

EXAMINING THE NEXUS OF EXTRA- JUDICIAL KILLINGS AND SECURITY CRISIS IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: BEYOND THE LAW

By

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Abstract

The security crisis in South-East Nigeria has escalated in recent years, with extra-judicial killings be coming as significant human rights concern. This study explores the intersection between extra judicial killings and the broader security crisis in the region, analyzing the underlying factors that fuel these unlawful acts and their implications for peace and governance. Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws from recent reports, legal frameworks, and security analyses to assess the role of state and non-state actors in perpetuating violence. The findings reveal a complainer play between ineffective law enforcement, political instability, and the rise of armed groups, contributing to a cycle of insecurity. The study argues that beyond legal measures, addressing extra-judicial killings requires a multi-faceted approach, including institutional reforms, community engagement, and strategic policy interventions. Recommendations include strengthening human rights protections, improving law enforcement accountability, and fostering dialogue between government and local stakeholders to mitigate violence and restore public trust.

Keywords: Extra-Judicial Killings, Security Crisis, South-East Nigeria, Law Enforcement.

Introduction

The South-East region of Nigeria has witnessed a significant escalation in security challenges in recent years, characterized by a surge in extra-judicial killings and widespread violence. These incidents have-not only resulted in substantial loss of life but have also deepened the rift between state authorities and local communities, eroding public trust in governmental institutions. According to Amnesty International, between January and June 2021, at least 115 individuals were killed by security forces in the South-East, underscoring the severity of the crisis (Iwuno, 2025).

The complexity of the security situation is further compounded by the activities of various non-state actors. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a pro-Biafra separatist movement, established the Eastern Security Network (ESN) in December 2020, purportedly to protect the Igbo people against perceived external threats and marginalization. However, the Nigerian government views the ESN as a threat to its authority and has designated IPOB as a terrorist organization. This designation has led to increased military operations in the region, often resulting in allegations of human rights abuses and extra-judicial executions.

The Nigerian government's response to the activities of IPOB and ESN has been marked by heavy-handed tactics. From January to June 2021, security forces were reported to have killed at least 115 people in the South-East, with many of these killings described as extrajudicial executions. These actions have been widely criticized by human rights organizations, which argue that such measures exacerbate tensions and contribute to a cycle of violence.

The interplay between state and non-state actors has created a volatile environment in the South-East. The government's aggressive approach towards IPOB and ESN has often led to civilian casualties, further alienating the local population. This alienation has, in turn, fueled support for separatist movements, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and mistrust (Iwuno, 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the Nigerian government's efforts to curb the activities of separatist groups in the South-East, the region continues to experience a persistent cycle of violence and insecurity. The prevalence of extra-judicial killings by security forces has not only led to significant loss of life but has also eroded public trust in state institutions. This situation raises critical questions about the effectiveness of current security strategies and the underlying factors perpetuating the crisis. There is a pressing need to examine the nexus between extra- security challenges in the South-East to develop comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of the conflict and promote sustainable peace.

This study seeks to examine the intricate relationship between extra-judicial killings and the prevailing security crisis in South-East Nigeria. By analyzing the roles of both state and non-state actors, the research aims to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the cycle of violence. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing comprehensive strategies that go beyond legal frameworks to address the root causes of insecurity and promote sustainable peace in the region.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives, they are:

Failed State Theory: by Helman and Ratner (1993), this theory posits that a failed state is unable to provide basic governance, security, and legal structures, leading to lawlessness and human rights violations. The Nigerian government's inability to effectively address security concerns in the South-East aligns with the characteristics of a failing state, where state actors engage in unlawful killings and fail to uphold legal protections.

Human Security Approach: Introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 1994), this approach shifts security discourse from state-centered to people-centered concerns. It emphasizes economic, political, and personal security as integral to stability. In the context of

South-East Nigeria, Extra-judicial killings undermine human security by fostering fear, displacing communities, and eroding trust in government institutions. These theories provide an analytical

lens for understanding the persistent security crisis in the region, highlighting both structural governance failures and the need for a holistic, human-centered response to insecurity.

Conceptual Clarifications Extra-judicial killings

Extra-judicial killings refer to the unlawful and deliberate killing of individuals by state agents without due process. In Nigeria, such acts have been a persistent issue, with security forces often implicated in the arbitrary deprivation of life. According to Amnesty International, between January and June 2021, at least 115 individuals were killed by security forces in the South-East, underscoring the severity of the crisis

It can also be seen as unlawful execution carried out by state security forces or non-state actors without due process of law. According to Amnesty International (2022), such killings violate both domestic and international human rights frameworks, leading to severe humanitarian and legal consequences. Patterns killings and the actors: State-Sponsored Killings Security Operatives, including the Nigerian Army, Police, and the Ebube Agu security outfit, have been implicated in extra-judicial killings under the pretext of counterinsurgency and crime control (Eze & Nwogu, 2021). Reports indicate that arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and summary executions have surged in the region. Non-State Actors and Insurgent Violence Separatist Movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its paramilitary wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), was accused of the security crisis and have engaged in violent confrontations with state forces. While the government justifies crackdowns as counterterrorism measures, human rights organizations document cases of excessive force and unlawful executions (Okolie et al., 2023). According to Amnesty International (2022), security forces in Nigeria have been implicated in Systematic human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killings, illegal detentions, and excessive use of force, further alienating the populace and escalating regional tensions. Extra-judicial killings exacerbate public distrust in state institutions, fueling retaliatory violence and deepening the security crisis (Omeje, 2020). Economically, insecurity discourages investment and disrupts daily live lipoids, leading to economic downturns and heightened youth unemployment, which in turn fuels further violence.

Security Crisis:

The South-East region has experienced escalating violence, partly due to the activities of separatist groups like the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). The government's response has often involved heavy-handed security measures, leading to allegations of human rights abuses. This cycle of violence has contributed to a pervasive security crisis, undermining public safety and stability.

South-East Nigeria is a geopolitical region comprising five states (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo), with a history of political agitation and conflict. Eze and Nwogu (2021) argue that historical marginalization, underdevelopment, and perceived exclusion from national politics have contributed to ongoing security challenges in the region. The situation has created a state of heightened instability, characterized by violent conflicts, criminal activities, and the breakdown

of law and order. As noted by Akinola (2021), South-East Nigeria has witnessed increased violence due to ethnic tensions, political repression, and widespread insecurity, exacerbated by the involvement of both state and non-state actors in the political, economic, and administrative systems that regulate governance.

Beyond extra-judicial killings, several other security crises have plagued South-East Nigeria, exacerbating instability and posing significant threats to human rights and governance. These include:

1. **Kidnappings and Banditry:** The region has seen a surge in kidnappings for ransom, with criminal gangs targeting civilians, politicians, and businesspeople. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023), kidnapping incidents in the South-East have increased sharply, with ransom payments fueling organized crime networks. In many cases, victims are killed even after the ransom is paid.
2. **Inter-communal Clashes and Land Disputes:** Ethnic and communal tensions have contributed to violent conflicts over land ownership, exacerbated by population growth and economic pressures. Disputes between farmers and herders have led to numerous fatalities, as reported by the International Crisis Group (2022).
3. **Separatist Agitations and Armed Militias:** The resurgence of the pro-Biafra movement has led to violent confrontations between security forces and groups advocating for self-determination. The government's crackdown on these movements has escalated tensions, resulting in increased attacks on police stations, military checkpoints, and government facilities.
4. **Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime:** South-East Nigeria has become a hub for the illicit drug trade and organized crime, further fueling violence. Reports from the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA, 2022) indicate that drug cartels exploit weak law enforcement structures to distribute narcotics across the region.
5. **Religious Extremism and Radicalization:** Though not as pronounced as in Northern Nigeria, there are emerging threats of radicalization driven by socio-economic grievances and political dissatisfaction. If unchecked, these could further destabilize the region.

Human Rights and Extra-Judicial Killings in South-East Nigeria

Human Rights Concerns in the South-East

The South-East region of Nigeria has been a focal point for significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding extra-judicial killings by security forces. These actions have led to widespread allegations of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and unlawful killings.

A 2021 report by Amnesty International documented that at least 115 individuals were killed by security forces in the South-East between January and June of that year. The report highlighted instances where security operatives, under the guise of restoring order, engaged in excessive force, leading to unlawful executions. The same report noted that more than 500 individuals were arrested during police and military raids, with widespread allegations of torture and ill-treatment.

Further emphasizing the gravity of the situation, the U.S. Department of State's 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Nigeria identified significant human rights issues, including credible reports of arbitrary and unlawful killings, torture, and other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by government agents. These reports underscore a pattern of systemic human rights violations in the South-East, raising concerns about the accountability of security forces and the protection of citizens' rights. The persistence of such abuses highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to address these violations and uphold human rights standards in the region.

Governance and Extra-Judicial Killings in South-East Nigeria

The issue of extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria is deeply intertwined with governance challenges, as highlighted by various scholars and reports. Poor governance, as noted by Okolie et al. (2023), has fueled insecurity by failing to address political and economic grievances, thereby allowing law enforcement excesses and state-sanctioned violence to persist. These unlawful acts not only reflect deficiencies in the rule of law but also underscore systemic weaknesses within Nigeria's political and administrative structures.

A study by Nwankwo and Nwakoby (2016) emphasizes that extra-judicial killings are a severe abuse of power and a blatant violation of individuals' rights to life and fair hearing. The authors argue that such actions are indicative of an institutionalized culture of impunity within Nigerian law enforcement agencies, where officers often rely on maximum force in crime control, leading to unlawful executions.

Similarly, Eze and Ogbu (2021) discuss the pervasive culture of impunity among Nigerian law enforcement agencies, particularly the police and armed forces. They note that this impunity accounts for a significant number of extra-judicial killings, with security personnel often engaging in such acts without fear of repercussions. This situation is exacerbated by weak governance structures that fail to hold perpetrators accountable, thereby undermining public trust in governmental institutions.

Furthermore, a report by Amnesty International (2002) highlights the role of armed vigilante groups in the South and South-East regions of Nigeria. These groups, often operating with the tacit approval or outright support of state authorities, have been implicated in extrajudicial executions, torture, and other human rights abuses. The report underscores the complicity or acquiescence of government officials in these unlawful activities, reflecting a failure of governance in protecting citizens' rights.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria are symptomatic of broader governance issues: the lack of accountability mechanisms, the prevalence of impunity among security forces, and the failure of state institutions to uphold the rule of law. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening governance structures, promoting transparency, and ensuring that security agencies operate within the bounds of the law (Iwuno, 2025).

Law Enforcement and Extra-Judicial Killings in South-East Nigeria

The issue of extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria has garnered significant attention in recent years, with various reports highlighting the role of law enforcement agencies in these human rights violations.

In a 2024 report, the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety) alleged that over 32,300 unarmed civilians were killed in the South-East by state actors and local vigilantes between August 2015 and December 2024. The report emphasized that security agencies, under the pretext of combating terrorism, engaged in both secret and open killings, thereby contributing to a pervasive culture of impunity.

Amnesty International (2024) also reported that in August 2024, Nigerian police used excessive force against protesters demonstrating against the cost-of-living crisis, resulting in at least 24 deaths. The organization provided evidence, including videos and eyewitness accounts, showing that many fatalities were due to police firing live ammunition at close range. This incident underscores ongoing concerns about the use of excessive force by law enforcement agencies in Nigeria.

Ezeigwe (2020) discusses the human rights abuses occasioned by the Nigerian Police Force, noting that extra-judicial killings have become a recurring issue. The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms to address these violations and hold perpetrators accountable.

The EndSARS movement (2020) further brought to light the issue of police brutality and extra-judicial killings in Nigeria. The movement led to nationwide protests demanding the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit notorious for human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings.

These scholarly perspectives and reports underscore the systemic issues within Nigeria's law enforcement agencies that contribute to extra-judicial killings. Addressing these challenges requires wide-ranging reforms aimed at promoting accountability, adherence to the rule of law, and respect for human rights within the security sector.

Effects of Extra-Judicial Killings and Security Crisis on the Economy of South-East Nigeria.

The economic impact of extra-judicial killings and the broader security crises in South-East Nigeria is profound, affecting key sectors such as trade, investment, agriculture, and overall business operations. The persistent state of insecurity has triggered widespread economic decline in several ways:

1. Decline in Business Activities.

The South-East region is a major commercial hub, with cities such as Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi serving as key centers for trade and manufacturing. However, continuous violent clashes and extra-judicial killings have forced many businesses to shut down or relocate to safer regions. According to Eze (2023), business activities in these cities have declined by over 40% due to security concerns.

2. Reduction in Foreign and Local Investments

Investors are increasingly reluctant to commit resources to a region plagued by insecurity. The risks of attacks on business premises, abductions of executives, and destruction of infrastructure have deterred both domestic and foreign direct investment (FDI). The World Bank (2022) reported that FDI in Nigeria has significantly declined, with the South-East recording some of the lowest levels of investment inflows due to heightened security concerns.

3. Agricultural Disruptions.

Farming communities in the South-East have been severely affected by armed conflicts, leading to reduced agricultural productivity. Many farmers have abandoned their lands out of fear of attacks by criminal gangs, Fulani herders, and even security forces. This has caused food insecurity and rising food prices. The **Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (2022)** documented a **30% decrease in agricultural output** in the region.

4. Job Loss and Rising Unemployment.

The closure of businesses, reduced investment, and agricultural disruptions have resulted in massive job losses. Unemployment in the region has soared, particularly among the youth, making them vulnerable to recruitment by criminal organizations and separatist movements. According to Okolie et al. (2023), the unemployment rate in the South-East has risen to 35%, further exacerbating social unrest and economic instability.

5. Displacement and Migration.

Continuous violence has led to widespread internal displacement, with many residents fleeing to other parts of the country. This migration disrupts local economies as skilled labor and entrepreneurs abandon their businesses and properties, further weakening economic growth. The **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023)** estimates that over 500,000 people have been displaced in the South-East due to insecurity.

6. Decline in Revenue Generation.

Government revenue from taxes and commercial activities has significantly decreased as a result of the economic downturn. Many businesses are either shutting down or operating at reduced

capacity, leading to lower tax revenues for the government. This decline in public revenue further constrains government spending on critical infrastructure and social services.

The cumulative effect of these economic disruptions is a **vicious cycle** in which insecurity fuels poverty, and poverty, in turn, fuels criminality and social unrest. Breaking this cycle requires urgent efforts to restore security, build investor confidence, revive agriculture, and strengthen governance structures. Addressing the security crisis is therefore crucial for revitalizing economic growth and ensuring sustainable development in South-East Nigeria.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, to explore the nexus between extra-judicial killings and the security crisis in South-East Nigeria, it includes journal articles, policy reports, and publications from human rights organizations. Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis of relevant documents. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex dynamics at play. The research adopts a case study design, focusing on specific incidents of extra-judicial killings in South-East Nigeria (May 2022 Anambra State killings, Odi massacre of November 1999 in Bayelsa State, End SARS movement in 2020). This design facilitates a comprehensive examination of the context, causes, and consequences of these incidents, providing insights into the broader security crisis.

Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants who have direct experience or extensive knowledge of extra-judicial killings in the region. The sample includes 20 individuals: 10 community members affected by such incidents, 5 human rights activists, and 5 law enforcement officials. This sample size is deemed sufficient for achieving data saturation in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

In this study, we employed thematic analysis to systematically examine the qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and relevant documents. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, providing a rich and detailed account of complex phenomena.

The process of thematic analysis involves several key steps:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** We began by immersing ourselves in the data, reading and re-reading transcripts to become thoroughly acquainted with the content. This step is crucial for gaining an in-depth understanding of the material.

2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Next, we systematically coded interesting features of the data across the entire dataset. Coding involves organizing data into meaningful groups, which serve as the foundation for identifying themes.
3. **Searching for Themes:** After coding, we collated codes into potential themes by analyzing patterns among them. This step involves grouping related codes to form overarching themes that capture significant aspects of the data.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** We then reviewed and refined the themes to ensure they accurately represent the data. This process involved checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset, ensuring coherence and consistency.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** In this phase, we defined and named each theme, providing clear definitions and labels that capture the essence of each theme. This step ensures that each theme is distinct and provides insight into the data.
6. **Producing the Report:** Finally, we compiled the findings into a coherent narrative, using vivid and compelling extract examples to illustrate each theme. This report provides a detailed and nuanced account of the data, highlighting the key themes identified through the analysis. By following these steps, we ensured a rigorous and systematic analysis of the qualitative data, allowing us to uncover meaningful patterns and insights related to the nexus of extra-judicial killings and the security crisis in South-East Nigeria, Beyond the Law.

Discussion of Findings

The study finds that extra-judicial killings are both a symptom and catalyst of the security crisis in South-East Nigeria. The lack of accountability for such actions undermines the rule of law and perpetuates a cycle of violence and mistrust between the public and security agencies. The analysis reveals several critical themes that elucidate the complex relationship between extra-judicial killings and the broader security crisis in the region:

1. Systemic Abuse of Power.

The investigation uncovers a persistent pattern of excessive force employed by law enforcement agencies, notably the Nigerian Army and police units such as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This abuse manifests in numerous extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and other human rights violations. Despite official bans and reform pledges, these practices continue unabated, indicating deep-rooted systemic problems within Nigeria's security apparatus.

2. Erosion of Public Trust

The prevalence of extra-judicial killings has led to a sharp decline in public confidence in security agencies. Communities that once relied on law enforcement for protection now view them with

suspicion and fear. This erosion of trust hampers effective policing, as citizens become reluctant to cooperate with authorities, thereby worsening the security crisis.

2. Impunity and Lack of Accountability.

A critical factor perpetuating extra-judicial killings is the entrenched culture of impunity within law enforcement agencies. Officers involved in human rights violations often evade justice due to inadequate investigative mechanisms or deliberate shielding by superiors. This lack of accountability not only emboldens perpetrators but also signals a tacit acceptance of unlawful behavior within the system. Reports have highlighted the Nigerian authorities' repeated failure to tackle impunity enjoyed by units like SARS, despite numerous pledges to reform.

3. Impact on Human Rights and Governance.

The unchecked actions of security forces have severe implications for human rights and governance in the region. The suppression of dissent, unlawful detentions, and extrajudicial executions undermine democratic principles and the rule of law. These violations contribute to a climate of fear and repression, stifling civic engagement and weakening governmental legitimacy.

4. Community Responses and Self-Defense Initiatives

In response to the failures of formal security structures, some communities have resorted to forming vigilante groups and self-defense initiatives. While these groups provide a measure of protection, they also risk escalating violence and creating parallel systems of authority that challenge state legitimacy.

militias. While these initiatives aim to fill the security void, they often operate outside legal frameworks and can contribute to further cycles of violence and lawlessness. The emergence of such groups reflects the desperation of communities seeking protection amid the prevailing insecurity. These findings underscore the complex interplay between law enforcement practices, public perception, and the broader security environment in South-East Nigeria.

5. Interconnectedness of Findings

These findings are deeply interconnected. The systemic abuse of power leads to extra-judicial killings, which internode public trust. The erosion of trust diminishes community cooperation, making effective policing more challenging and potentially leading to increased reliance on excessive force by frustrated law enforcement officers. The cycle is perpetuated by a lack of accountability, as impunity ensures that abusive officers face no consequences, thereby normalizing such behavior.

6. Broader Implications

The implications of these findings extend beyond immediate security concerns. The normalization of extra-judicial killings undermines the rule of law and democratic governance. It fosters

acclimate of fear and injustice, which can fuel further unrest and instability. Moreover, the international reputation of Nigeria is at stake, as persistent human rights abuses draw condemnation and can affect diplomatic and economic relations.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between extra-judicial killings and the security crisis in South-East Nigeria underscores the profound challenges facing the region. The findings of this study highlighted a pervasive abuse of power by law enforcement agencies, leading to a significant erosion of public trust and a culture of impunity. These factors collectively exacerbate the security situation, creating a vicious cycle of violence and mistrust.

Addressing this complex issue necessitates comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening oversight mechanisms, enhancing law enforcement training, promoting community engagement, and implementing legal reforms to safeguard human rights. By adopting these measures, there is potential to break the cycle of violence, restore public confidence in security institutions, and pave way for lasting peace and stability in South-East Nigeria.

The urgency of these reforms cannot be overstated, as the continued prevalence of extra-judicial killing spouses a significant threat to the rule of law and the overall security of the region.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions above, we therefore recommend thus:

1. **Strengthen Oversight Mechanisms:** Establish independent bodies to investigate allegations of extra-judicial killings and hold perpetrators accountable.
2. **Enhance Training for Law Enforcement:** Implement comprehensive training programs focusing on human rights and the appropriate use of force.
3. **Promote Community Engagement:** Foster collaboration between security agencies and local communities to rebuild trust and improve intelligence gathering.
4. **Legal Reforms:** Review and amend existing law to ensure they provide adequate safeguards against extra-judicial killings and other human rights abuses.

By implementing these recommendations, it is anticipated that the incidence of extra-judicial killings will decrease, thereby contributing to the resolution of the security crisis in South-East Nigeria.

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