Nigeria: Grazing Routes to Ethnic Bloodshed

Author: Edegbe Odemwingie

Limited resources like water and grazing have led to increasingly frequent battles between agriculturalists and nomadic pastoralists.

The stench from charred, decaying carcasses – both of people and cattle – was still fresh. The burnt remnants of peoples’ houses were the only other sign of the Fulani nomadic herdsmen who used to live in this village in Alingani in Nigeria’s Nasarawa State.

Last August, the village was destroyed by farmers with the support of the local Ombatse militia who belong to Nigeria's Eggon ethnic group.

Although ethnic differences often play a role in the brutal clashes between pastoralists and sedentary farmers, the roots of these long-running disputes lie in access to land and scarce resources like water and grazing.

Nigeria has seen thousands killed in skirmishes between farmers and traditional herdsmen as the latter work their way south in search of grazing for their cattle.

A growing population and the effects of climate change have exacerbated the herdsmen’s plight. More than 35 per cent of Nigeria’s land is threatened by desertification.

In one account of the battle in Alingani, a Fulani herdsman, Najid, 27, said fighting broke out when an Eggon farmer accused one of the herdsmen of grazing animals on his land.

“Everything belongs to Allah. Every piece of land belongs to Allah and not you,” the Fulani herdsman reportedly told the farmer.

According to police, 60 people were killed and more than 80 houses and properties were destroyed. Eleven children aged ten and under drowned in the nearby Guyaka River while trying to flee the violence. Another Fulani herdsman, Dan-Auta, recalled the attack.

“I don’t know what happened. We were just returning from grazing in the evening on Saturday alongside some of our women who had gone to a nearby market to sell things, only to meet our houses burnt down with some of our animals killed or taken away by the attackers,” he said. “The elderly men and women as well as children were burnt while in their huts. Only the children who went out grazing with animals survived.”

Mathias is a farmer who witnessed a separate attack, this time carried out by Fulani herdsmen against settled farmers. He described what happened in an interview for Leadership Weekend magazine.

“They [herdsmen] came from nowhere and started shooting guns,” he said. “That day I managed to escape by the grace of God. I had to run among their scattered cattle, which were running in different directions following the shooting.

“That same night, Fulani mercenaries armed with automatic weapons invaded the village. They killed many.”

Mathias said the local authorities failed to prevent the attack or arrest the perpetrators.

Clashes between nomadic Fulani herdsmen and settled farming communities are largely rooted in disputes over land. Farmers are increasingly looking to expand their arable fields, but pastoralists complain that this encroaches on grazing routes, and that they have few viable alternatives. The farmers reply that the herdsmen ruin their crops and livelihoods as well as contaminating water reserves.

However, in some areas, the attacks also carry religious overtones. In Plateau State, which neighbours Nasarawa, indigenous farming communities are largely Christian, while the Fulani are overwhelmingly Muslim.

A typical danger facing herdsmen is attacks that take place along grazing routes at the hands of cattle rustlers and farming communities. But neither the long distances nor the dangers along the route have stopped them from pursuing their traditional way of life.

The social standing of a Fulani herdsman depends on the number of cattle he owns. Herdsmen therefore guard their cattle carefully and fight anybody who tries to harm them.
They are well-armed and move around with sticks, daggers, cutlasses, bows and arrows, swords and other weapons to protect themselves against attack. Their weapon of choice is a poisoned dagger.

Traditional beliefs also fuel the clashes. Some herdsmen believe that when their animals feed on fresh pasture, they will remain healthy and well-fed and resist certain diseases associated with the dry season.

**CLASHES ON THE INCREASE**

The fractious relationship between herders and farmers sometimes relaxes when there are mutual business transactions to be carried out. In some northern states, farmers pay herdsmen to remain on their lands with their cattle after the farming season is over, so as to benefit from the manure.

But overall, Nigeria’s minister of agriculture and rural development, Akinwumi Adesina, says the rising numbers of livestock and the encroachment on grazing lands have increased the risk of conflict between the two communities.

According to government figures, repeated clashes have resulted in nearly 4,000 deaths on both sides of the conflict since 1998, although international watchdogs like the New York-based Human Rights Watch put the figure much higher.

Human Right Watch reports that clashes in central Nigeria killed 3,000 people between 2010 and 2013, and that a further 1,000 were killed across five states in a five-month period between December 2013 and April 2014.

Over the last year, the clashes have become more frequent, with over 200 reported incidents resulting in thousands of people displaced, destruction of property and farmlands, and the loss of cattle. The Nigeria Social Violence Dataset recorded 1,075 deaths in 2014 alone, a significant increase on previous years. In 2013 there were 892 recorded deaths and in 2012 there were 323.

**TOO MANY GUNS**

One factor being blamed for the rise in violence is the proliferation of weapons in northern Nigeria. Findings by various research organisations and think tanks show that nomadic herdsmen have accessed the increasing volume of arms, many of which enter the country via mercenaries and transnational criminal networks spread across Africa’s volatile Sahel region, from Mali to Niger and Chad.

According to a January 2014 report published by the Journal of Educational and Social Research, there are more than eight million illegal small arms and light weapons in West Africa.

One top Nigerian security official who spoke anonymously to Leadership Weekend said that the mercenaries have also been used extensively by the Islamist militant group Boko Haram.

“There are classified intelligence [reports] that confirm that many of the reported Fulani gunmen are actually mercenaries from Niger and Chad,” the source said. “Apart from their cross-border criminal activities, many of them have prior battle experience in Sudan, Libya, and, most recently, Mali.”

The recurrent tensions between herdsmen and farmers over access to land and water have been further complicated by the Boko Haram presence.

According to a 2012 report by Minority Rights Group International, Boko Haram has targeted farming communities that are in dispute with the largely Muslim pastoralists.

Another problem associated with the recent influx of Fulani herdsmen into certain areas of the country is the suspicion that they are being used by some for political gain.

Zechariah Zamani Alumaga, legal adviser to the Ombatse group in Nasarawa State, has claimed that the state governor orchestrated an influx of “Fulani mercenaries” into Nasarawa State for political gain – something the governor denies.

Lawmakers in Nasarawa State have made a similar claim against the governor, accusing him of engaging the services of Fulani mercenaries to unsettle the state, with the intention of holding onto power beyond the upcoming general election on February 14.

When contacted for comment by Leadership, the governor’s spokesman denied the allegation, describing it as “malicious and unfortunate”.

**GOVERNMENT SETS ASIDE DESIGNATED GRAZING RESERVES**

Nigeria’s constitution places responsibility on the government to ensure the security of its people and their property. However, past and present administrations have not managed to put an end to the clashes between herdsmen and farmers. In some parts of the country – particularly the middle belt region including Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Kogi states – they have escalated.
According to Human Rights Watch, cases have been where the government has taken sides in attacks. Think tanks have also criticised the government’s inability to combat arms proliferation in the north.

A report by Minority Rights Group International warned that the government could not afford to blur the causes of the violence.

“The ethnic and religious dimensions of the conflict appear to be overshadowing the underlying basis, which is competition over natural resources,” the group stated. “The government has focused on so-called anti-terrorism campaigns while failing to address resource depletion and ethnic conflict in the country, particularly between minority groups.”

In the absence of a well-coordinated national response, it is mainly individual states that have taken the initiative.

On October 20, 2014, a committee led by a retired major-general Lawrence Onoja, in Benue State – an area that enjoys year-round grazing due to its favourable climate – recommended changing the law to ban uncontrolled movement of livestock.

The committee also called for a disarmament programme to prevent unauthorised use of firearms.

For its part, Nigeria’s central government has adopted a policy of establishing a network of grazing reserves and routes for pastoralists. It says that the country has 415 grazing reserves, but only a third of them are being used, as the others have been built on or are used for farming. In April 2014, agriculture Akinwumi said that only 141 of the reserves had been officially logged, and less than 20 of those were suitable for use by pastoralists.

In 2009, the government embarked on a project costed at 247 million US dollars to mark out grazing reserves across Katsina and Bauchi states in northern Nigeria, as well as Abuja. Establishing these three reserves, which are meant to serve the needs of around 15 million pastoralists, involves demarcating 175,000 hectares of grazing land, building veterinary units and constructing settlements for nomads to use on their way through.

The government also began demarcating a 1,400 km livestock route from Sokoto State in the northwest to Oyo State in the southwest; and another 2,000 km route from Adamawa State in the northeast to Calabar in the Delta region.

Besides grazing routes, the government has earmarked ten billion naira for the Great Green Wall Programme (GGWP), designed to help combat desertification, which is a major factor driving pastoralists from the far north to head south in search of better grazing.

Despite the government’s efforts, its plans have not met with favour from either the Fulani herdsmen or the farmers. Herdsmen view any encroachment on their grazing lands and migration routes by farmers as a provocation.

Tordue Salem, a journalist who has covered the conflicts extensively, says that farmers do not approve of setting aside designated grazing areas.

“You can’t ask people in an agrarian area like Benue, for example, to cut out areas and designate them as grazing precincts just to avoid incessant conflicts with herdsmen,” Salem said. “The proposal is simply provocative.

“Grazing routes would mean less farmland and farm yields for a people who are predominantly farmers. That would also go a long way in depleting the agricultural profile of these agrarian states, and would adversely hamper food security in Nigeria.”

No one has been able to find middle ground between the two positions.

Last September, a Fulani rights protection group called Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore appealed to federal and state governments to establish a grazing reserve commission to enable people to own land and have grazing rights in various parts of the country.

The issue of grazing sites continues to divide herdsmen and farmers. An end to the conflicts remains a remote prospect.

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