

21 September 2006

Nigeria: heightened risk of violence and displacement ahead of 2007 elections

Ethno-religious conflict is endemic in Nigeria, with at least 14,000 people killed and hundreds of thousands displaced since military rule ended in 1999. Since internal displacement in Nigeria is often short-term, and most IDPs seek refuge with host families, data on the scope of the problem is scarce and no accurate estimates of the current number of IDPs exist.

While conflict often breaks out along religious or ethnic lines, poverty and unequal access to power and resources – be they land or oil wealth – are often at the heart of the conflict. Underlying tensions are never far from the surface, and may indeed be encouraged by scheming politicians seeking gain from social division. The high death toll and internal displacement resulting from a wave of sectarian violence across the country triggered by Danish caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in February 2006, coinciding with a dramatic increase in militant violence in the oil-rich Delta region, were clear warning signs that once violence erupts it can quickly take on a momentum of its own. Violence linked with secessionist demands in Nigeria's south-east, as well as local resistance to the official handover by Nigeria of the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon, are further causes for concern. Many observers fear that the level of conflict, and with it the level of internal displacement, may increase as the April 2007 presidential elections draw nearer. Splits within the government of President Olusegun Obasanjo, and increasing jockeying for power have seen a rise in the number of political assassinations and a general sense of insecurity across the country. Failure to strengthen Nigeria's fragile democracy and to ensure free and fair elections could ultimately result in massive population movements both within and well beyond the country's borders.

MAP OF NIGERIA



Map No. 4228 UNITED NATIONS
October 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

Complex conflicts, complex causes

With a population of about 130 million and more than 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation – with a multitude of religious, ethnic and political fault lines that periodically erupt into communal violence. This has created a sizeable, albeit fluctuating internally displaced population – particularly since a return to democratic rule with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 opened up new opportunities for people to express their grievances and new areas of conflict were created by the competition for political spoils.

While some of these conflicts may appear to be caused by a single factor, such as religion or ethnicity, the reality is usually more complex. The introduction of Islamic Sharia law in a total of 12 of Nigeria's 36 states in recent years has caused tensions, but when Muslim and Christian groups have clashed this has usually been caused by other factors – such as pressure on land or unequal access to social services. However, the polarisation that follows is often along religious lines, and the conflict is easily stereotyped as a “religious war”. The same dynamic is often observed with regard to “ethnic conflicts”.

Perhaps the most significant cause of communal violence in Nigeria is the entrenched divisions throughout the country between people considered indigenous to an area, and those regarded as settlers. Even though settlers may have lived in an area for hundreds of years, they are consistently discriminated against in terms of land ownership, control of commerce, jobs and educa-

tion. In predominantly Christian Plateau state, for example, the majority of “settlers” belong to the northern Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, nomads who have gradually moved southwards as the expanding Sahara desert has dried up their traditional grazing lands (IRIN, 30 December 2005). Hausa-Fulani Muslims have long complained that predominantly Christian farmers steal their cattle and prevent them from grazing, whilst the farmers counter that cattle encroach on their land. At the same time there are indigenous Muslim ethnic groups fiercely opposed to the perceived expansionist tendencies of the Hausa-Fulanis (IDMC interview, Jos, December 2004). One of the most alarming outbreaks of violence resulting from the tensions occurred in 2004, when a spiral of revenge killings between mainly Muslim cattle herders and Christian farmers in central Plateau state left possibly more than 1,000 people dead and 258,000 temporarily displaced – around 60,000 of them in camps in neighbouring Bauchi and Nassarawa states (Reuters, 4 August 2004; GIDPP, 30 June 2004).

Closely linked to this is the problem of poverty and unequal access to resources. Despite its oil wealth (Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer, and the seventh largest in the world), at least two thirds of Nigerians live on less than \$1 per day. Many people believe that conflicts are created and fanned by scheming politicians, particularly elites of the former military regime, relying on the huge pools of destitute and frustrated youths to create social division. The violence can then quickly spread and take on a momentum of its own (BBC, 5 May 2004).

The volatility of underlying tensions was amply demonstrated when in February 2006 as many as 50,000 people were displaced and about 150 killed in a wave of sectarian violence across various Nigerian states, sparked by protests over caricatures of the Prophet Mohammad (NRCS, February 2006). The majority of deaths occurred in the mainly Christian southeast city of Onitsha, where groups of armed youths attacked Muslim Hausa-speakers from the north in revenge for Christian Igbos killed some days earlier in the north of the country. Spiralling violence spread across at least six states, with thousands of IDPs taking refuge mainly in police and army barracks or churches – although many later returned to their homes (BBC, 24 February 2006).

Displacement has also been closely linked to oil production in the Niger Delta. While the Delta region has been volatile for many years, with impoverished local communities accusing successive governments as well as oil companies of depriving them of their fair share of oil revenues, tensions escalated dramatically in early 2006. Armed militia groups used increasingly violent means in their attempt to gain greater control of oil wealth, clashing with the Nigerian army, kidnapping numerous foreign oil workers and destroying oil installations, reducing the country's oil exports by at least 20 per cent (IRIN, 26 June 2006). Violence between local militia and security forces as well as inter-militia fighting in the Delta region has frequently forced people to flee their homes and widespread destruction of property has occurred (HRW, February 2005; AI, November 2005).

Violence leading to displacement could also be sparked by other “flashpoints”, particularly in south-eastern Nigeria

where growing secessionist demands by the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) have resulted in hundreds of deaths in recent years (IRIN, 4 September 2006) and on the disputed Bakassi peninsula – recently officially awarded to Cameroon but where the local population has been resisting the handover (NRCS, 5 July 2006). In addition, in the commercial capital Lagos, forced evictions by the authorities are reported to have affected more than one million people in the last five years (AI, 24 January 2006), as well as hundreds of thousands in the federal capital Abuja (HIC, 1 June 2006).

Following the refusal of the Nigerian parliament in May 2006 to change the constitution in order to enable President Obasanjo to run for a third consecutive term, widening splits within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and high-level political assassinations have led to increased fears of a violent election in April 2007 (IRIN, 2 June 2006, 28 July 2006). In July 2006, the Brussels-based think-tank International Crisis Group warned of the “very real potential for the persistent levels of violence to escalate with major regional security implications” (ICG, 19 July 2006).

Numbers guesswork

Complex movement patterns combined with the overwhelming lack of data in Nigeria makes the issue of numbers of IDPs very problematic. There has been no systematic registration or verification of numbers of IDPs and figures are often “grossly misleading,” according to Zanna Muhammed, deputy director of the National Emergency Management

Agency (IDMC interview, Abuja, 6 December 2004).

According to Moremi Soyinka-Onijala, Special Assistant to the Nigerian President on Migration and Humanitarian Affairs, estimates on the number of IDPs in Nigeria varied from 500,000 to millions (Brookings, April 2006, p5). The 2005 UN Humanitarian Appeal (CAP) for West Africa put the total number of IDPs in Nigeria at 200,000 (as of November 2004) – although this too must be based on guesswork (UN, 11 November 2004). It is therefore safe to say there is an undetermined number of IDPs in Nigeria.

The vast majority of displaced people in Nigeria seek refuge with family, friends or host communities where their ethnic group is in the majority. Others seek shelter in major towns. Many appear to return to their homes or resettle in the proximity of their home areas soon after the violence has subsided, but an unknown number also resettle in other areas of the country. It is therefore difficult to distinguish between movements of people forced to flee by violence and those moving for economic reasons.

Protection concerns

Human rights organisations have consistently accused the Nigerian security forces of failing to provide security during outbreaks of communal violence, and of using excessive force that has contributed to high death tolls. During the May 2004 clashes in Plateau state, police and army reinforcements were only sent to the town of Yelwa after hundreds of people had already been killed, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW, 11 May 2004). Local media reported that Yelwa residents ac-

cused the police and army of assisting the attackers, some of whom were armed with military-issue assault rifles (Vanguard, 8 May 2004).

During the violence between Muslims and Christians in the northern city of Kano, also in May 2004, police reportedly committed dozens of unlawful killings in the name of restoring law and order. According to Human Rights Watch, this followed a pattern of unlawful, arbitrary and extrajudicial killings by the police following outbreaks of communal violence in Plateau, Kaduna and other states over the previous three years (HRW, 17 May 2004). The proliferation of small arms throughout Nigeria has also contributed to the high casualty figures during attacks (AI, 11 May 2004).

In the oil-rich but impoverished Delta region, brutal repression of protests and human rights abuses against civilians by the Nigerian security forces – including “collective punishment” of entire communities – continue to be a “routine tactic”, according to Amnesty International (AI, November 2005).

Need for return and reintegration assistance

While immediate humanitarian needs in the wake of communal violence in Nigeria are often adequately addressed through a combination of national and international humanitarian actors, specialist and longer term needs tend to be neglected.

During the 2004 Plateau state crisis thousands of IDPs received emergency food aid, shelter, medical treatment and water/sanitation from a variety of sources, many of them in camps estab-

lished in neighbouring Bauchi and Nasarawa states. But once the immediate crisis died down, humanitarian assistance particularly to IDPs attempting to return to areas affected by the fighting – such as the town of Yelwa – was virtually non-existent. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was the only relief agency present in the area, providing basic health services as well as trauma counselling. Many people witnessed relatives being mutilated and killed, and hundreds of mainly women and girls were abducted. Some were raped, although this was not well documented. Many were visibly suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome (GIDPP, February 2005).

Then, less than one year later, the IDP camps were officially closed and the displaced either returned to their home areas in Plateau state or resettled with relatives – spontaneously or as part of official resettlement programmes, particularly in Bauchi state. However, reports from the town of Yelwa, which was largely destroyed in the fighting, indicated that many IDPs were returning to a dire lack of basic services and without the means to start rebuilding their homes. In many cases, incidents of vandalism, burning and looting reportedly took place several weeks after the initial violence precisely in order to deter returning IDPs. This is by no means unprecedented. During the devastating communal violence in the Plateau state capital Jos in 2001, whole villages were razed to the ground (OMCT, 2002, p19), and farmers fleeing the violence in other central region states in 2001 saw their crops ruined and other properties damaged. As part of the strategy to retaliate for the killings of soldiers in Benue state in 2001, government troops were re-

ported to have “regularly plundered” abandoned farms (HRW, April 2002, p14). In October 2002 it was reported that as many as 90 per cent of the 60,000 inhabitants of Odi town in Bayelsa state were still living in temporary structures, having found their original homes destroyed after being displaced in 1999 (OMCT, 2002, p80).

Fragmented humanitarian response

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), established in 1999, is responsible for overall disaster management in Nigeria – including the coordination of emergency relief operations as well as assisting in the rehabilitation of the victims where necessary. It has presence in most states and often supports IDPs in the emergency phase of a crisis, but it does not have the necessary resources to assist people displaced for a longer period of time, or to assist returnees to reintegrate. State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMA) also exist in some states, but with varying performance levels.

The national response is generally constrained by lack of experience in dealing with IDP issues, which has resulted in inefficiencies and support gaps to affected populations, but also by competing mandates. Confusion exists at the federal level over who has the mandate to respond to and assist IDPs – especially between NEMA and the National Commission for Refugees (NCR, informally mandated in 2002 to also cover IDPs) – which results in competition for resources.

Such tension and competition has been partly responsible for hindering the drafting of a national IDP policy, which

has been in the pipeline since the creation of the Nigerian Presidential Committee on IDPs in January 2004 (Brookings, April 2006, p13).

Coordination between the various humanitarian actors at all levels is at best inconsistent. In the wake of the 2004 Plateau state crisis, international donors criticised the overall national response on various grounds, including: a lack of coordination; the lack of a proper registration system for IDPs; inefficient use of resources despite adequate financial capacity; lack of proper planning, monitoring and evaluation; and the politicisation of humanitarian assistance. At the same time neither the UN nor international donors such as the European Commission's Humanitarian Office regarded the situation in Plateau state as a real humanitarian emergency – with major implications for response and funding. Indeed many donors see Nigeria as well endowed and able to address such situations from its own resources. There is a widely held view that the Nigerian government should focus its efforts on addressing the root causes of the problem – including the equitable distribution of resources – rather than focusing on the symptoms.

The UN system in Nigeria – headed by a Resident Coordinator who is also Resident Representative of the UN Development Programme – consists of

numerous agencies, and has since 2000 been organised around a Development Assistance Framework. So, with a firm focus on development needs, UN assistance to IDPs in Nigeria has been fairly ad hoc. The Red Cross movement as well as a few international NGOs has also been involved in IDP response, albeit in a rather uncoordinated fashion.

Indeed, the overall fragmented response to the 2004 Plateau state crisis in particular demonstrated the need for improved coordination between humanitarian actors at all stages of internal displacement from contingency planning and preparedness right through to post-emergency rehabilitation activities. Although the Nigeria government may have the financial capacity to respond to emergencies, it lacks the necessary institutional capacity and expertise to deal effectively with acute situations of internal displacement. And although the current situation of internal displacement in the country may not amount to an “emergency”, there is clearly potential for increased violence that could quickly spread and cause major population movements.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Nigeria. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

Sources:

Amnesty International (AI), 3 November 2005, Claiming rights and resources: Injustice, oil and violence in Nigeria

Amnesty International (AI), 24 January 2006, Nigeria: Making the destitute homeless – forced evictions in Makoko, Lagos State

Amnesty International (AI), 11 May 2004, Nigeria: Government must protect civilians, investigate and try the perpetrators of the recent killings in Plateau State

BBC News, 24 February 2006, Nigerian religious riots continue

BBC News, 5 May 2004, Analysis: Behind Nigeria's violence

Brookings Institution, 16 June 2006, First Regional Conference on Internal Displacement in West Africa

Global IDP Project, 31 January 2005, Internal displacement in Nigeria: a hidden crisis

Habitat International Coalition (HIC), Housing and Land Rights Network, June 2006, Abuja, Nigeria: authorities massively evict communities, rendering up to 800,000 people homeless

Human Rights Watch (HRW), February 2005, Rivers and Blood: Guns, Oil and Power in Nigeria's Rivers State

Human Rights Watch (HRW), 11 May 2004, Nigeria: Prevent further bloodshed in Plateau State

Human Rights Watch (HRW), 17 May 2004, Nigeria: Police shootings compound violence in Kano

Human Rights Watch (HRW), April 2002, Nigeria, military revenge in Benue: A Population Under Attack

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 26 June 2006, Nigeria: Worsening violence in Delta could force foreign intervention

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 30 December 2005, Nigeria: Desert's march fuels tensions

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 4 September 2006, Nigeria: Government cracks down on Biafra separatist resurgence

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 2 June 2006, Nigeria: Succession crisis looms after Obasanjo barred from new tenure

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 28 July 2006, Nigeria: Candidate for Lagos governorship murdered; violent election feared

International Crisis Group (ICG), 19 July 2006, Nigeria: Want in the midst of plenty

Nigerian Red Cross Society, 24 February 2006, Cartoon Crisis 3rd Update

Nigerian Red Cross Society, 22 February 2006, Cartoon and Religious Crisis Update (3)

Nigerian Red Cross Society, 5 July 2006, Situation Report: Bakassi population movement

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), 26 August 2002, "Hope Betrayed ? A Report on Impunity and State Sponsored Violence in Nigeria"

United Nations, 11 November 2004, Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP): Humanitarian Appeal 2005 for West Africa

Vanguard, 8 May 2004, "Yelwa: Govt beefs up security in Plateau"

Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Nigeria country page.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

Media contact:

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer

Head of Monitoring and Advocacy Department

Tel.: +41 (0)22 799 07 03

Email: jens.eschenbaecher@nrc.ch

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Ballexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701