SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS (SALWs) PROLIFERATION AND ESCALATING THREAT OF BANDITRY IN NORTHWEST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the extent to which small arms and light weapons (SALWs) proliferation contributes to the escalating insecurity in North Western Nigeria. The methodology of this study is based on information generated from primary and secondary sources and analysed through the qualitative method. The power elite theory was adopted in this study to substantiate the literature and the findings. The study reveals that the Northwest has become saturated with various calibres of sophisticated SALWs which has enabled bandit groups to carry out atrocities against unarmed civilian communities and government targets. The study also revealed that the impact of SALWs proliferation and banditry on human lives in the region has expanded over the years. It was recommended that an urgent move should be made by the government to contain the flow of SALWs; there should be a coordinated synergy and cooperation among various security formations, and there should be proper engagement with the border communities for efficient intelligence gathering and sharing. The provision of technology-driven facilities would enhance the performance of security agents to eliminate the flow of arms and contain armed banditry in the Northwest.

Keywords: Banditry, Light Weapons, North-West, Proliferation, Security, Small Arms.

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Introduction

The growing trend of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) proliferation in Nigeria has become a serious threat to the security of lives and property. The increasing number of these weapons and the rate of criminality across every part of Nigeria has become so scary and worrisome. Thus, the heightened insecurity and the recent emergence of different armed gangs demonstrate and feed the culture of armed criminality in the country, which is highly connected to SALW proliferation **(**Bala & Tar, 2021 p. 928**)**. For instance, between the period of 1997 and 2009 in the South-South region (Niger Delta), various armed groups engaged the federal government, law enforcement agencies and foreign oil companies operating in the region in a low-intensity war over oil benefits and control. In the South West region between 1999 and 2005, armed ethnic militias engaged the security agents and other various non-state groups and such activities destabilised the region (Ikelegbe, 2014, p. 98).

In the Southeast region, an armed vigilante group emerged across several states in the region in resistance to armed violent criminality and the violent agitations by pro-Biafra groups have been fuelling the demand for SALWs across the region which has raised serious security concerns for the future of Nigeria. Furthermore, the emergence of the dreaded Boko Haram sect is arguably the biggest security threat the Nigerian State has been confronted with. The group has carried out several abductions and deadly attacks on government targets, security agents and civilians in the northern region where several thousands of lives have been lost and property worth millions of naira have been destroyed. Boko Haram no doubt portends a grave threat not only to Nigeria but to other neighbouring countries such as Niger, Chad and Cameroon. It is because of its crude mode of operation that the group is considered one of the deadliest terrorist organisations in the world (Muhammad, 2016, p. 132).

The protracted conflict between Fulani herders and crop farmers has expanded across the country with an escalation in the spate of violent confrontations leading to massive displacement, high death toll, and massive destruction of animals and farmlands. Thus, North

Western Nigeria is currently facing one of the worst humanitarian catastrophic situations involving numerous criminal gangs, herders-allied groups, jihadist groups and vigilante groups. Activities of these groups have led to the deaths of over 8, 000 people since it began in 2011 and displaced over 200,000 across the region while others into Niger Republic (Ademola, 2021, p. 3). The persistent escalation of insecurity in North Western Nigeria has shown that Nigeria's security architecture cannot address the situation. This seeming inability of the Nigerian state to address the spate of SALWs proliferation has enabled bandit gangs to continue their operations across the region.

It is against this backdrop that this study examines the extent to which SALWs proliferation contributes to the escalation and intensification of armed banditry in the North Western Nigeria. The study attempts to provide answers to the following questions: What factors are responsible for SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria? To what extent has SALWs proliferation contributed to banditry in North Western Nigeria? What measures are desirable to control SALWs proliferation in order to contain armed banditry in North Western Nigeria?

Conceptual Framework

Small Arms and Light Weapons

According to the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Material (2006) small arms are weapons that can be used by an individual including notably firearms and other destructive arms: devices such as "an exploding bomb, an incendiary bomb or gas bomb, a grenade, a rocket launcher, a missile, a missile system or landmine": they also include different types of "revolvers and pistols with automatic loading; rifles and carbines; machine guns; assault rifles; and light machine guns". The Convention also defines light weapons as "portable arms designed to be used by several persons working together in a team and which include notably heavy machine guns; portable grenade launchers, mobile or mounted portable anti-aircraft cannons; portable anti-tank cannons, non-recoil guns; portable anti-aircraft missile launchers or rocket launchers;

portable anti-aircraft missile launchers; mortars with a calibre of less than 100 millimetres.

Banditry

A bandit refers to an individual who is physically engaged in robbing people of their belongings as a means of survival and usually operates within a gang or organised criminal syndicate that acquires and distributes wealth within its internal structure **(**Gustafson, 2017, p. 14). The term banditry means an act of attacking, robbery, maiming, killing, and all sorts of violence against the public, especially in situations where there is a breakdown of law and order in society. Banditry in its traditional context is the potential and actual use of SALWs in committing a crime or disposing innocent people of their belongings. This is often done through the instrumentality of coercion, force or physical violence against individuals and groups. It is more or less, a gang-related phenomenon that is currently shaping the level of insecurity across many countries in Africa. Nevertheless, there are exceptional cases where some bandits carry out operations as 'lone brigands' without associating themselves with any other criminal syndicates (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) Proliferation and Banditry: The Nexus

There is a strong connection between small arms and light weapons proliferation and banditry. Several scholars have written extensively on the role of SALWs in the escalation of banditry in Nigeria. For instance, Mohammed and Ibrahim (2015) in their study note that SALW's accessibility has enabled armed bandits to inflict serious pain on innocent people. They asserted that the continuous escalation of banditry and animal rustling could be attributed primarily to the economic and commercial benefits derivable from such activity which is strongly connected to SALWs use. Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016) argue that SALW proliferation has contributed to the level of insecurity in Nigeria. They further asserted that SALWs use in banditry over the

years has enhanced the operational capacity of Boko Haram against the security agents.

Armed bandit activities in the North West have been significantly influenced by SALWs proliferation in that region. They source funds for SALWs purchases from contributions by several communities and other illicit activities ranging from kidnapping for ransom and cattle rustling. They purchase SALWs from other armed groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West African Province, corrupt government-accredited officials, unscrupulous security agents, gun runners and local craft producers (Crisis Group 2020, p. 9).

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) Proliferation and Banditry in North Western Nigeria: Empirical Review

The report of the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation (2021) examines the nexus between terrorism and banditry; highlights the strategies and actions needed by stakeholders to counter the escalating terrorism and banditry in North Central and North West (Kaduna, Katsina, Niger and Zamfara states). The study utilises qualitative and descriptive methods and documented information collected from critical stakeholders through key informant interviews. The finding of this report revealed that banditry has exposed many young people to the use of SALWs in unconventional warfare where there is increasing collaboration between terrorist and bandit groups who progressively acquire sophisticated armoury and actively engage in attacks and large-scale kidnappings for ransom. The study concludes that there is an established system of SALWs and logistical exchange between terrorist and bandit groups in the focal states.

Another study by Bello & Abdullahi (2021) examined the causes and effects of herders-farmers conflicts, cattle rustling and banditry on insecurities in Anka and Maradun local government area of Zamfara state. Primary data were sourced through FGD and KII while secondary data were sourced from books, journals and information via the Internet. This study revealed that herders-farmers conflict, cattle rustling and banditry have greatly influenced SALWs proliferation which in turn resulted in crimes in all ramifications in the study area.

The study concluded that security agents have intercepted and seized large caches of SALWs resulting from operations against banditry.

Another study by Rufa'i (2021) traces the historical antecedence of armed banditry in the North West over a decade, the actors involved and their sponsors and the role of SALWs in exacerbating insecurity in Zamfara state. The study is exploratory in nature as it gathered data through FGD, KII and Personal Observation across the study area. The findings of this study revealed that bandits had over the years, generated huge sums of money from many outlets and procured more sophisticated SALWs in their operations. It also found that some members within the bandit enclave are specialists in SALWs trafficking as they supply to other various bandit groups in the North West through their international connections, especially in Libya and Mali. It was also discovered that a huge amount of SALWs have been pumped into North West Nigeria through the ungoverned border which enables bandit groups to become more sophisticated in operation, strength and tactic. This current study is different from the empirical review as it emphasizes the extent to which the proliferation of SALWs contributed to banditry in North West Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilised the Power Elite theory as the theoretical framework of analysis to explain the intricate role being played by the Nigerian power elite in exacerbating the proliferation of SALWs and insecurity in North Western Nigeria. The role of the power elite in Nigeria is explained through the manipulation of national policies for personal/group aggrandizement. The few powers elite control a disproportionate amount of power, privilege, wealth and access to decision-makers in the political system. The power elite theory was propounded by Charles Wright Mills in 1956 and derived his philosophy mainly from Marxism. "Mill shared with Marxist sociology and elite theorists the view that society is divided rather sharply and horizontally between the powerful and powerless (Elwell, 2013).

The major contribution of this theory to policy studies is that it directs attention to the basic stratification in society between the elites

and non-elites. Secondly, it enables policy analysts to appreciate the important role variables such as status, power, influence, pressure and authority play in public policy making. Thirdly, is that public policies are usually designed only for the benefit of the power elite. The pervasive attitude demonstrated by the Nigerian elite towards the resolution of insecurity has become evident in Nigeria's security policy framework where a whopping sum of money is often appropriated for the management of security in the country. It has become evident that the power elite do not want to end insecurity because of the huge benefits they derive from it. Security management in the country has become a booming enterprise due largely to the desire on the part of the power elite to siphon public funds while pretending to be fighting the proliferation of SALWs.

They are only fooling the gullible and naive people that they are winning the war against SALWs proliferation and banditry whereas in the real sense, they are the ones fuelling the activities of armed groups. The more insecurity strives in the country the more the elite benefit from the proceeds, evidence has shown how legally acquired SALWs to fight insecurity ended up in bandits' enclaves as the elite covertly supply arms to criminals just to ensure the persistence of instability so that they can embezzle more public fund budgeted for SALWs control and security management. Rather than resolving insecurity, activities of the power elite have continued to exacerbate the proliferation of SALWs in the North Western region as many armed gangs now penetrate the region to take advantage of insecurity.

Mills' power elite theory has been criticised for its being unnecessarily rationalistic and placing too much emphasis on developed societies without any consideration for developing societies. Mills however makes his moral position explicit, while at the same time, it serves as a source of numerous insights into the malaise of our time. Notwithstanding the criticism, the power elite theory has enabled the researchers to give insights into how the intricate role of the Nigerian power elite in security policy-making has led to the heightened proliferation of SALWs and security challenges in North Western Nigeria.

Methodology

Data for this study were generated through in-depth interviews and documentary reviews of written records. Interviews were conducted among twenty-three (25) purposively selected key participants across North-Western Nigeria and FCT-Abuja respectively. Key informants include stakeholders from law enforcement agencies, Vigilante Group of Nigeria (from Katsina, Sokoto and Zamfara states), and government and private institutions. Others are members of Civil Society groups, security experts, scholars and researchers working on SALWs proliferation and banditry in North Western Nigeria. Codes are assigned to the law enforcement agents as follows; Police (A), Immigration (B), Custom (C), Department of State Service (D), Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (E) Nigerian Drug Law Enforcement Agency (F) and Vigilante Group of Nigeria (G). Data from documentary records were further sourced through intense desk reviews of books, newspapers, magazines, journals, gazettes and information via the net to complement empirical data collected. This implies that the methodology used in the study area where empirical data were gathered differed from those used in the other area where only a literature review was conducted. Data gathered were analysed using descriptive qualitative techniques.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Causes of SALWs Proliferation in the North Western Nigeria

According to the Department of State Service (DSS), factors facilitating SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria include:

> Porosity of land borders and numerous unmanned routes across the land borders. They also identified ineffective policing of the borders, shortage of personnel and poor welfare packages, lack of security equipment and technology, problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, greed, illiteracy, political thuggery, and poor synergy and coordination among personnel. They concluded that these factors are responsible for SALWs

> proliferation and escalating banditry in the North Western Nigeria of Nigeria (D).

A Deputy Controller of Immigration and a member of the vigilante in Katsina noted that:

> SALWs transit into North Western Nigeria through the land borders between Nigeria and her neighbours such as Benin, Niger and Chad largely due to the porosity of the border and numerous illegal unmanned routes. They said SALWs also come into the North West as a result of the fact that heavily loaded vehicles are not properly checked at the border posts. They further posited that special compartments are usually designed by the traffickers to hide weapons in the vehicles before loading heavy goods to cover them since they understand that security men at the borders do not have the equipment to detect such weapons (B) (G).

The National Public Relations of Customs at the headquarters in Abuja explained that:

> Porous border aids the easy passage of SALWs flows into North Western Nigeria, especially from the uprising and insurgency in the Northern, Western and Eastern African countries such as Libya, Mali and Somalia. He said these conflict-reddened countries serve as readymade sources of weapons to those who want to acquire them. Most of the SALWs seized by the Nigerian Customs show some links to these areas. He concluded that some unscrupulous security agents, the business class and politicians are all complicit in SALWs proliferation (C).

Laurence Alobi, a former Commissioner of Police FCT and Head of National Commission on SALWs; the former Inspector-General of Police, Solomon Arase and Dickson Orji a former Coordinator of the Presidential Commission on SALWs in Abuja, stressed that:

> The border in North Western Nigeria is porous and the existence of numerous unmanned routes across the border has enabled bandits to transfer weapons into the region. They identify other factors facilitating the flow of SALWs into the region including cross-border businesses, trade in drugs and other dangerous illicit items. They concluded that shortage of security agents, poor welfare packages for personnel, lack of modern technology, inadequate working tools and lack of synergy and cooperation among security agents are among other contributing factors.

A Controller of Customs at the headquarters in FCT, Abuja, the secretary of VGN in Sokoto command and a Commander at the headquarters of NDLEA FCT, Abuja stressed that:

> Lengthy and porous borders facilitate SALWs proliferation and banditry in North Western Nigeria. Illegal business and trading activity at the border posts in North Western Nigeria added to the high rates of SALWs proliferation in the region. They noted that criminal elements at the border areas are often being used by the traders to illegally cross certain items including SALWs into the region usually through unmanned routes. They asserted that members of border communities are actively engaged in SALWs smuggling since they see it as legitimate business. They concluded that the lack of provision of technological gadgets such as detectors, drones, scanners, x-rays, CCTV cameras, fences, sniffing dogs, etc. at the border areas also facilitates SALWs' movement into the region (C) (G) (F).

Key informants from the NSCDC, the Force Intelligence and Investigation Criminal Department/Force Investigation Bureau in Abuja and the VGN in Zamfara asserted that:

> SALWs come to North Western Nigeria due to the negligence of the border communities by successive governments in Nigeria. Negligence in terms of lack of basic infrastructure at the border areas made members of these communities to be, most often, disloyal to the Government of the day and thereby conniving with criminals to transfer SALWs across the borders. They further mentioned other factors such as disparity in national interests of neighbouring states, lack of synergy and teamwork among security agents, and lack of modern border facilities, (fences, security gadgets, deep trenches, sensors and CCTV cameras). They also identified unemployment, poverty, greed, people with criminal intent, banditry, bad governance, corruption, complicity of security agents and leadership failure as the main drivers of SALWs flow into the region (E) (A) (G).

Gerald Okafor, and Andrew Gwazo, Senior Research Fellows, at the IPCR FCT Abuja; Nasiru Abubakar, a Senior Researcher at the Department of History in ABU Zaria-Kaduna and Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i, a Grass-roots Researcher at the Department of History in Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, stated that:

> Nigeria's land border is porous and several unmanned routes exist across the border areas. They identified structural defects in governance, laxity on the part of the political leadership, weak national laws and activities of some politicians and security agents as the main drivers of SALWs flow in the region. They noted that corrupt practice and mismanagement of public fund, which is supposed to be used to eliminate poverty and create employment for the youth, have often been diverted. They concluded that activities of bandits have escalated SALWs flow into the region and the number of women (both old and young) involved in SALWs trafficking has

increased over the years due largely to poverty and unemployment.

From the presentation above, several factors have been identified as being responsible for SALWs proliferation across North-Western Nigeria. The position of almost all key informants is that the porosity of the land borders and the existence of numerous unmanned routes across the border constitute a major problem in the management of the Nigeria's security challenges. They added other factors to include lengthy border, ineffective policing of the border, inadequate manpower, poor welfare packages for personnel, the complicity of security agents, politicians and business class, youth unemployment, endemic poverty, greed, illiteracy, political thuggery, connivance of border communities in SALWs trafficking and lack of border fences/walls and modern border management technological gadgets such as detectors, x-ray, CCTV camera and sniffing dogs and the like.

It was further observed that porous borders aid the easy passage of SALWs into the region, especially from the uprising and insurgency in the North, West and East African countries such as Libya, Mali, Somalia, and the like. Several studies have shown that conflict reddened neighbouring countries serve as readymade sources of weapons to those who want to acquire them. There are issues of weak laws, fatigued leadership, corrupt government officials and security agents. It is the politicians who use these weapons to carry out their nefarious activities when trying to score a political goal. Arrested bandits and other criminals have often mentioned the names of prominent politicians and businessmen as their sponsors. The activities of the power elite in the country have greatly escalated banditry in North Western Nigeria. There were cases where funds meant for weapons procurement to fight insecurity were diverted and shared among political coteries, some of them have been jailed while others are currently being tried in court.

Illegal crossing and trading activities at the border areas and activity of certain people who want to break bureaucratic bottlenecks were also identified as facilitating SALWs flow into the region. The spate of SALWs proliferation has also been attributed to the inability to effectively search heavily loaded vehicles due to the lack of cranes at the

border posts. Most of the trucks are loaded with the aid of heavy machines and there are no such machines and equipment at Nigeria's land borders that one can use to off-load such consignments.

In addition, the Nigeria land border with her immediate neighbours is very contagious and this has made it difficult to track SALWs traffickers. Cross-border communities are highly complicit in this regard because they support the operation of SALWs traffickers and help them to move SALWs since they are very conversant with the terrain. This activity is encouraged by the failure on the part of the Nigerian government to provide basic infrastructure at border communities. There have been reports of how funds meant for infrastructural development have been diverted by the power elite for group or personal aggrandizement thereby making the fight against insecurity difficult.

Impact of SALWs Proliferation on Banditry in the Northwest

Ikelegbe Augustine, a Security Expert and Professor of Political Science at the University of Benin, and the former IGP, Solomon Arase stressed that:

> SALWs proliferation and use by armed bandits in North Western Nigeria portends a serious threat to individual safety and internal security. He said there is increasing demand for SALWs by criminals and bandits in the region which they use in perpetuating insecurity and making a huge amount of money because the issue of SALWs proliferation has become a very lucrative business due to the financial benefits that are derived from it. As bandits and terrorists acquire more sophisticated SALWs for their operations so also do other people, mainly Fulani herders and crop farmers acquire arms to defend themselves against potential attacks. He noted that the growing crime wave in the region has encouraged an increasing rate of SALWs proliferation. He concluded that massive SALWs acquisition has enabled bandits to sustain their operations thereby

> contributing to the escalating insecurity in the North West.

A Commandant at the headquarters of the NDLEA and a member of the VGN in Sokoto asserted that:

> SALWs proliferation has increased the rate of armed banditry in the northwestern part of the country. They maintained that SALWs proliferation has given power to bandits groups to carry out their operations with little or no resistance from security agents. North Western Nigeria like other regions in the country is now saturated with different calibres of sophisticated SALWs resulting in high death toll, displacement, and abduction and continues to pose a threat to human lives and property in North Western Nigeria (F) (V).

Nasiru Abubakar and Murtala Ahmed Rufa'i (grass root researchers and experts) in ABU Zaria and UDUS Sokoto lamented that:

> The huge number of existing caches of SALWs has given bandits and terrorist groups the impetus to challenge the Nigerian security agents, displace, kidnap and kill many people in the North Western region. It has deprived many people of their means of livelihood and those who lost their means of livelihood are looking for other means of survival including arming themselves and engaging in all sorts of crimes. The high rate of SALWs proliferation has enabled bandit groups to operate with impunity and this has affected infrastructural development, weakened the laws of the land, discouraged investment, and affected food production, farming and animal rearing in the region. They concluded that the heightened proliferation of sophisticated SALWs and activities of bandit gangs have unsettled the general economy of North Western Nigeria,

Alobi and Arase (security experts) stressed that:

> SALWs availability and accessibility to bandit groups in North Western Nigeria has increased over the years. Increasing SALWs proliferation and use in the region has created a heightened security situation to the extent that insurgent and bandit groups now openly and constantly challenge the Nigerian security agents in providing security of lives and property to the people. They summarised that the rate of bandit attacks on law enforcement agents who are supposed to provide security for civilians is increasing by the day and this is due to bandits' accessibility to sophisticated SALWs in the region.

Key participants, DSP at the FCIID/FIB in Abuja and a member of VGN in Zamfara observed that:

> Activities of armed bandits have escalated since 2011 and the criminals have been able to sustain their operations due to their accessibility to SALWs caches. SALWs' accessibility has given the bandit gangs the operational capacity to resist security agents and carry out attacks with heavy casualties on the security agents as well as the civilians. They concluded that some of the bandits were far better armed than the security agents thereby making it very difficult to counter their attacks and defeat them (A) (V).

Other key informants DC and AC at the Custom Headquarters maintained that:

> SALWs proliferation has greatly contributed to the escalating banditry in the North Western Nigeria. They noted that many impoverished youth groups in the region have resorted to SALWs acquisition and banditry because of the huge benefit derivable from such acts. They only needed to acquire weapons through any

> possible available means and began to organise themselves into camps. Activities of these armed gangs have led to wanton killings of innocent people and properties worth millions of naira have been destroyed by bandit groups since the (re)emergence of banditry in the North West (C).

Gerald, Gwazo and Dickson (security experts) noted that:

> Threats resulting from the heightened SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria have expanded since 2014. SALWs are now significantly being used in rural/urban banditry and the spread of SALWs in the region has made peace-building efforts difficult as many Nigerians in that region now resorted to possessing illegal weapons for self-defence and protection of members of their family and group. They noted that the structural defect of Nigerian society encourages politicians, business class, and corrupt government officials to purchase SALWs and arm the unemployed youth to carry out all forms of crimes thereby exacerbating internal security challenges. Stockpiles of SALWs have been often left in the hands of criminals after elections which they in turn use to perpetuate acts of banditry and other heinous crimes in the region.

The PRO of the Nigerian Customs at the Headquarters and a member of VGN in Katsina maintained that:

> SALWs proliferation has influenced the act of banditry as it is currently happening in North Western Nigeria. Increasing SALW's availability has rendered the internal security architecture of Nigeria ineffective in handling activities of bandit gangs across the region. It is due to the spate of SALWs proliferation that bandits have been able to continue their nefarious activities against several communities as well as security bases and stations. They

> concluded that the region is now awash with different calibres of sophisticated SALWs due to the fierce competition over dominance between security agents and bandits on the one hand and among rival groups within the bandits' enclaves on the other (C) (V).

Other key participants, a DC from the Immigration Service and a CSP at the FCIID/FIB in Abuja stressed that:

> The increasing rate of SALWs proliferation has to a large extent created all forms of social vices in North Western Nigeria. Massive SALWs used by bandit gangs have created a weak internal security system in the region. They noted that it is very dangerous for SALWs to be in the wrong hands because it easily ignites serious crises where many innocent people lose their lives and property. That is what is going on in North Western Nigeria, a situation where bandits carry out attacks, raid, rustle animals, decimated entire villages, rape young girls and kidnap many for ransom while security agents become helpless even in the wake of violent provocation (B) (A).

Still, other key informants, an NSCDC agent at the Force Headquarters in Abuja and a member of VGN in Zamfara noted that:

> SALWs proliferation has resulted in high crime rates being perpetuated by bandit groups in North Western Nigeria. Armed bandit's activities range from killing, maiming, raping, displacement, adoption etc. All these various forms of crimes are directly associated with the use of SALWs. They stressed that there are too much of SALWs in the hands of bandit groups and this situation has weakened the performance of the security agencies thereby making it difficult to maintain security in North Western Nigeria (E) (V).

The DSS opined that:

> SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria has created a general sense of insecurity in the form of banditry and other heinous crimes. Where such crises exist, they affect the general performance of internal security architecture. The DSS concluded that the heightened SALWs proliferation has enabled armed bandits to continuously carry out operations against the people despite the tactical deployment of security forces to stem the tide of insecurity in the region (D).

There is no doubt that SALWs proliferation has escalated banditry in the North Western Nigeria. The government has failed in its primary responsibility to ensure adequate security of lives and property due to the ongoing activities of armed bandits. Many people now abandoned their farms and livestock due to fear of being killed by bandit groups. Agriculture which is the main occupation in this region has been completely relegated to the background due to banditry. This has seriously impacted food production and food security thereby unsettling the economy in the region. There are increased incidences of attacks, sexual violence, killings, abduction and the like going on in Katsina, Zamfara, Kaduna, Kebbi, Sokoto etc. When we look at these issues, we discover that they all involve the use of SALWs by bandits. Challenges arising from SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria have expanded over the years. SALWs proliferation has to a large extent played a critical role in exacerbating bandits operations in the region.

There is widespread of SALWs in the region because the more SALWs bandit gangs have access to, the more efficient they become in their operations. The Nigerian state that possesses the legitimate monopoly over the use of instruments of violence has been unable to contain SALWs proliferation and this has enabled armed bandits to carry out operations with impunity. The inability to manage the border paves the way for SALWs flow, which in turn creates different kinds of security challenges. SALWs proliferation has exacerbated banditry which is currently fuelling violent killings, mass abduction and forced displacement of innocent people in the region. The effectiveness of the

security architecture to manage this situation has been jeopardised by excessive SALWs use. This has hindered the efforts of the security agent to carry out their duty diligently and realise set objectives towards resolving banditry in the region.

Discussion of Findings

Causes of SALWs Proliferation in the North Western Nigeria

The porosity of Nigeria's land borders has been identified as the most prominent factor that is responsible for SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria. However, arms also come into the country through the land, air and sea ports. Nigeria's land border with her neighbours is very porous and lengthy. This makes it to become difficult to regulate SALWs. The positions by Ikelegbe (2014) & Rufa'i (2021) in their studies reaffirmed that, SALWs flow into the country through the land border due to the massive nature of the land border and that SALWs transfer into the country was aided by numerous unmanned routes. This is what makes it possible for bandit groups and other criminals to be able to use unmanned routes to beat security agents when transferring SALWs across borders in North Western Nigeria.

Willing immigrants come into Nigeria through more than ten thousand (10,000) unmanned routes daily as some come in from Sudan, Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya and a host of other conflict-reddened countries in Africa. The role being played by the border communities across the border has been noted too. The failure of the Nigerian government to effectively mobilise and cater for border communities has led to distrust among their members. This negligence on the part of the government has led to a situation where border communities overtly show loyalty to bandit groups. This also makes them see the trafficking of SALWs as a legitimate means of fending for themselves while conniving with bandit groups and other criminal elements to facilitate SALWs' transit. This scenario has been captured in the studies by Wepundi et al., (2014, p. 2) & Faltas, (2018) who stated that the negligence of border communities by the governments makes them play a central role in arms trafficking across borders in West Africa.

The active connivance of border communities in SALWs trafficking has accentuated SALWs proliferation in the North Western Nigeria. Border communities' involvement made it possible for traffickers to easily beat the security agents because they are very conversant with the terrain where these activities are taking place. Another factor is that the security agents are not effectively mobilised and deployed in the way that would make them put in their very best in this struggle. While some of the security personnel are directly engaged in facilitating the flows of SALWs because of the gain they derive from it, others are reluctant to put in their best because of the lack of modern equipment and the herculean task involved. Hazen & Horner, (2007) & Ikelegbe, (2014, p. 117) stressed that lack of motivation of security personnel and lack of equipment and other border facilities make the work of the security agents cumbersome.

There is laxity on the part of the Nigerian government, political corruption and weak laws, lack of good governance, incompetent political leadership, and mismanagement of public funds. There are also the problems of poverty, youth unemployment, greed and illiteracy. Politicians often engage unemployed youth in various nefarious activities including purchasing SALWs to arm the youth whom they use as political thugs during political transitions. Arrested culprits often mention names of eminent personalities, top security officials and politicians as their bosses who protect them when caught.

Impact of SALWs Proliferation on Banditry in the Northwest

SALWs are very attractive because of their simplicity, even a child of 8 years old can operate them without much difficulty and it requires little training to get acquainted with their use. SALWs accessibility has given bandit groups the impetus to challenge constituted authorities in North Western Nigeria. This has hindered the capacity of states in the region to provide adequate security of lives and property to the people. The spate of SALWs proliferation and banditry in the region has escalated over the years and the impact of this is enormous because it has created a general security crisis which the region is trying to grapple with. Thus, there are escalated cases of activities of armed bandits ranging from

raids, mass killings and displacement, sexual violence, armed robbery, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and the like. A common denominator of insecurity as enumerated above is the use of SALWs.

The value of SALWs in the black market today has fallen drastically, SALWs are now readily available to bandit gangs, especially in the rural areas where you see teenagers with various calibres of SALWs, with any little provocation, they begin to pull out their weapons to either directly attack communities, rival groups or to deter any transgressor from the other side. Some politicians and traditional rulers give protection to bandits and thugs who serve as foot soldiers to them. They covertly purchase SALWs for thugs to carry out certain assignments during election periods. The unemployed youths have become increasingly involved in SALWs trafficking and banditry in the region because they are idle and want to live a more comfortable life. (Wepundi et al. (2014, p. 2) noted that apart from the active connivance with arms dealers in trafficking, bandit gangs are also actively engaged in cattle rustling, armed robbery and SALWs thefts thereby exacerbating local insecurity and, by extension, local demand for SALWs.

The heightened SALWs proliferation in North Western Nigeria was facilitated by the inflows from recent armed conflicts in Somalia, Liberia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Mali and most recently Libya where its armouries were opened to prosecute the Libyan uprising that eventually led to the killing of Muammar Gaddafi the then Libyan president. Addo, (2006) stressed that the crises in these countries increase arms flows to various countries in the West African sub-region. The flow of SALWs to bandit groups is so rampant that the region is now awash with various calibres of SALWs, As long as SALWs remains in circulation across the region and the hand of bandit groups, the internal security of North Western Nigeria will continue to be constrained.

Conclusion

This study investigates the linkage between SALWs proliferation and banditry in the North Western Nigeria of Nigeria. It identified the major

factors that are facilitating SALWs proliferation in the region to include; porous border and the existence of numerous unmanned routes across the border, inadequate border management facilities and technology, shortage of security personnel and poor welfare packages for personnel, poor synergy, mobilisation and deployment of security agents, complicity of security agents and politicians in SALWs proliferation, active connivance of border communities and the likes. Banditry in North Western Nigeria is therefore triggered by the increasing demand for SALWs across the region.

The study further examines the heightened act of banditry by showing the extent to which SALWs proliferation exacerbated insecurity resulting from bandits' activities and the impacts such activities have created in the region. The study revealed that SALWs proliferation in the region has increased geometrically over the years due to the high rate of trafficking and accessibility to sophisticated caches of SALWs which enable bandit groups to withstand offensive from security agents. Operating from the vast ungoverned space across North Western Nigeria, the bandit gangs have often targeted the Nigerian security forces and have succeeded in inflicting high casualties on security agents. Several communities and villages have been decimated, and thousands of people killed, abducted and displaced daily across the region. At present, the government security forces claim to be at the top of the situation while the nefarious activities of armed bandits range with no solution at sight.

Recommendations

The Nigerian government should enhance the deployment of sophisticated technological equipment such as scanners, drones, CCTV cameras, etc. and encourage effective joint operation of security personnel between Nigeria and her immediate neighbours to regulate SALWs flow across national borders.

There should be proper synergy and coordination among the Nigerian security agencies and provision of adequate logistics and financial support to detect SALWs movement and contain activities of bandit gangs in the North West region.

There should be a robust method of intelligent gathering through effective community engagement, integrate of border communities into the security architecture, increased personnel strength and enhanced deployment and welfare packages for law enforcement officials to become more efficient and proactive in the fight against SALWs proliferation and banditry.

The security architecture should be restructured by implementing a well-articulated security framework and establishing a SALWs control agency/commission to galvanise efforts towards fighting the proliferation of SALWs and in doing this, the tactics of stick and carrot should be deployed to defeat banditry in the North West.

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