

# Nigeria: Live ammunition fired at anti-police brutality protesters

Jean Shaoul

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Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari's security forces have used live ammunition against the nationwide anti-police brutality protesters, killing at least 56 people and injuring hundreds more across the country, according to Amnesty International.

The human rights group said, "In many cases, the security forces had used excessive force in an attempt to control or stop the protests."

Last week, Buhari called on demonstrators to go home, making no mention of the military's firing live ammunition at peaceful protesters blocking the toll gate at the Lekki-Ikoye bridge in Lagos on October 20. At least 12 people were killed, including two near the statehouse in Alhauusa, with a further 50 wounded. The protesters had been sitting down on the road, waving the Nigerian flag, and singing the national anthem.

While the military denied any involvement in the shootings, Amnesty International disputed this, saying that its investigation had tracked army vehicles leaving their Lagos barracks at Bonny Camp en route to Lekki Toll Gate using photographs and videos of the soldiers' movements culled from social media. A Lagos-based soldier, speaking anonymously to Reuters, said soldiers from the army 81st Division's 65th Battalion, based at Bonny Camp, had fired on unarmed civilians at the toll gate. Amnesty described the events as "The Lekki Toll Gate massacre".

Osai Ojigbo, Amnesty's Nigeria director said, "What happened at Lekki Toll Gate has all the traits of the Nigerian authorities' pattern of a cover-up."

Buhari called for an end to the demonstrations, warning Nigerians against "undermining national security" and urging them to "resist the temptation of being used by subversive elements to cause chaos."

He heightened tensions on Friday by claiming security forces have exercised "extreme restraint" in handling the situation, even as he was forced to concede that 51

civilians had been killed, along with 11 police officers and seven soldiers, since the protests began. A statement from his office the following day blamed the deaths and injuries on the "hooliganism" of the past weeks.

For four weeks, protests have raged nationwide against Buhari's government that, like its predecessors, is a cabal of billionaire kleptocrats sitting atop the country's vast oil wealth, none of which percolates down to the Nigerian people. Nearly half the 206 million population live on less than \$1.50 a day and around one third are unemployed. The lockdowns imposed to curb the spread of the pandemic have created widespread hunger and destitution.

Buhari, the 77-year-old former general and military head of state from 1983 to 1985, who was elected in 2015, has remained largely invisible and impervious to the obvious plight of the vast majority of Nigerians during the most serious political crisis since the 1999 return to civilian rule. Mindful of the Nigerian army's role in organising countless coups, he is doubtless watching his back.

The protests—under the hashtag #EndSARS—in Africa's largest economy and most populous country started after a video clip went viral of the killing of a young man by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS is an elite police unit notorious for the kidnapping, extortion, torture and killing of young people. Uniting Nigeria's youth—the median age of the 200 million strong population is 19—across ethnicities, tribal groups, and religions, they gathered support from the Nigerian diaspora throughout the world.

The government's pledge to replace SARS with a new unit, the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), only inflamed the protests. They encompassed opposition to the widespread brutality of the police and security forces—the worst in the world according to International Political Science Association's World Internal Security and Police Index—rampant corruption, banditry and

organised crime syndicates and the government's economic mismanagement and handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite curfews imposed in at least 10 of Nigeria's 36 states, protests—albeit smaller—have continued. Crowds set fire to police stations, banks, TV and media buildings and government offices and looted shopping malls and government food warehouses storing food.

There had been widespread accusations of the federal government misappropriating pandemic relief funds, with little distributed during the months of lockdown that stopped millions of people from earning their living. While the authorities denied that they were hoarding food to share with their family and friends, the BBC reported that some of the COVID-19 aid has been found in politicians' homes. One politician, whose house was raided in Lagos state, claimed that he intended to share the items on his birthday—two days after his home was looted.

Video clips showed people carting away bags of rice, noodles and sugar among other items, with reports that people had died as they crowded into the warehouses or in some instances were crushed under the weight of the 50kg bags of food. Some videos showed looters handing out items to beggars, the aged and disabled people, who could not join in the raids.

In some cases, the looters were not the protesters, but were the government's armed thugs hired to disrupt the demonstrations, causing the death of some and injuring others and acting in cahoots with the police, who looked away. In one video posted online, "looters" were seen negotiating with armed military, while in the capital Abuja, security men were seen joining in the looting.

There has been no let-up in the suppression of the anti-police brutality movement as tensions remain high across the country. On Saturday, Nigeria's police chief ordered the immediate deployment of the entire force in a bid to suppress the protest movement, with extra police and resources mobilised throughout the country. Lagos state's police chief Mohammed Abubakar Adamu said, "Enough is enough to all acts of lawlessness, disruption of public peace and order and wanton violence," adding that the police would "use all legitimate means to halt the further slide into lawlessness and brigandage."

This was an all-out declaration of class war against workers and youth faced with social misery and hunger in the interests of Nigeria's sated financial elite.

The authorities are reportedly considering some form of clampdown on social media following the worldwide

spread of images, videos, and an Instagram live feed of the deadly shootings at the Lekki toll gate on October 20. Information Minister Lai Mohammed said that "fake news" was one of the biggest challenges facing Nigeria and that "the use of the social media to spread fake news and disinformation means there is the need to do something about it."

The broad based protests demonstrate that the social and class questions in Nigeria, as elsewhere, outweigh the regional, religious and ethnic divides in the country that successive governments have manipulated to divert mass social unrest and defend the monopoly of wealth and power exercised by a narrow wealthy layer.

This financial elite, whose figurehead is the aging and ailing Buhari, is completely dependent upon foreign capital and incapable of implementing even limited measures to raise the living standards of the population. Buhari's government presides over a militarised state serving the interests of US and European banks and transnational energy corporations, including Royal Dutch Shell, Agip, ExxonMobil, Total S.A. and Chevron, that has demonstrated its willingness to employ mass repression against the working class.

These conditions, 60 years after Nigeria—an artificial construct of the British Empire—obtained formal independence amid hopes of economic development and democracy, are replicated across the continent and in the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. They are testimony to the inability of the national bourgeoisie in the epoch of imperialism to satisfy the most basic needs of the working class and peasant farmers.

Only the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist perspective, can carry out the fight for democracy and equality.



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