



4.7.16

NIGERIA | Villages Under Siege by Fulani Herders

Over 10 villages in northern Nigeria remain under siege by armed Fulani herders weeks after security forces deployed to Agatu Local Government Area (LGA) in Benue State reportedly drove them out of five communities they had occupied.

The plight of the 10 villages was revealed by Chief Elias Ekoyi Obekpa, local paramount ruler of the Idoma tribe in Benue State, on April 6. At the time, Benue State Governor Samuel Ortom was paying his first visit to the communities in Agatu LGA that were destroyed by Fulani herders in attacks in late February that continued for several days.

According to a statement issued by the office of Senator David Mark, who represents the area, following his visit to Agatu in March, at least 500 people died during the attacks and “all the primary and post primary schools, health centers, worship centers as well as the police station in the area have been burnt down.”

After visiting the area, Angele Dikongue-Atangana, the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to Nigeria, remarked that in 20 years of working as a humanitarian (sic) she had “never seen such a level of destruction.” She added that the Agatu people deserved both national and international attention, and would need external help to rebuild their communities.

Attacks by herdsmen are also occurring in areas of Benue State populated by the Tiv tribe. According to a local NGO, Minority Report NG, on April 6, eight people were killed and one went missing after suspected herdsmen attacked the Mbaa ayo, Mbanyagbegher, Mbakwaken and Mbakyar Wards of Tarka LGA. The assailants reportedly used a mobile phone belonging to an All Progressives Congress (APC) youth leader who was abducted from his home in Tarka LGA and found dead on April 4 to announce they would attack Annune in Tarka LGA within seven days.

Herder attacks also continue to occur in the south of the country. On April 2, Rev. Father Aniako

Celestine from St. Joseph's Catholic Church Ukana in the Udi LGA of Enugu State was kidnapped by suspected Fulani herders while travelling to his home in Ezeagu LGA. According to local media reports, the kidnapers used the priest's mobile phone to demand a \$49,880 ransom for his release.

On March 17, herders destroyed farmland and livestock in Ungwuneshi in Awgu LGA, Enugu State in an altercation prompted by the abduction of two local women. The incident culminated in the detention of 76 local men who were searching for them, reportedly by "men in military uniform." No herders were arrested in connection with the incident, and the army has denied any involvement in the arrests. The detained men were charged with arson and illegal possession of arms and were eventually released on bail following interventions by the State Governor. Community leaders are reportedly working to ensure all charges against them are dropped.

Supporters of a bill currently before the Nigerian National Assembly, that would establish grazing reserves and stock routes across the country, claim it would bring an end to violence involving Fulani herders. Opponents of the bill say it would entail uprooting communities from their ancestral lands and warn that creating stock routes linking grazing reserves throughout the country with no additional provision for security would increase lawlessness.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "It is deeply worrying to hear that communities in Agatu are still under siege weeks after security forces were sent there. The geographical range and scale of violence involving Fulani herders, and the proliferation of small arms, indicate that it has mutated far beyond inter-communal competition for resources into a significant threat to national security. Addressing this violence must become a priority, with attacks being met by an effective defense of besieged communities, as well as of herders who are legitimate victims of cattle rustling. Murder, rape, and destruction of personal and federal property are criminal acts; consequently, perpetrators ought to be apprehended, disarmed and prosecuted in order to combat lawlessness and impunity. In addition, given the significant sensitivities generated throughout the country, it is vital that the potentially explosive issue of grazing reserves is handled with extreme caution and objectivity."