

Nigerian anti-police protests continue and garner international support

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Protests are ongoing on the streets of Nigeria's major cities and through the social media #EndSARS campaign, demanding an end to police brutality.

The protests began around two weeks ago calling for the immediate disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the elite federal police unit that is routinely involved in extortion, kidnappings, grotesque abuses, and killings.

Last week, President Muhammadu Buhari was forced to announce the disbanding of the squad to be replaced by a new unit, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. He also pledged to set up panels to investigate and prosecute "unruly and unprofessional" police officers and promised wider police reforms.

Nigeria's police inspector general announced on Sunday that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) would help train Nigeria's new tactical police force. Senate President Ahmad Lawan called on protesters to call off their rallies in light of the steps Nigeria's leaders had taken.

Far from disbanding, protesters have broadened their demands, calling for an end to decades of corruption and mismanagement, with #EndBadGovernance shared by more than 1.8 million twitter users, and #BetterNigeria and #FixNigeriaNow being widely used. Supporters have launched an online radio station to bolster the movement. There have also been calls for Buhari to resign. The 77-year-old is a former general and was military head of state from 1983 to 1985 after taking power in a coup.

Last Wednesday, Nigeria's army, notorious for its human rights abuses, declared it was ready to maintain law and order and deal decisively with any situation created by "subversive elements and troublemakers."

This week, the army is to start a 10-week training exercise, "Operation Crocodile Smile," the first time the annual exercise, typically concentrated in the oil-producing Delta region, will be nationwide. An army

spokesperson made a pro forma denial that its timing had anything to do with the protests. But his statement said that this year the exercise would include a cyber warfare operation designed to identify, track and counter negative propaganda on social media. Justifying the widespread deployment of the armed forces, the statement claimed it was "aimed at identifying Boko Haram terrorists fleeing from the North East and other parts of the country as a result of the ongoing operations in the various theatres of operations, especially in the North East, North Central, and North Western parts of Nigeria."

The protests have led to escalating violence by Nigeria's security forces. The government crackdown has led to the deaths of more than a dozen people, with another two killed on Saturday when Adegboyega Oyetola, governor of Osun state, escaped what officials described as an "assassination attempt" by a group of people armed with guns and machetes. Yesterday, a 17-year-old girl, named only as Saifullah, died in police custody in northern Kano state, allegedly after torture. There was an increased military presence in Abuja, the capital, after Defence Minister Bashir Magashi warned protesters against "breaching national security." According to Amnesty International, armed thugs attacked protesters at the headquarters of the central bank in Abuja.

Despite Nigeria being the world's eighth largest oil producer and Africa's biggest oil producer, its oil wealth, upon which the country is reliant, is monopolised by the oil companies and Nigeria's kleptocrats who are seeing their revenues plummeting amid falling demand and prices. For the decades since independence from Britain in 1960, politics has been a murderous battle by different factions of the national bourgeoisie about access to oil money.

While there are around 29,500 millionaires in Nigeria, with the country's richest person, Aliko Dangote owning

\$10 billion, young Nigerians, who make up nearly half the population, confront a bleak economic future. The official rate of unemployment has surged to 27 percent, the highest in at least a decade. The latest report by the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) noted that 40 percent of the total population, or almost 83 million people, live below the country's poverty line of 137,430 naira (\$381.75) a year—likely an underestimate.

The dire social conditions are the product of colonial and neocolonial oppression by the imperialist powers on behalf of their banks and corporations, exacerbated by the venal and corrupt rule of the national bourgeoisie. Incapable of advancing the social and economic conditions of the impoverished masses since independence, Nigeria's ruling elite has proven the correctness of Trotsky's warning in his theory of permanent revolution, which insisted that the bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development could not establish genuine independence from imperialism or carry out any of the democratic tasks associated with the bourgeois revolutions of the nineteenth century. Only the working class, guided by an international perspective, could do so as a by-product of a socialist revolution that would lay the basis for creating jobs, decent wages, and access to essential social services for all.

The protests have elicited widespread support around the world from sports figures, musicians, celebrities, and other prominent figures—with the hashtags #EndSars and #SarsMustEndNow trending in multiple countries. Nigerian diaspora communities have rallied in sympathy in Atlanta, Berlin, London, and New York.

Uche, a young British worker, told the WSWS, "I visited Nigeria a few years ago to bury my Dad and visit relatives. I knew about the corruption and to take small amounts of paper dollars to get an easy ride through customs because without a bribe you can and will be delayed for hours and hours.

"When me and my Mum had passed from customs filling in the paperwork, armed soldiers stopped us. They told my Mum to move away and they asked me why I had come to Nigeria, what I had in the box (suitcases). They wanted to see my passport visa and examine my suitcases. After money was passed to one of them, they welcomed us to Nigeria and told us to go on our way.

"My first sight of SARS was walking around a street full of market shops in an area of Lagos. Then heavily armed SARS police arrived, running out of their vehicles, screaming at stallholders. They stopped at one stall and this guy passed something to one of them and then they

left him and went to other stalls. I knew that money was handed over before my cousin told me what was happening.

"I knew ahead of my visit about the corruption and SARS and they were dangerous.

"I did have first-hand contact with SARS. We were in a taxi going for a night out to a beach party on the island. The taxi was pulled over by SARS police. They ran out of their vehicle, pulled the taxi doors open, the taxi driver ran away. They were shining torches and pointing what looked like machine guns in our faces and screaming at us. They dragged us out of the taxi, threw us to the ground, prodding us, demanding to know who we were, where we were going, who we were meeting, who was the taxi driver, where we got our money from. All the time, pointing guns at our heads. My cousin did all the talking and once our money was handed over, they told us to go.

"My cousin said there was no one to complain to because complaints lead to arrest, or kidnap, or death. Unlike in the airport where the bribes were taken out of sight, the SARS didn't care who saw what they were doing.

"I saw the SARS force was hated and people feared having any contact with them. I was angry at what I saw there: people struggling to live and being terrorized by riot police who were stealing what little money people had, and nothing in the country worked properly. When my Dad was alive, he used to tell me about Nigeria, and he said the Nigeria they got was not the Nigeria the people wanted after independence.

"I really support the protests in Nigeria, and I am glad that what is happening there is being written about on the pages of the WSWS, so everyone can know how the people have been treated. I am glad they are standing up for themselves. I hope the protests work to bring a better life for Nigerians."



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