

# Ethnic conflict escalates in Nigeria

**Barry Mason**  
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The last month has seen serious outbreaks of ethnic conflict in Nigeria. On July 18 and 19 there were clashes in Sagamu, a town 30 miles north of Lagos in the south west of Nigeria.

The southwest is the homeland of one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, the Yoruba. Fighting took place between the Yoruba and Hausa who originate from the northern region of Nigeria. The conflict seems to have been sparked off after several days of a traditional Yoruba festival, the Oro. Traditionally those not involved in the festival are requested to stay off the street. Yoruba people spoke to a BBC reporter and said that the Hausas had not respected this tradition. The Hausas said they had been attacked indiscriminately.

The killing of a Hausa woman increased the tension. According to the August 2 *South African Mail & Guardian*, 60 people were killed in the clashes and thousands of Hausas had to flee to the north. The BBC reported that several Hausa people were killed in an attack on a Mosque by Yoruba youth. They also report that there were burnt corpses in the street and buildings set on fire.

Further ethnic conflicts occurred in the northern city of Kano, a commercial centre with a population of one million, over the weekend of July 24 and 25. The attacks on the minority Yoruba were reportedly in retaliation for the attacks on Hausas, when victims of the violence in Sagamu returned home to Kano. The *South African Mail & Guardian* cites Nigerian newspaper reports claiming over 100 Yoruba were killed. Police blame the killings on the Yandaba—"the sons of evil". Until recently the Yandaba had maintained their dominance by organising the black market in fuel. Since the election of Olusegun Obasanjo as president of Nigeria, the fuel crisis has been relieved, leaving the Yandaba with no role. Ten thousand Yorubas were forced to seek refuge in army barracks

and at police headquarters.

Troops were sent in to control the riots and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew. Those wounded in the attacks overwhelmed private clinics, which surround the slum areas where the attacks took place. Most of the victims were Yoruba, but security forces killed Hausas when putting down the riot.

Renewed clashes took place in Ondo state, east of Lagos starting July 30, between the minority Ijaw and Ilaje people. There had been similar clashes between these groups in September last year when hundreds were killed. That dispute was over ownership of land reputed to be rich in oil reserves. It is thought that around 50 people died in the latest round of fighting, said to have been sparked off by Ilajes returning to land from which they had been displaced last September. Ijaws who had taken over the land refused to leave.

President Obasanjo intervened to try and diffuse the ethnic conflicts. On Monday August 9 he visited Sagamu near Lagos and on Tuesday 10 visited the northern city of Kano. He met with Hausa and Yoruba community leaders. Obasanjo claimed in Sagamu that the ethnic conflict had been instigated by opponents of the government, but did not apportion blame. The unrest has caused the government great concern. The Yoruba and Hausa are the two biggest ethnic groups and the most politically powerful. They form sizeable communities in most cities throughout Nigeria and the fear is of a more widespread ethnic conflict.

Since the election of Obasanjo in May of this year, there have been around 700 deaths as a result of ethnic conflicts. The immediate spark in the conflicts may differ, but the common theme is the enormous poverty and deteriorating social conditions.

Nigeria was brought into being under British colonial rule, when in the early 1900s Lord Lugard forged together the Moslem Northern protectorate and the Southern Christian sphere. The British encouraged

regionalism. The South was divided up into a western and eastern region. Under the governor-general Richards, a constitution was set up in 1946 that created three regional councils—one in the north, east and west provinces. The provinces, later called regions, held more devolved power following a revision of the constitution in 1951 under governor-general McPherson.

These regions reflected political divisions based on tribal allegiance. The western region was dominated by the Action Group AG (mainly Yoruba), the northern region by the Northern People's Congress NPC (mainly Hausa-Fulani) and the eastern region by the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons NCNC (mainly Igbo).

Whilst the McPherson revisions had created an all Nigerian federal government based in Lagos, it strengthened regionalism by transforming the regional councils into regional parliaments and governments. The British colonial government scrapped the McPherson constitution in 1954 and a constitution worked out by the British colonial minister Lyttleton was brought in. This gave more powers to the federal central government based in Lagos, but the regionalism legitimised by British colonial rule continued to strengthen.

In the lead up to independence, the Eastern and Western regions became self-governing states in 1957 and the North a self-governing state in 1959. Nigeria gained its independence from British rule in October 1960. The tensions between the regions did not ease following independence. The federal government based in Lagos was dominated by the NPC because, being the most populous region, its representation outnumbered the other two regional parties.

Violent strife in the Western region in 1962 followed a split in the AG party and a state of emergency was declared in the region by the federal government. Increasing dominance by the Northern NPC sparked off a further explosion in the Western region in 1965. This led to the first military intervention in 1966 and Nigeria fell under a military government led by General Yakubu Gowon. The military government attempted to defuse the regionalism, but the tensions whipped up in the North led to attacks on the minority Igbo people—who flocked to the eastern region. Civil war broke out when the Igbo leadership under Lt-Col

Emeka Ojukwu declared a separate state of Biafra. The Federal Government prosecuted the war against Biafra in which a million people died, many of starvation. By 1970, Federal Nigeria was able to overcome the Biafran separatists and Nigeria remained one country under military rule until 1979.

The role of the military throughout Nigeria's independence has been to intervene when ethnic conflicts and tensions threatened to tear it apart. Obasanjo led an army commando division in the war against Biafra and was seen as fervent nationalist. Although a Christian Yoruba from the Southwest, the Northern Muslim Hausa/Fulani military elite favoured him as president. They hope he can hold the disparate forces together.

According to a *Financial Times* article of August 3, Nigeria faces its worst economic crisis since independence. IMF officials visited Nigeria in July. Britain, the largest creditor of Nigeria, wants it to accept IMF officials monitoring the central bank in return for IMF support. Obasanjo has agreed to many of the proposals to open up the economy to the global corporations, but is resisting the imposition of the IMF team within the Central Bank.



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