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Dozens of civilians killed in Nigeria in government airstrikes against armed gangs

Dozens of civilians have been killed by the Nigerian government in air raids on alleged armed gangs in recent weeks.

Over the weekend of January 11–12, around 20 civilians were killed in the village of Tungal Kara in the northwestern state of Zamfara, after local self-defense groups set up to protect residents from armed gangs were reportedly misidentified as gang members and targeted by the Nigerian Air Force. The incident follows another airstrike on a village in nearby Sokoto State on Christmas Day, in which 10 civilians were killed.



A Nigerian JF-17 [Photo by Wikimedia / SimTheSynonym / [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)]

These attacks are the latest in a series of aerial bombardments carried out as part of a protracted campaign against armed groups and insurgents in the north of the country, much of which is effectively outside of federal government control. Since 2021, the Nigerian government has intensified its military campaigns across the country, with armed forces now deployed in two-thirds of its 36 states.

Government airstrikes have regularly killed civilians. In September last year, an attack in the northern state of Kaduna killed 24 people, while in December 2023, more than 120 civilians were killed and another 66 injured after a drone strike targeted a religious gathering, also in Kaduna. According to research firm SBM Intelligence, based in Nigeria's largest city Lagos, military air raids have killed at least 400 civilians since 2017.

A report by Human Rights Watch also found that Nigerian security forces had committed various human rights violations during such "counter-terrorism" operations. This includes extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention and mass trials against suspected militants, primarily from Islamist group Boko Haram or its offshoot Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Since 2009, Boko Haram and ISWAP (since 2015) have been conducting a violent insurgency in Nigeria's northeastern state of Borno and in neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Mali. Abductions, suicide bombings, torture, rape, forced marriages and the recruitment of child soldiers have become widespread, tens of thousands have been killed and at least 2 million displaced.

Meanwhile, Nigeria's northwest and central regions have for years been plagued by waves of kidnappings, as armed gangs, known locally as "bandits", raid schools and villages seizing students and local residents for ransom, as well as looting, burning homes and stealing livestock. Ransom demands have forced many families and even entire communities to sell property and take on debt. According to the Centre for Democracy and Development, a think-tank based in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, approximately 30,000 bandits organised in over 100 gangs operate in northwestern Nigeria.

In December, dozens of villagers were abducted in Zamfara State by armed groups. Eyewitnesses and local news sites claimed that between 40 and 50 women were taken from the village of Kafin Dawa as gunmen went door to door seizing local residents. And in late February, suspected Boko Haram insurgents kidnapped more than 200 internally displaced people from Ngala local government area, Borno State, while 287 students were abducted from a secondary school in the town of Kuriga, Kaduna State by bandits only a couple of weeks later.

The mass kidnappings in 2024 come 10 years after the internationally publicised abductions of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok, Borno State in April 2014. This attack was used to justify military interventions by the imperialist countries, with Britain and the United States both sending security forces and "advisors" to Nigeria in May that year.

This was part of a broader “pivot to Africa” by the imperialist powers aimed at securing control of the continent’s huge mineral and energy resources, including oil, natural gas, cobalt, rare earth elements and uranium, which are critical to industries such as electronics and weaponry. Nigeria in particular holds immense oil reserves, at around 37 billion barrels, and is Africa’s largest oil producer. Oil accounts for 80 percent of the country’s export earnings.

The UK and US have continued to provide funding and training to Nigeria’s armed forces. Between 2000 and 2024, the US provided, facilitated or approved over \$2 billion in military aid to Abuja, according to a report by Brown University’s Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies and Washington-based think tank the Center for International Policy. This included the supply of 12 Super Tucano warplanes in 2017, as part of a \$593-million package that also comprised bombs and rockets.

In October 2024, the UK government provided £450,000 of military materiel to the Nigerian armed forces, including counter-improvised explosive device equipment. Britain currently has 20 military personnel stationed in the northeastern city of Maiduguri providing training to the Nigerian Army.

Neither the military aid from the imperialist powers nor the Nigerian government’s campaign of terror have succeeded in quelling the violence, which has worsened since 2014. According to estimates from Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), which based its figures on online surveys conducted among a sample of Nigerian households, a staggering 2.2 million people were kidnapped across the country between May 2023 and April 2024.

Around three-quarters of these kidnappings took place in rural areas and more than half in the northwestern states, which have been the hardest hit by armed violence. Around 80 percent of victims were released, 13 percent were killed and 3 percent remain in captivity. Among households that had experienced an abduction, 65 percent paid a ransom to secure the hostage’s release, with an enormous 2.23 trillion naira (roughly \$1.4 billion) paid out in total. Based on these estimates, if kidnapping in Nigeria were a single company, it would be the country’s eighth largest by revenue.

In the same period, over 600,000 Nigerians were also estimated to have been murdered across the country by insurgents, armed gangs or by other perpetrators known to the victim, with seven in ten households having reported a murder to the police.

These already horrific figures may in fact be a decline on previous years, with most available data indicating a peak in violence between 2021 and 2023, after sustained annual increases since 2018. According to data collected by US-based non-profit organisation Armed Conflict

Location & Event Data (ACLED), armed violence involving bandits in Kaduna State, by far the worst affected, rose from around 50 incidents a year in 2018 to more than 400 in 2021, before falling to about 200 by 2023.

However, the ACLED report also noted that the decrease in violent incidents does not indicate a lower level of coercion of local communities. In many cases, bandit groups have consolidated control over swathes of territory, allowing them to use alternative tactics to collect revenue, including imposing informal taxation on industries such as farming and artisanal gold mining, under threat of reprisals if payments are not made.

While armed banditry has a long history in northern Nigeria, it has surged in recent decades partly due to intense competition between Hausa farmers and nomadic Fulani herders over scarce land resources. Climate change has exacerbated conflict, forcing pastoralists from their traditional grazing lands and encroaching on farmland, leading to violence and ethnic tensions.

Banditry, abductions and ethnic tensions have also escalated as social conditions have deteriorated in Nigeria. Recessions in 2016 and 2020, followed by the government's introduction of a raft of pro-market "reforms" since the election of Bola Tinubu as president in May 2023, have led to mass unemployment and triggered a severe cost-of-living crisis, pushing millions into poverty and forcing Nigerians to seek alternative forms of income.

In 2023, the NBS estimated that 33 percent of under-30s in Nigeria, who make up 60 percent of the country's population, are unemployed. Around 40 percent of the country's population live in extreme poverty, according to the World Bank—some 93 million people. And between October and December 2024, 25.1 million Nigerians were estimated to be acutely food insecure by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), a figure which is predicted to rise to 33 million this year.

State repression and armed violence can only be stopped by tackling the myriad social crises that have triggered it, which are inherent to the capitalist system. This requires uniting the working class across racial, ethnic and national lines in a frontal assault on the corporate and financial oligarchy in Nigeria and internationally, as part of a fight for socialism.