

Nigerian government unleashes massacre against police brutality protesters

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Nigeria's government has unleashed deadly violence against the anti-police brutality protests that have rocked the country for nearly two weeks. On Tuesday night, it sent in soldiers firing live ammunition to massacre peaceful protesters and quell a movement that has posed an increasingly direct challenge to the rule of the corrupt bourgeois state headed by the former general and coup leader, President Muhammadu Buhari.

Social media posts showed protesters killed and wounded in the military attack on a large crowd that had blocked the toll gates at the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge, paralyzing an expressway that links Lagos island with the Lagos mainland in Nigeria's sprawling commercial capital. While the scale of the massacre was not immediately clear, one witness reported to the BBC that he had seen at least 20 bodies and more than 50 wounded. Before the troops moved in, they cut off the lights and the CCTV camera at the toll plaza.

There were reports that troops were carrying away bodies to hide the extent of the death toll, while one medical professional reported that wounded were being evacuated from a nearby hospital for fear that the army would come to round them up and kill them.

Lagos authorities Tuesday announced the imposition of a 24-hour curfew across the city of 20 million, declaring, "We will not watch and allow anarchy in our state." Previously, the Nigerian army warned it was prepared to step in against "subversive elements and troublemakers."

Nonetheless, crowds continued to block major roads, including access to the city's international airport, while witnesses reported that a police station in the Orile Iganmu district of Lagos was set on fire on Tuesday. While the curfew was supposed to begin at 4 pm, the authorities extended the deadline to 9 pm in the face of mass defiance, which continued into the night.

What began as a movement demanding the dissolution of the hated SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad)—an elite unit of the Nigerian Police Force known for killing, torturing and extorting Nigerian civilians, particularly the country's youth—has continued to grow.

The Buhari government claimed last week that it had disbanded SARS—replacing it with a new unit, dubbed Special Weapons and Tactics, or SWAT, the same name given to elite police killing squads in the United States. The president insists that he is committed to "police reform" and that he regards the protesting youth as a father would his children. The government's vicious reaction in the streets, however, tells a very different story.

Dozens of people have lost their lives in the protests, while many more have been detained by the police. One of them, a 17-year-old girl, identified only as Saifullah, ended her life in a jail cell in the northern Kano state, reportedly tortured to death.

The government has unleashed hired gangs of thugs armed with clubs and knives against the demonstrators, severely wounding many. The police themselves have attacked protesters with tear gas, water cannon and live ammunition.

The protests demanding a halt to the operations of the SARS police date back to at least 2017, with the government repeatedly claiming that it had "reformed" the unit and the cops themselves continuing their brutality with complete impunity. According to a report issued by Amnesty International, the SARS police routinely engaged in extra-judicial killings, kidnappings, rapes and "torture including hanging, mock execution, beating, punching and kicking, burning with cigarettes, waterboarding, near-asphyxiation with plastic bags, forcing detainees to assume stressful bodily positions and sexual violence."

In addition to the deep-seated hatred of the repressive and corrupt police, Nigeria's mass protests are fueled by popular anger over conditions of mass unemployment, endemic poverty and unprecedented social inequality in Africa's largest country, with a population of 206 million. All of these longstanding conditions have been sharply exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's disastrously incompetent response, combined with its drive to reopen the economy with complete indifference to workers' lives.

According to Oxfam, Africa's three wealthiest

billionaires—Nigeria’s Aliko Dangote the richest among them—have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of Africa’s population, 650 million people across the continent. The five wealthiest Nigerians have a combined net worth of \$29.9 billion, according to the aid agency, which is enough to lift 112 million Nigerians out of poverty.

Today’s revolt in Nigeria has deep historical roots that reach back to the colonial oppression exercised by the British empire. The country’s independence was granted by the United Kingdom in 1960 under an arrangement that kept Queen Elizabeth as Nigeria’s monarch and head of state. Far from spelling the liberation of the masses of oppressed, this deal, like similar arrangements reached elsewhere on the continent, ushered in an aspiring national bourgeoisie, eager to lay hold of the existing state apparatus and forces of repression inherited from the colonialists and committed to defending the artificial borders that they created as a guarantee of their own wealth and power.

The first four decades of independence were marked by continuous military coups and bitter civil wars, including the Biafra conflict that claimed the lives of 3.5 million, most of them children who were starved to death.

The internecine struggles within the Nigerian national bourgeoisie, which continue to this day, have centered on who gets their snouts deepest into the country’s oil wealth, which accounts for 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings and 80 percent of government revenues and is largely controlled by transnational energy corporations, including Royal Dutch Shell, Agip, ExxonMobil, Total S.A. and Chevron.

The bitter experiences in Nigeria, as throughout Africa and the rest of the former colonial world, have provided confirmation in the negative of the Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated by the great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky and upheld by the Fourth International that he founded in 1938. He explained that in colonial and oppressed countries, only a fight for power by the working class can advance the struggle against imperialism and ensure genuine national liberation and democratic and social rights for workers and the oppressed masses. This revolution is permanent in that the working class, having seized power, cannot restrict itself to democratic tasks and will be compelled to carry out measures of a socialist character. At the same time, the revolution is permanent in a second sense in that it can achieve victory only to the extent that it is extended in a unified fight of the international working class for world socialist revolution.

The conditions for such an internationally unified struggle are rapidly emerging, founded objectively upon the unprecedented global integration of capitalist production and the increasingly similar conditions confronting the workers

of the world.

The emergence of simultaneous mass protests against police murders and brutality in Nigeria, the United States, Chile, Colombia and other countries provides stark confirmation that the critical issue in these struggles is class, not race, as posited by the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left satellites in the US in an attempt to divert and stifle a united movement of the working class against capitalism.

While the Nigerian protesters clearly drew inspiration from the mass, multi-racial protests that swept the US in the wake of the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, they chanted the slogan “Our Lives Matter,” speaking for working people and youth not only in Nigeria, but across the planet.

The police constitute the guardians of private ownership of the means of production and of the obscene wealth accumulated by financial and corporate oligarchs and the most privileged layers of the upper-middle class. They stand guard over the yawning chasm of social inequality dividing this ruling elite from the masses of workers and oppressed.

In every country, an end to police brutality requires a struggle against capitalism that can be waged successfully only by uniting the working class across racial, ethnic and gender lines, as well as across national borders in a common fight for socialism.

A powerful revolutionary movement of the working class is emerging not only in Nigeria but across Africa and the entire planet. The immense task of providing this movement with political and programmatic direction requires the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in every country.



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