently living with 2 pandemics. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic surge is spreading rapidly in Nigeria¹ amidst an accelerated explosion in criminal activity and insecurity compared with elsewhere in Africa. In a time when almost all countries around the world are struggling to slow down the highly infectious virus transmission, thousands have been killed, displaced, and many have fled their shelters due to insecurity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, with little being done to slow the infection rate or insecurity. Bandits raided villages, Jihadists bombed places, and herd groups clashed, thus increasing food insecurity. Criminal gangs engaged in violence, pillage, cattle rustling, and criminals got money by raiding places (such as schools, villages, and on the roads) or by engaging in violent kidnapping for ransom particularly school children, wealthy individuals, farmers, business men, or influential people.²

The Federal Government of Nigeria imposed lockdown and restrictions of movements in response to the pandemic but security measures have not been put in place. These policies included curfews, stay-at-home orders, promotion of safety guidelines by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), such as physical and social distancing and better hygiene practices. These actions presented more challenges especially to the most vulnerable and marginalized Nigerian communities affected by insecurity. If urgent public health preventive measures are not implemented to contain the spread of the highly infectious virus, the conflict-affected states are not far away from being hit badly.³ This study aims to present the impact of insecurity amid COVID-19 in Northern Nigeria and possible recommendations on how to tackle this issue.

Commentary

Insecurity to violence in Northern Nigeria has posed a major challenge since the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009. Conflict disrupts health interventions, deprives people of health services, and negatively affects health systems.⁴ This has been further compounded by the recent rise in banditry in the Northwestern and central regions of the country. Amidst the deteriorating security situation, Northern Nigeria has also been plagued with development-related difficulties that have further compounded the insecurity. This posed a serious threat to socio-economic development, most importantly increased unemployment and poverty.⁵ This has worsened the hunger situation (chronic and acute); disrupted the supply chain, food supply, and prices; increased food insecurity risk, currency depression, loss of income and remittances; and caused the majority of farmers to be unable to farm their lands. The few farmers who could farm are fearful of transporting their farm produce to markets, thereby creating food shortages.

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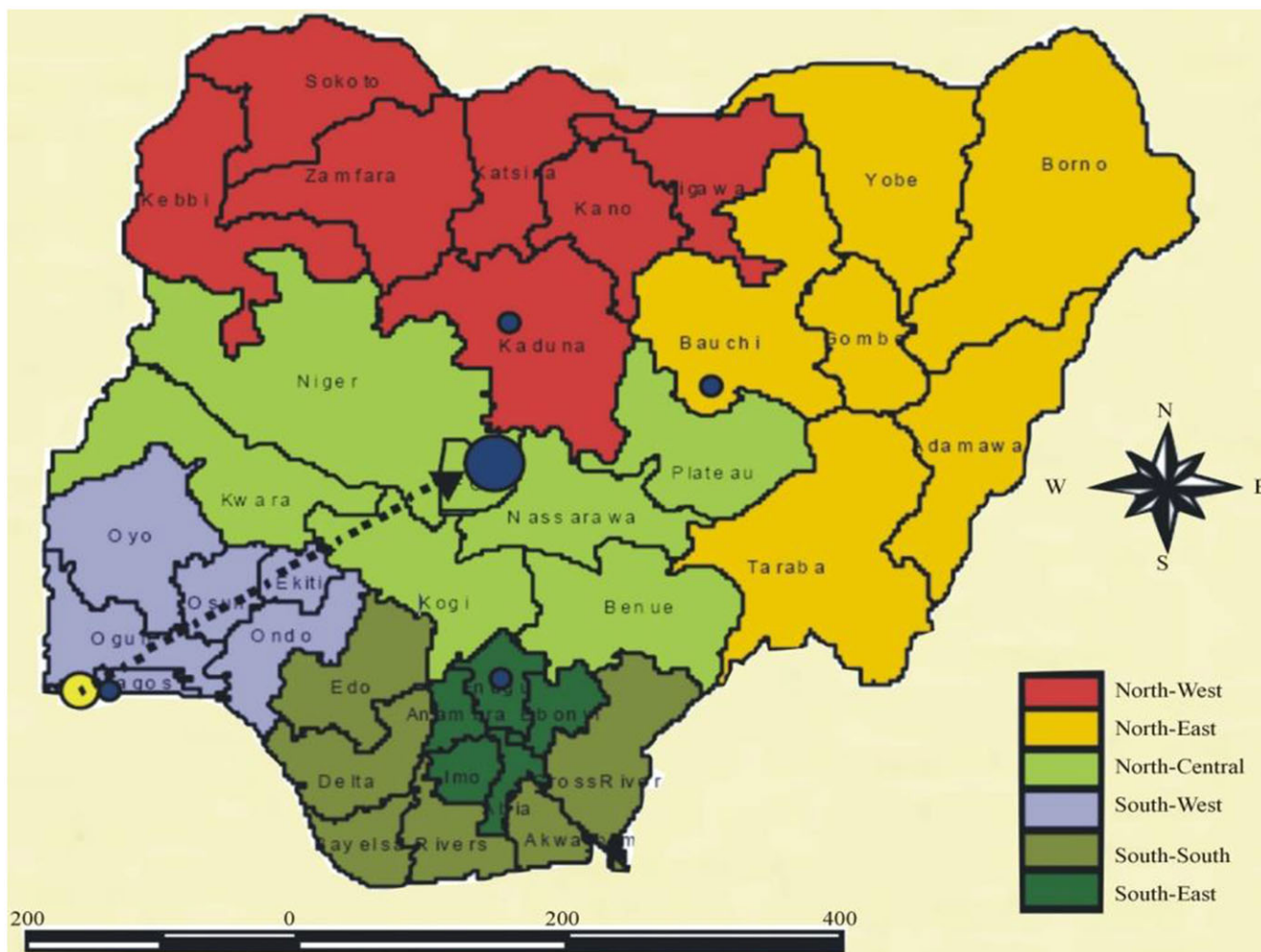


Figure 1. Map of Nigeria showing the 6 geopolitical regions of the country.

Social distancing is recognized as the primary policy prescription for combating the COVID-19 pandemic and has been widely adopted across the world.⁶ Social distancing, however, has proven difficult to achieve in different areas across the North. The displacement of people from their homes during the pandemic due to banditry and insurgency made people abandon their homes and communities thus flaunting social distancing guidelines. Various internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps across the North are generally in poor hygienic conditions. Infection prevention practices further expose the IDPs to COVID-19. Moreover, hospitals have also been destroyed as a result of the insecurity in various areas in the North, which has made the management of the disease difficult for the State governments concerned.

Insecurity had also led to a rise in poverty in the North, and just like many regions around the world, in battling poverty, poor people are less willing to make economic sacrifices, as they place relatively greater value on their livelihood concerns compared with contracting COVID-19.⁷

In the wake of the pandemic, nonessential movements may have lull under a nationwide lockdown, but not the insurgent violence of Boko Haram.⁸ This worsened the panic and devastation posed by COVID-19 among people of Northern Nigeria. In 2019 alone, 180,000 people fled their homes in Northeastern Nigeria following an upsurge in the fighting. Likewise, in the Northwestern

and the middle belts, crises such as farmers-herders clashes, banditry, kidnapping, and cattle rustling have displaced many people from their places of residence. The displacement of the people made it almost impossible for the government to effectively contain the spread of the virus, despite measures imposed by the Federal Government such as the lockdown, social distancing, and the use of face masks in public places. The Boko Haram insurgency has killed more than 36,000 people and displaced at least 2 million people in Northeastern Nigeria since 2009. People fleeing from Boko Haram increasingly take up shelter in the relative safety of urban centers.⁹ The fleeing population caused overcrowding in IDP camps and the relatively safe urban centers such as Maiduguri, Yola, Gombe, and Damaturu, which made social distancing a mirage further increasing the spread of COVID-19. People in these IDP camps across the nation are at high risk of contracting the virus due to the new arrivals from COVID-19-affected villages fueled by overcrowding (Figure 1).

As the number of COVID-19 cases rises, many Nigerians feel the immediate economic impact of the restrictions on movement. For some of the displaced people who have lost everything, including their social support networks, the blow has become extremely difficult.¹⁰ This has caused increased difficulties among the most vulnerable populations such as children, women, and the elderly.

Recommendations

Northern Nigeria and its government are battling many rebellion wars, banditry, kidnapping, clashes between herders and farmers, and now, the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recommended that proactive steps should be implemented from all stakeholders concerned to tackle insecurity. The government should be sure to listen to and support communities to address the dual contagion of insecurity and coronavirus, restructure the security architecture, provide an enabling environment for training and retraining of all security personnel, and enhance intelligence gathering, which will pave the way for overcoming this issue. To pilot sustainable food production, it is recommended that the government should invest heavily on the agricultural sector through effective policies to procure critical equipment, machinery, and manpower, particularly for young people. This would decrease the incidence and effects of social vices, provide jobs for the idle and jobless youth, supply food to value chains, restore the economy, and by extension put an end to food insecurity in the North and other regions of the country.

In addition, basic necessities such as food, shelter, basic health care, and other social support programs in the form of palliative measures should be provided for free to the vulnerable groups that are worst affected. Strategies should be put in place by the government in collaboration with the communities to ensure that the palliative measures reach the intended target population, while the necessary COVID-19 infection prevention and control protocols are strictly adhered to by all.

Conclusion

In the midst of COVID-19, the ramifications of security instability in Northern Nigeria are significant and should be given the utmost attention by the Nigerian government as they have an enormous

number of consequences on the economy, on humanitarian activities, and above all, on efforts geared toward containing the spread of COVID-19 in the country at large.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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