

the streets. United across ethnicities, tribal groups, and religions, they attracted 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. Last month, it emerged—after initial denials—that the UK, the former colonial power whose Shell Oil company has major investments in the Niger Delta, had in 2019 provided training and equipment for Nigeria's police and security forces, widely recognized as one of the worst in the world. The program was organized through the Foreign Office's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), whose funding comes from the Department for International Development's so-called "aid" budget.

What began as an outcry against the widespread brutality of the police and security forces soon turned into a mass protest against rampant corruption, banditry, organised crime syndicates and the government's economic mismanagement and mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic.

The military's firing of live ammunition at peaceful protesters blocking the toll gate at the Lekki-Ikoye bridge in Lagos on October 20, killing at least 12 people and wounding 50, further inflamed tensions. The protesters had been sitting down on the road, waving the Nigerian flag, and singing the national anthem.

The protests continued in defiance of curfews, with crowds setting fire to police stations, banks, TV and media buildings and government offices. Shopping malls and government food warehouses storing food were looted amid widespread accusations that federal government officials had misappropriated pandemic relief funds and were hoarding food for their families and friends.

The authorities have announced their intention of introducing some form of censorship of social media following the worldwide spread of images, videos, and an Instagram live feed of the deadly shootings at the Lekki toll gate. 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."

Mohammed has also threatened to sanction CNN, the US cable news network, over its investigative report into the shooting of protesters by soldiers at the Lekki Tollgate, Lagos, accusing the network of disseminating false news and disinformation. He denied that the soldiers

had fired at the protesters, contradicting a previous statement denying the soldiers' presence at the tollgate. While he did not specify what action the government would take, his silence was assumed to mean that the government would revoke CNN's broadcasting license, sparking outrage across the country.

CNN defended its reporting, saying it was carefully and meticulously researched and based on statements from dozens of witnesses and verified footage of soldiers shooting in the direction of protesters.

These measures signal that Nigeria's ruling elite will use every possible means to silence and suppress workers and youth who face social misery and hunger as food prices soar. The official rate of unemployment is 27 percent, amid falling oil revenues and the pandemic-induced recession. Major food items cost significantly more than a few months ago, with a 50kg bag of rice that used to cost ₦26,000 now costing ₦32,000 and onions quadrupling in price, which the government has blamed on the protests and looting. At the same time, the government has increased the price of fuel and electricity, even as power cuts are the norm not the exception.

Average annual income is just \$2,000 in this oil rich country. Public education, with high user co-payments, is in an appalling state. Health care is virtually non-existent as the COVID-19 pandemic grows and yellow fever has made a comeback, with more than 70 people dying of the disease since September, compared to 47 throughout the whole of 2019.

Similar conditions of poverty and police brutality are replicated across the continent, with protest hashtags trending in at least seven countries, including Congo, Zimbabwe and Namibia, prompting the hashtag **#AfricaIsBleeding**. The sheer scale of the continent's young population—some 20 percent of Africans are between the ages of 15 and 24, few with any realistic prospect of a secure job and a decent future—testifies to the powder keg that is Africa.



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