

Nigeria's President Buhari clampdown on reporting of "security issues" amid mounting turmoil

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Nigeria's National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has ordered TV stations to refrain from "giving details of either the security issues or victims of these security challenges", and "collaborate with the government in dealing with the security challenges" by withholding information about kidnapping incidents.

This latest media clampdown, ostensibly aimed at the reporting of the wave of kidnappings and banditry sweeping Nigeria's northern provinces, is part of a broader effort by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari to keep a lid on the social tinderbox that is Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy. It comes amid mounting turmoil across the country as devastating poverty and the economic fallout from pandemic, including its impact on oil prices on which Nigeria depends, threaten the breakup of the state.

The federal government in Abuja has been waging war against an Islamist insurgency in the North East for years, while North West and Central Nigeria have witnessed a wave of kidnappings as armed gangs raided schools and students for ransom and gangs of cattle thieves and kidnapers raided villages, killing and kidnapping residents, looting, burning homes and stealing livestock. Ransom demands have forced many families and even entire communities to sell property and take on debt.

Earlier this week, the authorities in the northwestern state of Zamfara announced they had secured the release of 100 villagers kidnapped in early June following negotiations with their abductors, apparently without paying a ransom. It follows the abduction of more than 300 boys from a school in Katsina in December and another of hundreds of schoolgirls in Zamfara in February. While they were later released without a ransom, according to the government, three of the 23

students abducted from Greenfield University in Kaduna in April were found shot dead. The kidnappings have forced hundreds of schools to close.

Nearly 1,100 people were abducted last year, more than twice the number kidnapped by the Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram in 2014, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. In the northwest, escalating violence killed 2,690 civilians in 2020, nearly as many as the 3,044 killed in the northeastern Borno State, once Boko Haram's stronghold, leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Attacks on villages and livestock in northern Nigeria have been attributed to clashes between Hausa farmers and Fulani herders, as the nomadic pastoralists as they encroached on farmland as climate change forced them to move from their traditional pastureland, triggering ethnic massacres and kidnappings.

Banditry, abductions and ethnic tensions have escalated as social conditions have deteriorated amid two recessions in six years. Well over half of Nigeria's 15 to 25-year-olds, in a country where young people form 125 million of the 210 million population, are officially without work, leaving them to seek casual work if they can find it or hawk on the streets.

The federal government has deployed the airforce to attack bandit camps with daily and nightly flights over Zamfara, Kaduna and Katsina states. Buhari has ordered security forces to "shoot any person or persons seen carrying AK-47s in any forest in the country" and banned all mining activities in Zamfara, where the illegal hunt for gold is fueling the crisis. According to the United Nations, 279,000 people were displaced in the northern states of Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina by the end of 2020, with nearly 2.6 million people across the three states facing

food insecurity in 2021. Zamfara's provincial governor has ordered 6,000 troops to root out bandits from their camps in the vast Rugu forest spanning northern Nigeria and parts of neighbouring Niger.

None of this has succeeded in quelling the violence. The security forces' brutality and corruption have only served to exacerbate hostility to the federal and state political and economic elites. On Monday, a gang ambushed and killed 13 policemen in Zamfara state who were protecting a village from imminent attack. On Sunday, bandits brought down a Nigerian fighter jet in the northwestern state. The pilot was able to eject from the aircraft and flee to safety.

In June, Buhari's ruling All Progressives Congress party proposed two new laws that would allow the government to change the code of conduct for the country's media organisations and prosecute, fine and imprison journalists for publishing "fake news" and other breaches.

Days earlier, Buhari, the 78-year-old former general and military head of state from 1983 to 1985 who was elected president in 2015, had banned Twitter, which is used by 40 million Nigerians. He claimed the platform was being used to destabilise Nigeria after it removed one of his posts threatening to treat armed Biafran militants in a "language they understood" and referring to the bitter 1967-70 Biafran civil war, one of the bloodiest post-independence conflicts in Africa in which he served as a brigadier commander.

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Biafran separatists in the southeast have been blamed for a surge in attacks and the killing of dozens of police officers. Two weeks ago, the Nigerian authorities arrested Nnamdi Kanu, a British-Nigerian citizen and Biafra separatist leader. He was arrested in Kenya and taken to Nigeria. Armed separatism has been on the rise in Biafra after security forces used lethal force to suppress mass protests that began in 2015, killing at least 150 people at pro-Biafra rallies between August 2015 and August 2016 according to Amnesty International.

Social media networks will be required to register with Nigeria's regulators and have offices in the country. It follows the widespread use of Twitter and other social media networks to organise mass anti-government #EndSARS protests against the brutal Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The #EndSARS protests erupted last October, morphing into the largest anti-government rallies in Nigeria's modern history.

Information Minister Lai Mohammed has also accused

Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey, who also founded Square and Cash App, two payment processing platforms with interests in cryptocurrencies—especially Bitcoin—of raising funds through Bitcoin to sponsor one of the protest groups. In February, the central bank placed restrictions on the use of cryptocurrencies, estimated at \$400 million and the largest in Africa, banning financial institutions from dealing in them.

The growing adoption of digital currencies as a means of circumventing Nigeria's plummeting currency and soaring inflation is viewed as a threat to the government's control of the economy on behalf of the country's venal elite.

Last month, police used tear gas to disperse anti-government protesters in Lagos and Abuja with reports of arrests and injuries, with smaller protests in southwestern Nigeria in the cities of Ibadan, Osogbo, Abeokuta and Akure. These were the first to take place since last year's #EndSARS movement. Activists had called for nationwide anti-government protests on Democracy Day—named after the transition to civilian rule in 1999—over poor governance, the lack of security and the recent Twitter ban. In Lagos, protesters carried banners and placards saying "Buhari Must Go" and called for reforms. Despite the march being peaceful, police started firing tear gas at protesters and journalists to disperse the crowds, later firing live rounds in the air.

As elsewhere across Africa, an end to the state violence, repression and mismanagement imposed to protect the wealth of a tiny layer at the expense of the majority of the population requires a struggle against capitalism. It can only be waged successfully by uniting the working class across racial, ethnic and gender lines, as well as across the arbitrary national borders imposed by the former colonial powers, in a common struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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