Religious Fundamentalism And Community Vigilante: A Study Of Fulani Herdsmen Incursions In Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract
The current security challenges in Nigeria in which lives and properties worth billions of naira were destroyed were believed to be instigated by Islamic fundamentalists. One of the state that was most hit was Benue State which security situation equally degenerated to suicide bombings, terrorism, kidnappings for ransom and several attempts to Fulanize or Islamize the state. Despite the fact that government had invested resources and efforts to stop this offensive nothing seems to have a head way. This paper utilizes the qualitative method, depending on published data only. The literatures reviewed were in line with the direction of the study. This paper therefore concludes that community vigilante system is a potent security strategy that can effectively wade off external aggressions like that of Islamic fundamentalists, if institutionalized and given legal backing. This paper recommends that community vigilantes should be given legal backing to operate and should be institutionalized and established in every community in the state. The police force should be decentralized so that each state government will own and control its force, as this will give impetus for community vigilante to operate effectively. More so, the vigilantes should be properly empowered, equipped with fighting equipments and security infrastructures. **Word count**: 200

Key words: Banditry, Christianity, Community vigilante, Fulani herdsmen, Religious crisis, Islamic fundamentalist, Muslims. Religious fundamentalism

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that the Nigerian constitution declared the country a secular state, some Islamic fundamentalists continue to abuse the right and freedom of worshippers of other religion. Thus, the country continues to experience religious violence, religious intolerance, religious fanaticism and terrorism with all its counter-productive consequences in the country. This scenario no doubt affects the human psyche as well as the physical, social and cultural relationships among the citizenry, tribes and religious sects in Nigeria. This also affect the way government is run, including political and economic decisions, appointments, revenue sharing formula and politics among others. It is apparent that the federal government had done enough in equipping the police and military with modern sophisticated weapons, training and retraining of security officials and the use of foreign security experts to abate Islamic fundamentalism in Nigeria. Despite all these, religious

crises continued unabated, becoming complicated with new perspectives. Most worrisome is the fact that government actions and inactions have generated negative controversies, protests and reactions from different quarters.

Currently, an Islamic fundamentalist movement known as Bokoharam is wrecking havoc in the North East and North Central part of Nigeria. On its heels are Fulani herdsmen, bandits and unknown gun men causing insecurity on these parts of the country. According to Obilor (2020) Bokoharam had displaced more than 3000 persons from their homes, 2500 lost their lives and property worth billions of naira destroyed. Communities were ransacked, farmlands destroyed, and many persons were kidnapped for ransom. Properties destroyed included churches, mosques, police stations, school buildings, public institutions and private homes. For example, in April, 2014, the Bokoharam sect invaded the Federal Girls School, Chibok, and kidnapped 276 female students (Obilor, 2020). In Benue State, Islamic fundamentalists and their herdsmen invaded and attacked Katsina Ala, Gwer west, Shikaan, Mbagena and Kpav, killing and maiming innocent people. The same thing occurred in Jos, Plateau State, where some Islamic fundamentalist under the guise of bandits and herdsmen attacked and killed farmers, kidnapped and displaced many from their homes.

The activities of these Islamic fundamentalist tend to have reverberating consequences on the nation at large. In other words, Islamic fundamentalists' activities had some spillover effect on other parts of the country. Example, the formation of Freedom fighters led by Sunday Igboho was to curtail the incursion of Fulani herdsmen and their cattle grazing activities in Yoruba land. Also, due to the constant security threats and fear of a jihad that may be staged to Islamize the country had prompted State Governors to outlaw open grazing in their states. Open grazing was seen as avenue through which Islamic fundamentalists can have easy access and commit shenanigans in these states.

In spite of government efforts to curtail Islamic fundamentalism, the problem persist with increasing vigor and the federal government had indeed failed to find solution to the impending conflict. Gabriel (2018) let loose his anger when he accused the security agencies in Nigeria such as the military and the police government to be culprits to the crisis, claiming that they have compromised to Islamize the country. The failure of government to act decisively and fight these Islamic terrorists like the Bokoharam, bandits and Fulani herdsmen had attracted the condemnation of many scholars. Azele & Hardy (2012) accused the government of master minding, instigating, mobilizing, and sponsoring the Bokoharam insurgencies. They also accused some politicians, elites, and technocrats as culpable in the crime. According to Azele & Hardy (2012) sponsors of Bokoharam insurgency are in government and they are never apprehended. In a country where the government cannot be trusted and hold into confidence by the ordinary citizen, it will be apt and justifiable to consider an alternative measure that can protect the citizens from the violent activities of religious extremists and fundamentalists.

It is in this regard that the community vigilante is proposed as the best option in the present circumstance the country finds itself. Community vigilante is an aged long security control measure practiced in many African communities. For some times, the media was awash with opinions that the police force should be decentralized to allow each state of the federation to own and control its police force. Consequent upon this, many state governors started forming vigilante groups in their respective states. In South Western States of Nigeria, states' governors instituted a vigilante group known as "Amotekun". In South East of Nigeria, the "Forest guards" or "**EbubeAgu**" was also instituted.

Moreover, with the security threats from these Islamic fundamentalists, various communities set up vigilante groups comprising volunteer members and hunters to watch over and protect their communities. Examples abound in the Eastern States of Ebonyi and Abia where Fulani herdsmen and bandits were intercepted with arms and ammunitions in their attempt to invade some communities. Another case was the interventions of community vigilante in Katsina-ala Local Government Area of Benue State who succeeded to stop the killing of Christians in the area. Now, every community in Jos and Benue States has community vigilantes, sponsored by the state government to resist incursions of Islamic terrorist groups. It is against this background that this paper is articulated to investigate Islamic fundamentalist insurgencies and the impact of community vigilante in resolving the conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Religious Fundamentalism in Nigeria
The religiously instigated fundamentalisms in Nigeria have degenerated to suicide bombings, terrorism, kidnappings for ransom, armed robbery, drug trafficking, rapes and several attempts to Islamize the entire country, among others. Adamolekun (2012) asserts that religious fundamentalism in Nigeria have been endemic since the 1970s, and were perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists. According to him, the first inter religious conflict between Christians and Muslims started in 1979 during the National Constituent Assemble, when the issue of Sharia was debated whether it should be enshrined in the Nigeria constitution or not. Whereas the Muslims wanted it in the constitution, the Christians opposed it, which thus generated acrimony between the two religious groups. The registration of Nigeria as a member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1986, by the Babangida regime, was another episode that almost fuelled religious crises, but was effectively contained. This is in spite of the fact that Christians from far wide, condemned the move on grounds that Nigeria as a secular state shouldn't be a member of OIC, the government still went ahead with the registration.

However, the first Islamic fundamentalist group that set the pace for religious violence was Maitatsine. The Maitatsine uprising which started in Kano in 1980, was between the Maitatsine and Orthodox Muslims. According to Uka, (2012) the Maitatsine sect were migrants from North Africa, Cameroon or Chad Republic, who on arrival started teaching strange doctrines which within a short period polarized the Islamic religion and also replicated in other northern states, such as Bulunkutu, Jimeta, Yola, Gombe and Funtua. The crisis eventually culminated into the "Maitatsine riot" which occurred between 18-29 December, 1980, and led to the death of more than 500 persons and property worth several millions of naira were destroyed (Uka, 2012).

Another Islamic fundamentalist group that instigated religious crisis in Kano was the Shiite (Balogun, 2018). The Shiite group was based in Zaria but have adherents in all the northern part of Nigeria. Like the Maitatsine, they felt Islam had been adulterated and therefore wanted it purified according to strict Islamic laws. The Shiite riot which occurred in 1996 and 1997 in Kano led to the killing of not only non-Shiite adherents but also Christians in their number (Balogun, 2018).

The religious crisis that is most volatile and widespread in all parts of northern Nigeria was the "Fagge" crises in 1982, masterminded by Islamic fundamentalists. It started when a Christian church was built close to a Mosque in the city of Kano. Adamolekun

(2012) reported that over 3000 Christians lost their lives and properties worth millions of naira were destroyed, while many Christians relocated to the south.

The next religious crisis that took place in 1991 was provoked by Islamic fundamentalists who planned to stop a crusade organized by the Charismatic Movement in Kano. The crusade was to be addressed by a German Preacher and Evangelist, Reinhard Bonke, and was therefore followed with intensive publicity. This generated the anger of the Muslim faithful who felt the crusade must not hold in Kano, being an Islamic state. The attack from the Islamic fundamentalists triggered a counter-attack from the Christian faithful and the casualties from both sides were monumental. Ademolekun (2012) reported that modern fire arms were used in the attacks with over 650 people recorded dead and properties worth billions of naira destroyed. The imbroglio which lasted for three weeks was attended by killings and bloodshed (Ademolekun, 2012).

Currently, activities of Islamic fundamentalist had made the security situation in northern parts of the country become tense. In the North East of Nigeria, the states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa had over the years been experiencing security challenges. Omonia (2020) reported that the Bokoharam terrorists have killed more than 10,000 helpless persons, and rendered more than 3000 persons homeless. In April, 2014, the Bokoharam terrorists invaded the Federal Girls School, Chibok and kidnapped 276 female students (Omonia, 2020; Gwamna, (2011)). Benue and Plateau States were not spared by Fulani herdsmen and bandits who killed 42 persons in Katsina Ala and Gwer west local Government Areas of Benue State and 102 persons in Jos, Capital of Plateau State. Shikaan, Mbagena and Kpav communities were invaded by bandits and killed more than 1000 lives (Punch Newspaper, April 14).

The Ahmadu Bello University elections of June, 1988 witnessed yet another religious fundamentalism in Nigeria. Ajero (2011) reported that riots erupted in the university and on the streets of Zaria when a Christian won election as President of the Student Union Government for the first time, since the institution was established. Both Christians and Muslims went out of control and began fighting each other, leading to the death of students from either side of the religious flank. In the year 2000, the executive governor of Zamfara State, Ahmed Yerima, introduced the Sharia legal system as instrument of governance in the state. The attendant consequences were riots, bloodshed, loss of lives and properties which spilled over to other states in the north. Also, the cartoon with the image of Prophet Mohammed made by a Danish cartoonist raised uproar in Islamic world, culminating in a religious fundamentalism with more than 100 persons, believed to be non-Muslims living in northern states of the country losing their lives.

Benue State Killings

Benue state is described as the "Food basket of the nation" because of her fertile soil, abundant food production and is blessed with rich mineral resources. The state has three main ethnic/languages, namely: Tiv, Idoma and Igede. The land is generally fertile for agricultural activities and is also rich in aquatic resources. The state is also rich with biodiversities. The mineral resources found in the state include clay; salt; limestone; kaolin; barite; and quartzes. The state is also blessed with tourism potentials such as the statute of the legendary Ogbiloko; Historic open fire furnace; the sacred Utyo; Sacred Ipinu-Igede, a forest believed to be the dwelling place of ancestors, waterfalls of Andibilla, Uchenyim, Ohuma hills, the seven tributaries of Oyongo river and the Ilene

lake. The state harbors both urban and rural centers with 75 per cent of the people living in rural areas.

Basically for her rich potentials, people from other tribes, including Hausas and Fulani reside in the state, doing one business or the other. Of recent, the state began to experience incessant invasions and attacks by some Fulani herdsmen, bandits, local militias and cattle rustlers.

Omonia (2020) believed that these invaders are offshoot of Bokoharam insurgency in the north eastern part of the country. The purpose of these invasions is not only to gain control of the communal lands for open grazing of their cattle, but also to ensure proper Islamization of the state. Abdullahi and Odundo (2019) lent support to this view when he said that the invasion of Benue state is nothing short of "Jihad attempts". This was further supported by Tiku, Isokon, Tangban and Enamhe (2020) when they claimed that most of the invaders were nomads from the north and West African countries of Guinea, Niger, Cameroun and Chad. Tiku, et al (2020) further assert that open cattle grazing have been the bone of contention, mainly due to the banning of open cattle grazing by the state government. For the past six months, there was insecurity in the state, occasioned by incessant attacks, destruction of crops, slaughtering, kidnappings, raping and all forms of atrocities.

The official government report stated that over one million internally displaced persons were in IDP camps in Abagana and Makurdi (Iisokon, 2013). In one of such invasions, seven (7) IDPs were slaughtered in Abagana camp. In February 2016, herdsmen brutally massacred 500 persons in the state, which prompted the state government to enact a law banning open cattle grazing. The massacre and killings were overwhelming. Example of such murderous cases in the year 2020 include: over 100 hundred people were killed in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area; Over 150 people killed in Shikaan, Shitile, Mbagena and Kpav communities; 23 were killed in Ado Local Government Area; 70 persons were murdered in cold blood in Logo Local Government Area. (Gabriel, 2018) estimated the total number of persons that lost their lives in the state from 2016 to 2020 to be over 1.3 million and properties destroyed to be worth 50 million naira.

Community Vigilante in Developed Countries

In the United States of America, community vigilante is an aspect of community policing described as: "Community watch" or "Homeland security". Bohn & Haley (2012) affirmed that Homeland security in the United States carry out functions such as intelligence gathering, mapping and analysis, information sharing, security assessments and surveillance and feed the police with information to act upon. They also involve in territorial reinforcement and encourage informal control of the community. The Homeland security was set up to mobilize human and material resources that would assist the police in carrying out its assign duties. The members are usually trained and empowered by the police to deal with security challenges and disaster cases (Committee on Science and Technology for Countering Terrorism, 2014). The primary responsibility is to help local communities know how to respond to disasters or emergency cases anytime they occur (Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2014).

Craig (2017) opined that in European countries such as Belgium, Mexico, France and Japan, community vigilante is sometimes referred to as: "Community watch" "Neighborhood watch" or "Home watch". It is effectively functional and consists of trained

volunteers who are mobilized to manage disasters and security challenges. In some of these countries like Japan, community policing is managed and funded by the residents in each neighborhood. Craig also stated that the neighborhood watch provide support services to disaster victims and organize neighborhood awareness programs for neighborhoods on how to respond to emergency or disaster cases. In France and Belgium, the homeland security deals with emergency and non-emergency cases as far as they help to guarantee the safety of citizens (Scheider, Chapman & Seelman, 2013; Patterson, 2017).

Generally, in all Arab countries, community vigilante watch over the community and serve as spies to security agencies like the police. It feed police with information about criminal activities in the neighborhood. Members of community policing are trained to complement the police in fighting crimes (Frank & Straub, 2020).

Carrol-Buracker & Associates (2017) reported that in the autonomous communities of Murcia, Spain, the insecurity that bedeviled communities in the countryside were reduced to manageable level as a result of the commitment of home security guards. The capacity of the home security guards to manage emergency cases of insecurity was attributed to the spying strategy used to pass information to the police to act on. In countries such as India, China and Yugoslavia, the vigilantes are trained in the use of fire arms and for combat readiness.

Community Vigilante in African Countries

Charrier, Shlomi & Mike (2018) reported in their study that vigilante groups in all the communities in Ghana were registered with the municipal councils and are tasked to response to terrorist attacks. They are prepared to provide security information to the police and initiate strategies that would protect community members from insecurity and also assist the police in implementing necessary actions in any security threat. Macdonald (2013) reported that vigilante groups and the police in Kenya communities usually enter into joint security operations to fight insecurities. It also reported that the vigilante groups pursue similar goals with that of the police.

The community vigilantes in Ethiopia were able to bring down crime rate in communities known to have high rate of crimes to 12 per cent (Musa, Umar, Girei & Mohammed, 2016). Both the police and vigilante groups carried out joint operations to restore normalcy in the regions. In Johannesburg South Africa, Jose (2015) reported that the mining communities came up with the idea of establishing community vigilante to forestall crime rate in the area, but the outcome was disappointing and hazardous. Many of the volunteers met their deaths and some sustained injuries during a fight with a gang of criminals. Palmiotto (2010) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of vigilante groups towards resolving internal security challenges in Nairobi, Kenya and it was reported that 58 per cent of the participants had skill deficiencies which render them incapable of resolving the Pretoria of security challenges in the rural communities. Adler, Gerhardo & Williams (2018) stated that each community in Central African Republic of Congo has a cultural group of hunters who assigned the responsibility to protect and secure the community from external aggressors. Only trusted and brave members of the community are initiated in the group. Sometimes, members are made to take sacred oats and other ritualistic obligations to qualify to be a member.

Community Vigilante in Nigeria

In the rural communities of Nigeria, community vigilante use both micro and macro level strategies to fight crime and manage security challenges. Its primary role is to protect or secure the lives and property of community members. According to Dambazau (2017) community vigilante consist of volunteers mobilized to provide optimal security measures that will safeguard lives and properties in the communities. Generally, community vigilante report suspicious activities to the police, strengthened and secure communities from external aggressions as well as organize training programs for members. In a study to assess the role of vigilante in community policing in Nigeria, Nye (2018) reported that the community vigilante is an integral part of community policing that strategically fight insecurity and terrorists' activities at the community levels. The vigilante groups serve to activate police's efforts towards fighting crime and insecurity.

Different communities adopt different or divergent strategies to manage insecurities. Some of the alternative ways include: use of force, reprisals, violence, arrests, litigations, and killings, retreat, accepting defeat or surrender, compromise, peaceful settlement, etcetera. Trender & Shuwa (2012) assert that community vigilante had been used in Yoruba land to reduce the crime rates in the various communities. Example, the incursion of fundamentalist groups into the forests and parts of Yoruba land in South West of Nigeria led to the formation of a vigilante outfit, called "Amotekun". Reiner (2012) also noted that with the Bokoharam insurgencies, banditry, kidnappings, and herdsmen clashes, every community in Yoruba land maintain community vigilante. It is the same case in South-South Nigeria where community vigilantes are formed in all the communities. Similarly, criminal activities and insecurities have been curtailed by community vigilantes in many rural communities.

In Nigeria, community vigilantes operate as informal groups with no legal backing and are not registered by government. They exist and operate as cultural groups or associations, e.g., "Association of hunters". Some are backed by customary laws and usages while in some communities, they are backed by ground rules, which in most cases are on ad-hoc basis.

In the rural communities of Yakurr, members of vigilantes are drawn from age grades, in which case, members of a particular age grade carry out vigilante task for a set period of time. At the end of that period, the next age grade takes over the assignment. Indeed, community watch is rotational among age grades. Most of the vigilantes are untrained and they work with spears, charms, machetes, amulets, and local guns.

An advantage with community vigilante is that it has vast knowledge of the environment it operates in, such that they could easily spot out crime zones within the community. Harrison (2013) argued that vigilante groups alone cannot quell religious crises since they use crude and local weapons compared to Islamic fundamentalists who have been seen with modern weapons. According to him, the use of vigilante groups against Islamic terrorists would bring about more casualties on the side of the communities. Rahim (2012) argued that community vigilantes can only fight insurgencies if they are well trained and equipped with modern arms.

A study was conducted in Akure, Nigeria by Abiodun & Akwa (2016) reported that the police depend mostly on feedback or information from vigilantes to discharge their duties. The information enables appropriate preparedness and planned strategy to build the needed competency required of a police force. In another study carried out by

Cordner (2019) to assess the impact of vigilante groups on community policing, it was found that the vigilante groups had helped the police and other security apparatus with information that guided the decision making processes as well as meeting the security needs of the communities.

The Challenges of Community Vigilantes in Nigeria
The major challenge facing community vigilante and which had rendered them ineffective has been the lack of attention given to it by the government. In most cases, government had opposed their operations and even banned some from operating. A case in point is when the government of President Buhari refused to recognize the Amotekun as a vigilante community policing among the South Western States (Abdullahi & Odundo, 2019).

Another challenge had been the use of volunteer community members who are not skilled in the art of counter terrorist operations. According to Abdullahi & Odundo (2019) members of vigilante groups in Nigerian communities are not trained on modern warfare, compared to Islamic fundamentalist like Bokoharam fighters, instead, we find uneducated and ill equipped persons who rely on traditional weapons and local guns to cope with the complex and complicated security challenges they encountered.

Community vigilante in most communities is non-functional due to poor or absence of security infrastructures. Usually, vigilante groups should have enough fighting equipments to be able to wade off aggressions whenever they occur. Community vigilante had also suffered neglect due to the continuous centralization of the police force. In some communities, we find the police being antagonistic to the vigilante groups such that members became less inclined to cooperate with the police, resulting to clashes between the two groups (Abdullahi & Odundo, 2019).

Gaines & Cordner (2019) stated that although community vigilante is value-laden, sometimes some members are accused of committing crimes. The complaints about community vigilante are conundrum in nature, and not able to address the root issues of crimes in the community.

Theoretical Framework
In the analysis of this paper, the Participatory Rural Appraisal model by Robert Chamber (1992) is adopted as its background. The participatory rural appraisal model was formulated by Chamber (1992). The model assumed that the knowledge and opinions of rural people should be considered when planning and managing any developmental projects and programs that concern them. It is believed that the input of the people is necessary for the successful accomplishment of community development projects. According to Luigi (nd) the model aimed at strengthening the capacity of community members to plan, make decisions and to take action towards improving their own conditions. The model emphasizes a bottom-up approach instead of a top-down approach in the process of planning and execution of community projects.

The model also assumed that the experiences of rural members are fundamental to managing a community project or resources. It further assumed that local people are creative and have the capability to analyze, plan and implement their projects. In essence, the local people should not be excluded from participating in a community project. The key thrusts of this model are decentralization and empowerment. Luigi (nd) explain decentralization to mean the devolution of resources and discretions in such a way that

powers are shared to reach the rural people while empowerment implies that the local people are made and provided with the resources that would enable them take more control of their lives. The five key principles guiding the participatory appraisal model include: participation, flexibility, team work, information gathering and systematic analysis.

The Participatory Appraisal method is relevant to this paper. For effective resolution of religious fundamentalism, particularly the havoc currently wrecked in Benue State by the Islamic fundamentalists such as Fulani herdsmen, religious bandits, Bokoharam and other terrorist groups in other parts of Nigeria, a high level of citizen participation must be present. It means that the knowledge and skill of community members through community vigilantes must be incorporated in the fight against these Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists. Decentralization as a key component of the Participatory Rural Appraisal model, implies that the Nigeria police force should be decentralized, and community policing given proper recognition in resolving security challenges in the country. More so, community vigilantes should be sufficiently empowered with modern security infrastructures and resources to cope and withstand all forms of religious fundamentalism in Benue State.

With the decentralization of the Nigeria police force, the allegations leveled against the federal government and security agencies such as the military and police, by Governor Orthom of Benue State and other critics that they have compromised and are supporting or secretly funding Islamic fundamentalism would cease. It would then give the ordinary persons the opportunity to come together to proffer solution to their problems instead of depending on the government alone.

This model also highlights the need for collaborative and consultative approach between the authority and the local people in resolving religious crisis in the communities. Thus, all the stakeholders particularly the police and community members had to be consulted in the fight against religious fundamentalism. For instance, the police and vigilante members should learn to work together and always dialogue, consult and share ideas to bring about constructive strategy on how to confront religious fundamentalism.

METHOD

The qualitative method which depended on published data was adopted. In other words, literatures were thoroughly reviewed, using PubMed and bibliographic databases. The review covered various studies, articles and reports with focus on religious fundamentalism, religious extremism, religious fanaticism, as well as community policing and community vigilantes. The reviewed literatures also used inclusion criteria to draw 21 peer-reviewed articles drawn online and 10 reports from published and unpublished materials.

DISCUSSION

The incursions of Islamic fundamentalists under the guise of Fulani herdsmen, banditry and local militia into communities in Benue State had degenerated to destruction of lives and properties. The local governments worst hit by these invasions were Gwer west, Guma, Logo, Ushongo, Olu and Katsina-ala. Due to the current regressive security system in the state, many people felt the federal government is a complicit to what is

happening, especially that the Buhari government had failed to act decisively on the matter, especially that it did not even arrest or prosecute any Fulani herdsman, militia or bandit since the imbroglio started.

From the security breaches confronting the people of Benue State, it then dawn on the state government and the people to protect themselves from the Fulani herdsmen and banditry insurgencies. Consequently, through the support of the state government, the different communities started to mobilize volunteers for a local vigilante system.

The system is such that each of the autonomous community has a vigilante group but they work collaboratively with other communities whenever there is an attack. For example, some of these attacks usually occur suddenly and take community members by surprise, and when it does occur, farming and economic activities come to a standstill, but from the period the vigilante system was reinforced in each community, they succeeded to repel 13 groups of bandits and herdsmen invasions through the combined efforts of vigilantes from adjoining communities.

There is no gainsaying that the state government had invested sufficient resources and efforts to encourage the community vigilante system. Thus, community vigilante in each hamlet, village or community be it in the city or urban became strategically positioned to wade of these invaders. The inter-collaborative efforts of the vigilante groups from adjoining communities also complemented the state police command by feeding it with information that assist in the fight.

The advantage of the community vigilante is that every community knows her own people (indigenes) and can easily identify stranger elements, and is able to identify crime zones and where they may be coming from better than the police. It was therefore easy for vigilantes to gather such information and give them to the police to act upon. With the current centralized status of the police, it is difficult for police officers who are not from a particular geographical area or community to identify and apprehend any criminal without the active involvement of a community member (s). Indeed, the relative peace the Benue people are enjoying now is attributed to the reinforcement of the community vigilantes.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The incessant invasions and attacks of communities in Benue State were perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists under the guise of Fulani herdsmen, religious bandits, cattle rustlers **and local militias fighting for communal control and fulanization of these communities**. Each time there is attack or invasion by these Islamic extremists, lives and property worth billions of naira would be lost. The atmosphere would be laden with insecurity occasioned by hostility, kidnappings, acrimony and destruction of lives and property. Moreover, socio-economic activities including farming, trading and other businesses usually come to a standstill.

However, with the formation and reinforcement of the vigilante system in every community in Benue State, there has been relative peace in the state. The state government ensured that all the communities in the state were reinforced with community vigilantes. Not only were they equipped with modern fighting arms but were also trained on their use. However, this paper recommends that community vigilantes should be given legal backing to operate and should be institutionalized and established in communities that does not have and by extension in all communities in the country. The police force

should be decentralized so that each state government will own and control its force. This development would give impetus for community vigilante to operate effectively.

In a system where many people have the notion that it is the responsibility of the government via the military and the police to provide security for the citizenry, makes many of them to relax and do nothing to help themselves. But with the formation of community vigilante, with adequate orientation, sensitization, awareness creation, advocacy campaigns and enlightenment programs, the people would be able to do the needful when the need for them to protect themselves arises. It is also recommended that the vigilantes should be properly empowered, equipped with fighting equipments and security infrastructures. Both the state and local governments in collaboration with the various communities should interface to fund community vigilantes. The training and retraining of community vigilantes in the use of modern security equipments should equally be given top priority. Besides, the Federal Government should without delay come up with a legislature that will ban open cattle grazing, which Fulani herdsmen and bandits use as excuse to invade the people of Benue people.

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