

illegal guns flooding nigeria, fuelling violence

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Cattle-rustlers, armed robbers, cults and

even the deadly Boko Haram carry out violence with illegal arms, which they seem to have an unending supply of. How do these guns find their way into Nigeria? Daily Trust takes a look.

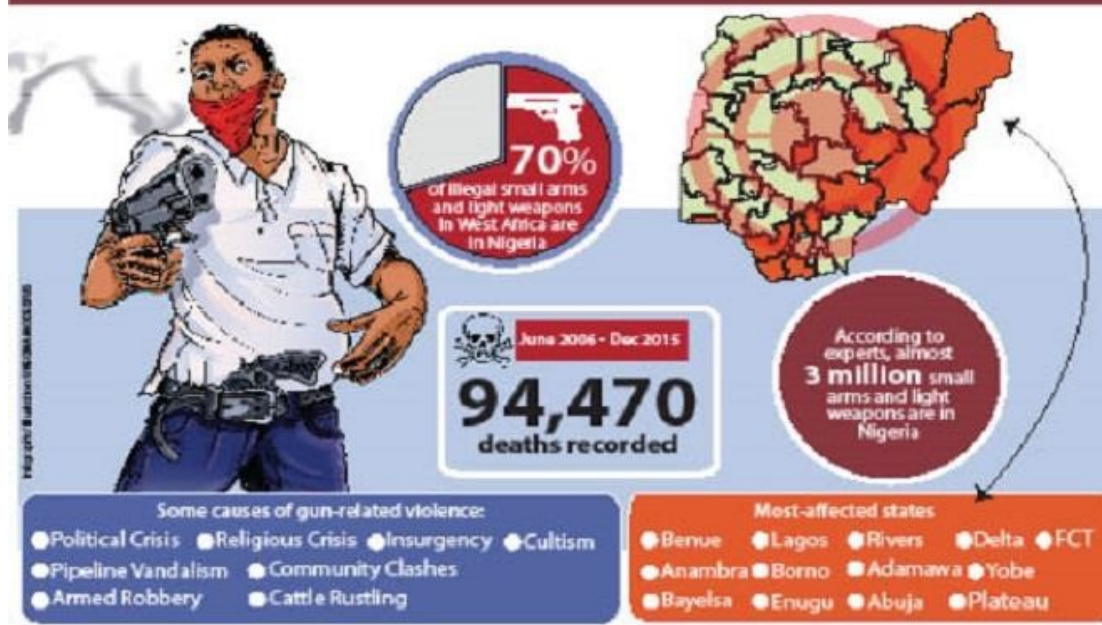
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In the last 10 years, the number of deaths as a result of violence in different parts of Nigeria has been spiking steadily. The fifth report of the Nigeria Watch Project released early this year indicates that between June 2006 and December 2015, a total of 94,470 deaths were recorded from fatal violence across the country. The country attained the climax in terms of number of deaths recorded from violence in the last 10 years in 2014 and 2015, accounting for 24 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively, of the total deaths recorded during the period.

The report, based on the findings of a study conducted by a lecturer from the University of Ibadan, Dr. Timothy Adeola Adams, revealed that the top three causes of the violent deaths were political crises, religious crises and crime, with Boko Haram accounting for most of the fatalities in 2015. Since the beginning of 2016, Nigeria has seen an upsurge in violent clashes across Lagos, Abuja, Benue, Port Harcourt and more.

The South-East has also witnessed violence from the Biafra agitation and crimes, while pockets of attacks had been carried out by Boko Haram in some parts of the North-East. Some days ago, scores of people were killed and many injured as an ethnically-tinged clash erupted at the popular Mile 12 Market in Lagos, a few days after traders and Okada riders locked horns at Apo in Abuja over the alleged killing of a trader.

Also, many people died as a result of recent clashes between Agatu farmers and herdsmen in Benue State, a development that generated widespread condemnation both within and outside Nigeria.

There is an existing consensus that the proliferation of small arms and light weapons

(SALW) across the world in general, and Nigeria in particular, fuels violence with the attendant human and material loss.

A 2015 resolution of the United Nations Security Council noted concern that “illicit transfer, destabilising accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons in many regions of the world continue to pose threats to international peace and security, cause significant loss of life, and contribute to instability and insecurity.”

There are no up-to-date and accurate data on the quantity of illicit firearms in circulation in Nigeria as the nation’s apex statistical body, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), has no record of small arms and light weapons being used legally or illicitly.

The Small Arms Survey reported that as at 2007, the number of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria were estimated at between 1 and 3 million. The estimation points to the obvious dearth of reliable data on the problem considering that the Boko Haram insurgency that broke out in full force in 2009 may have increased the quantity of illegal firearms in circulation.

A research fellow at the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, Helen Chuma-Okoro, stated in her publication on the proliferation of firearms in Nigeria that reportedly 80 per cent of weapons in civilian possession are illegally acquired because of strict regulations.

Chuma-Okoro noted that the regulations on possession of firearms in Nigeria are strict in the sense that they make it difficult to obtain firearms lawfully but they are not effectively implemented and the processes are easily circumvented due to institutional deficiencies.

“This gives rise to the conclusion that a large percentage - if not majority - of the small arms in circulation in Nigeria are illicit. The outdated state of the data creates the possibility that these figures are understated,” she stated.

How these illegal guns flood Nigeria and end up in the hands of unauthorised persons is becoming increasingly disturbing. Recently, the Police nabbed a vigilante commander in Adamawa State, Young Maurice, for allegedly selling guns and ammunition to criminals. A major concern has been the revelation that he ran an inter-state network of gun runners with his accomplice, a lady, arrested in Taraba State.

Nigeria is a destination and a hub of illicit trade in firearms in Africa, largely due to her porous borders. Geographically, it is among the countries in the world with the highest amount of porous borders and they serve as either unchecked or grossly unmanned entry points for illicit guns into the country.

An IRIN report told the story of a blacksmith called Sarpong who operates a small shop in Ghana’s second largest city, Kumasi. While he is trained to produce cooking utensils, he prefers to make guns as he can earn more money that way. When sales are good, he said, his shop brings in about a thousand dollars weekly, he said. “Foreigners pay better than Ghanaians,” he added, “Most of my buyers are from Nigeria or Sierra Leone and I can make an AK for you if you have the money.”

Nigeria has 770 kilometres of shared land border with the Republic of Benin, around 1,500 kilometres with the Republic of the Niger, 1,700 kilometres with Cameroon, 90 kilometres with Chad and 850 kilometres of maritime border in the Atlantic Ocean.

Recently, the Comptroller-General of Customs, retired Colonel Hameed Ali sought the support of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) to curb the influx of small firearms across the over 4,000 kilometre borders of Nigeria. Disturbingly, most firearms used in the Libyan war and the Arab Spring found their way into Nigeria through these porous borders. Another dimension to the problem is local manufacture, as a large number of illicit guns are produced in Nigeria by gunsmiths and sold to persons without license. Recently, the

Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons, (PRESCOM) revealed that about 60 per cent of the illegal arms in the South-East zone are produced locally. At a forum in Enugu, the South-East coordinator on House Survey of the Committee, Professor Aloysius Okolie, said: "Some communities are known for their fabrication of arms."

Professor Okolie disclosed that 40 per cent of the illicit arms are imported by politicians and the remaining 60 fabricated within the zone.

Over the years, Nigeria has initiated measures to check firearm proliferation. The Firearms Act of 1959 (amended) spelt out prohibitions on use, exemptions, licensing before possession, manufacture and sales of firearms, including punishment for offenders. There are also laws against robbery and use of firearms for the same purpose as well as committees to check proliferations.

A communication and criminology expert, who is also the Director of the Remedial Acts Programme of the University of Maiduguri, Professor Abubakar Mu'azu, said Nigeria's borders are "very porous" and the current 20,000 customs personnel in the country inadequate to police them.

"The border between Nigeria and Cameroon stretches to about 1,800 kilometres, from Maiduguri to Sokoto area about 1,240 kilometres and then from Sokoto to Benin is a very long stretch," Mu'azu said. The University don established a link between the crises in some neighbouring countries with the proliferation of unlicensed weapons in the country.

"There was instability in Chad, and their rebels have links to Borno State and some of them might have smuggled some of the weapons that they were using to Nigeria," Mu'azu said, observing that the terrain of some of the border areas can be difficult and required a good grasp to actually manoeuvre and bring in these small arms and light weapons, 70 per cent of which are in West Africa. "Close to 70 per cent, however, are in Nigeria," he said. Mu'azu added that at a point, cases of armed robbery in the North-East prior to Boko Haram insurgency, was on the rise. "That was in the 90s, operated with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons," he said. On other possible sources of the firearms in circulation, he said, "You have to consider the fact that people are illegally producing these weapons, locally. Some of them appear crude, but notwithstanding are deadly." He related it to negligence on the part of government.

On the solution, he advised relevant authorities to issue out an order requesting people who have illegal weapons to surrender them to the police within a given period. "If they fail to do that, I believe the intelligence services know the strategic areas where these firearms are concentrated. So, they can organise raids into those areas," he said, while recommending the use of drones for policing porous borders. "Some form of reorientation or sensitisation is required for the security personnel because there are some among them who connive with criminals to import weapons," he concluded.