

Communal Conflicts in Benue and the Herdsmen Conundrums

Sam Olatunji Ajiye

LL.B., B.L., LL.M., Rotary Peace Center, Chulalongkorn
University, Bangkok, Thailand.

ABSTRACT

The communal conflict between the nomadic herdsmen from northern Nigeria and the agrarian communities of Benue has escalated in recent times and is spreading across boundaries, threatening the country's security and stability. The activities of the Fulani herdsmen started surreptitiously in Benue State over two decades ago. Approximately 2,500 people lost their lives in 2016 because successive governments neglected the conflict and its victims, and where action was taken, it was insufficient. Consequently, the continual mayhem unleashed by the herdsmen signifies persecution because it was targeted at a particular religious group, and the destruction of their worship centers. Also, the continual violence and the lukewarm attitude of the central government is suggestive of a deliberate agenda, championed by the Fulani herdsmen, to occupy an area considered as being dominated by one ethno-religious group. Familiar problems – relating to land and water use, obstruction of traditional migration routes, livestock theft and crop damage – tend to trigger these disputes. But their roots run deeper. Drought and desertification have degraded pastures, dried up many natural water sources across Nigeria's far-northern Sahelian belt and forced large numbers of herders to migrate south in search of grassland and water for their herds. Herders migrating into the savannah and rain forests of the north central states are moving into regions where high population growth over the last four decades has heightened pressure on farmland, increasing the frequency of disputes over crop damage, water pollution and cattle rustling. In the absence of mutually accepted mediation mechanisms, these disagreements increasingly turn violent. Majority of Christian communities resent the influx of predominantly Muslim herders, portrayed in some narratives as an "Islamization force". Herders are predominantly Fulani, lending an ethnic dimension to strife. This research provides an analysis of the violent conflict in Benue state where most of the victims are Christians. The study critically examines the root causes of the conflict taking into account the nature of abuse targeted at women and children. The research adopted the use of Timeline as analytical tool and concludes that the Fulanis are psychologically conditioned through a cultural practice of revenge. Hence, the urgent need for cultural de-radicalizations and mind healing of the herders, amongst other recommendations.

Keywords: Nigeria, Benue, Communal Conflicts, Fulani, Herdsmen, Peace.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Initially, the region was called Munshi province by the British until it was renamed in 1918 after its dominant geographical feature, the river Benue, and the name Benue was officially adopted (Benue News Online: 2016). Benue became part of the Northern Province in the 3 region structure of 1954. After independence in 1960, the military coups of January and July 1966 (Lukman: 1971) led to the civil war that lasted from 1967-1970 (Nnoli: 1995). The administration of General Yakubu Gowon dismantled the 3 regions established by the colonial administration and created 12 states of the 3 regions, one of which was the Benue-Plateau State. As an administrative unit, Benue State was created on 3 February 1976. It was one of the seven states created by the military administration of late General Murtala Mohammed, which increased the number of states in the country from 13 to 19. Today, Benue State is made up of a

total of 23 Local Government Areas (LGAs) as indicated in the Table “B” below. Table “A” shows the map of Nigeria with the six(6) geo-political zones.



Table “A”



Table “B”

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Fulani herdsmen

The Fulani, also called Peul or Fulbe are people of obscure origins, expanded eastward from Futa Toro in Lower Senegal in the 14th Century. By the 16th Century they had established themselves at Macina (upstream from the Niger Bend) and were proceeding eastward into Hausa land. Some settled in the 19th century at Adamawa (in the northern Cameroons). Many of the Fulani continued to pursue a pastoral life. Some, however, particularly in Hausa land, gave up their nomadic pursuits, settled into existing urban communities, and were converted to Islam (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012a). A primarily Muslim people scattered throughout many parts of West Africa, from Lake Chad, in the east, to the Atlantic coast. They are concentrated principally in Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, Senegal, and Niger. The Fulani language, known as Fula, is classified within the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Encyclopedia Britannica 2012b). Table “C” below shows a Fulani Herdsmen with his automatic rifle; Table “D” shows the herdsman on the highway with his cattle obstructing the road while his weapon is tied on his cattle. Table “C” represents an artistic sketch of violent clash while Table “E” depicts the herdsmen invasion of major urban city with their cattle causing commotion.

Table “C”

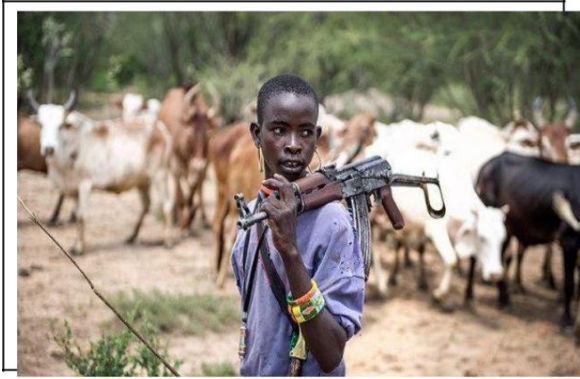


Table “D”

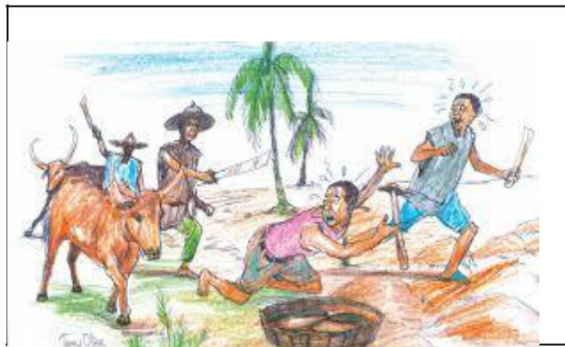


Table “E”

Table “F”

Communal Conflicts

The concept of communal conflict has many definitions and conceptualizations. According to Horowitz (2000) communal conflicts is the situation where by violence is perpetrated across ethnic lines and victims are based on ethnic group membership. This typically takes form of mutual aggression in which members of all ethnic groups perpetrate violence and also serve as victims. In this definition seem to conceptualize the concept in relation to violence existing between hostile ethnic groups. To Tadjoeeddin (2002) communal conflicts could be seen as violence that occurs between different communal groups in community based on religion, tribe, sect, race and others. In this broad conceptualization, Varshney (2002) noted that all communal conflicts appear to be based on ascribed group identities including race, language, religion, tribe or caste. According to this understanding, communal conflicts may range from Muslim-Christian violence, Black and White conflicts in United States, Apartheid in South Africa, Anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia, Shia-Sunni tensions in Pakistan (Varshney, 2002).

In the opinion of Kahl (2006) the concept refers to violence that involves groups with permanent or semi-permanent armed militias which are not directly linked to the government. However, communal violence can often escalate to include government forces when it is perceived that government is supporting secretly or otherwise of the communal groups at the expense of the other. Raleigh and Kniveton (2010) also conceptualized communal conflicts as a form of organized violence conducted between traditional hostile parties using informal ethnic militias. These conflicts are rooted in ethnic competition, resource access and wealth acquisition. The violence can take various forms including pitched battles and attacks.

Farmers

This refers to who cultivates land or crops. A farmer (also called an agriculturist) is a person engaged in agriculture raising living organisms for food or raw materials. The term usually applies to people who do some combination of raising field crops, orchards, vineyards, poultry

or other livestock (Dyer, 2007). The word 'farmer' was originally used to describe a tenant paying a leasehold rent (a farm), often for holding a lord's manorial demesne (Dyer, 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MARXIST THEORY

Marxist theory originates from Karl Marx and Fredreich Engels (1963). The central argument of the theory is that society is composed of inherent contradictions and conflicts over economic resources which are scarce by various competing groups. The competition and struggle for economic resources have made conflict inevitable in society. Thus, conflict is seen as a normal happening in society rather than an abnormal occurrence. Marx emphasizes that economic interest rather than norms and values are central in the analysis of conflicts in society. The three levels of the theory are:

1. Society is composed of different groups that compete for economic resources;
2. There is continuous struggle for economic resources for social groups as they pursue their own Interest; and
3. Social groups will use resources to their own advantage in pursuit of the economic interest.

Thus, crop farmers and cattle herder's conflicts could be viewed from the perspective of struggle for scarce economic resources which happens to be land. Land has become a scarce economic resource which both the crop farmers and cattle herders scramble for control. Land as a resource is fixed but is subjected to deterioration and degradation due to desertification and climatic changes in recent times. As such, cattle herders in the north are compelled to leave their area and compete with crop farmers in other central Nigeria (Benue) for land which is also degrading but indispensable for crop production. The resulting competition for the land for grazing and crop production leads to communal conflicts between the herders and crop farmers (Manu et al., 2014).

However, there are three primary criticisms of conflict theory. In the first place, conflict theory tends to ignore the many areas in which most people arrive at the same consensus about important values of life. Both the rich and the poor usually tend to admire hard-working, courteous people. Secondly, conflict theorists tend to support the people that lack social power. Critics say that this violates scientific objectivity. Finally, the focus on economic factors is the sole criteria for all conflict in society. However, most conflict theorists today take into account gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and other factors that lead to conflict.

Drivers of the Conflicts

For centuries, pastoralists drove their cattle east and west across the Sahel, the semi-arid zone south of the Sahara Desert that includes Nigeria's far northern belt. In the early 20th century, some herders started shifting their migratory routes farther south, pushed by a series of droughts in the far north, but also attracted by heightened security in central and southern Nigeria and by better control of parasitic diseases such as *trypanosomiasis* or sleeping sickness in the central and southern zones (Blench, 1994) Herders also wanted to evade the much-hated cattle tax (*jangali*) imposed by the British colonial government in the northern region (Crisis Group Interview, 2016). Among the principal causes and aggravating factors behind this escalating conflicts are climatic change (frequent droughts and desertification); population growth (loss of northern grazing lands to the expansion of human settlements); technological and economic changes (new livestock and farming practices); crime (rural banditry and cattle rustling); political and ethnic strife (intensified by the spread of illicit firearms); and cultural changes (the collapse of traditional conflict management mechanisms). A dysfunctional legal regime that allows crime to go unpunished has encouraged both farmers and pastoralists to take matters into their own hands.

Root Cause of Conflict

To understand the root cause of any conflict with the Fulani, you need an insight into the psycho-cultural background of the Fulani Herdsmen. In an interview with Saleh Bayeri, the Secretary General of Gan Allah Fulani Development Association of Nigeria (GAFDAN), an association in the defense of Fulani, a duly registered Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in January 2016 (*The Nation Newspaper*, 2016). According to him, the GAFDAN represents the interest of every Fulani's sons and daughters from every professional field including those breeding cattle. He further cleared the doubts on the non-forgiving spirit of the Fulani. According to him:

*This is the nature of the Fulani man; the Fulani herdsmen have this instinct of wanting to take revenge. It is in their nature. It is inherent, and in his blood even from his traditional activities. There is a Fulani cultural activity where if you are defeated today, you will be given six months to prepare and take on the person that defeats you. When you return after six months with your own tactics and you strike the other person to death, you will be crowned a hero and be given four wives as price of bravery and power as a man (*Nation Newspaper*, 2016).*

It shows that the Fulani herdsmen gained their lack of conflict understanding and management from their traditional activities which always promised them a reward of four wives for every vengeance successfully carried out. Bayeri who tried to deny his awareness of why Fulani herdsmen struck in Benue State, when he was asked: "Can you tell us what happened in the case of attack on Agatu people of Benue State? He concluded his response thus:

*When you hear that Fulani herdsmen attacked a community, just ask that community if there was no any clash say 10,15years ago. You will find out that one or two leaders of the Fulani might have been killed there...if they kill our one, we kill their 10. (*Ibid.p.9*).*

It was rather not surprising to hear Bayeri on a Nigerian online Newspaper, saying the February 2016 bloody attack in Benue was a reprisal attack by his people against the Agatus who he accused of killing in 2013, a prominent Fulani man (*Premium Times*, May 12, 2016). The herdsmen/farmers clashes have attracted international attention. Human Rights Watch (HRW) in December 2013 said the clashes in central Nigeria had killed over 3,000 people since 2010, accusing Nigerian authorities of ignoring the violence. According to official figures, more than 35 per cent of the land area of 923,768 square kilometers is threatened by desertification affecting the livelihoods of more than 40 million people (Eromo, 2016). In recent times, this ongoing tension in Nigeria has witnessed dramatic escalation to include attacks, kidnappings and killings by the nomads. To this extent the global index (2015) had ranked the Fulani herdsmen as one of the five deadliest terrorist groups in recent times.

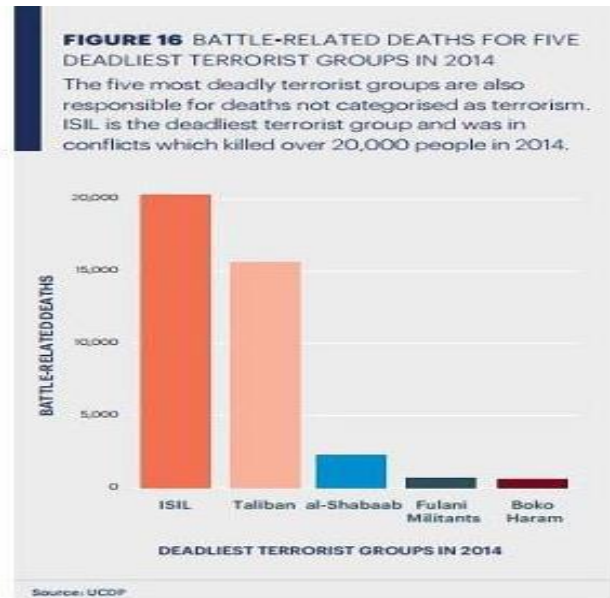
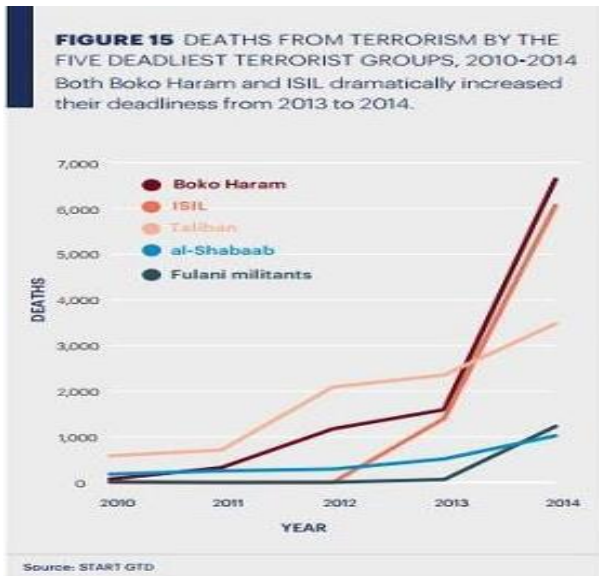


Table “G”: Fulani Militancy growth Rate Source: Global Misery Index 2015

From the Table above, the Global Terrorism Index of 2015 states that over 90 percent of the attacks carried out by the group are on private citizens, accounting for 81 percent of deaths in the area. And these attacks have mainly been through armed assaults, killing an average of 11 people per attack. The Fulani militants are ranked just after the al-Shabaab in terrorist attacks.

Efforts at Conflict Resolution

In 2017, the government of Benue came up with a bill to prohibit open grazing in Benue State. The bill was subjected to public scrutiny and inputs by the people through public hearings and debates from stakeholders across the state, including herdsmen. It was passed and signed into law in May, 2017 though a six month window period was allowed for sensitization and advocacy before the law came into full effect on November 1, 2017. Though, before the law came into effect, the *Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore*, the national association of the herders had registered its opposition against the law, insisting that it was intended to frustrate the trade of herdsmen in the state. The group was alleged to have threatened to resist the law and invade Benue to express its resentment and even went as far as dragging the state government to court over the matter. Bothered by the threat, the Benue government appealed to the Federal Government to arrest the leaders of the group and prosecute them. (Vanguard, January 2018).

However, the Anti-Open Grazing Law recorded a huge success as a Makurdi Magistrates’ Court on Friday sentenced three herdsmen, Iliya Garba, Hassan Abdullahi, and Lanshak Lonfalk, to one year imprisonment each, for violating the law, offences which are punishable under Sections 97 of the Penal Code and 19 (2) of the Open Grazing Prohibition Ranches Establishment Law of Benue, 2017. The Prosecutor, Insp. Michael Iorundu, told the Court that the joint patrol team of ‘Operation Zenda,’ led by Sgt. Edward Shinyi, arrested the herdsmen on Feb. 18 2018. The three herdsmen and others at large, were openly grazing their cattle along Yeluwata Road in Guma Local Government Area of Benue. The Magistrate, Hon. Lillian Tumba pointed out that the herdsmen were first offenders who were though illiterates, not aware of the law, but ignorance of the Law is not an excuse. The magistrate sentenced the herdsmen to a year imprisonment each, with N500, 000:00 option of fine each.

Timeline

Presentation of Data

The data below shows the timeline of Fulani herdsmen and farmers attacks in Benue State 2013 - 2018.

Note: "LGA" is the acronym for Local Government Area, the 3rd Tier of Nigerian government:



Table I



Table II



Table II



Table IV



Table V

Timeline of Benue State attacks in 2017



Table VI

Timeline of Benue State attacks in 2018

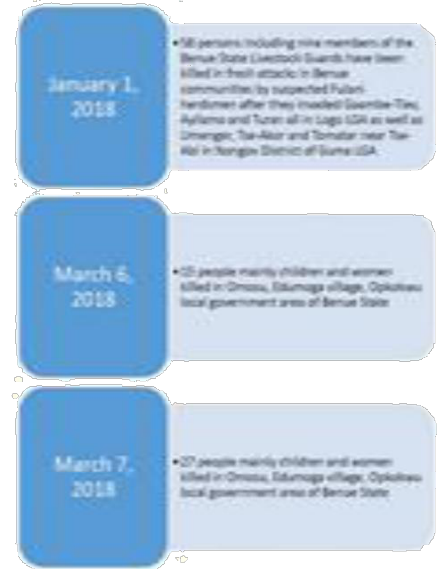


Table VII

Data on Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers Attack in Benue 2013-2018

Period/Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Net Death
January-April	50	252	144	10	32	90	578
May-August	67	0	106	524	54	0	751
September-December	22	100	12	80	50	0	264
Total Death	139	352	262	614	136	90	1593
Percentage (%) of Net Death	8.73%	22.1%	16.45%	38.54%	8.54%	5.68%	

Table VIII Source: Fellow’s Data Collection (March, 2018)

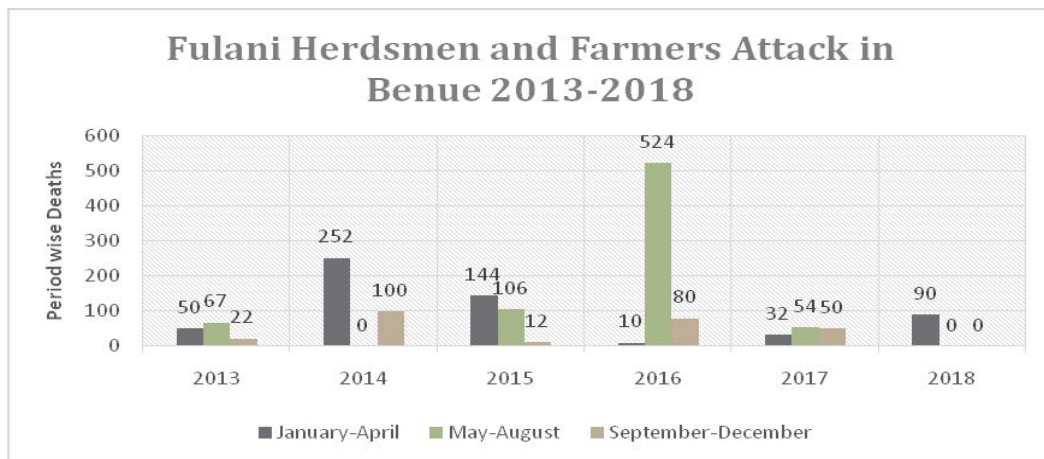


Table IX: Fulani Herdsmen and Farmer’s Attack in Benue 2013-2018

In the table above, May-August 2016 shows the highest death toll i.e. 524 least death toll observed was zero in May-August 2014. In Year 2014 January-April shows highest deaths least number of deaths recorded was 10 in January-April 2016.

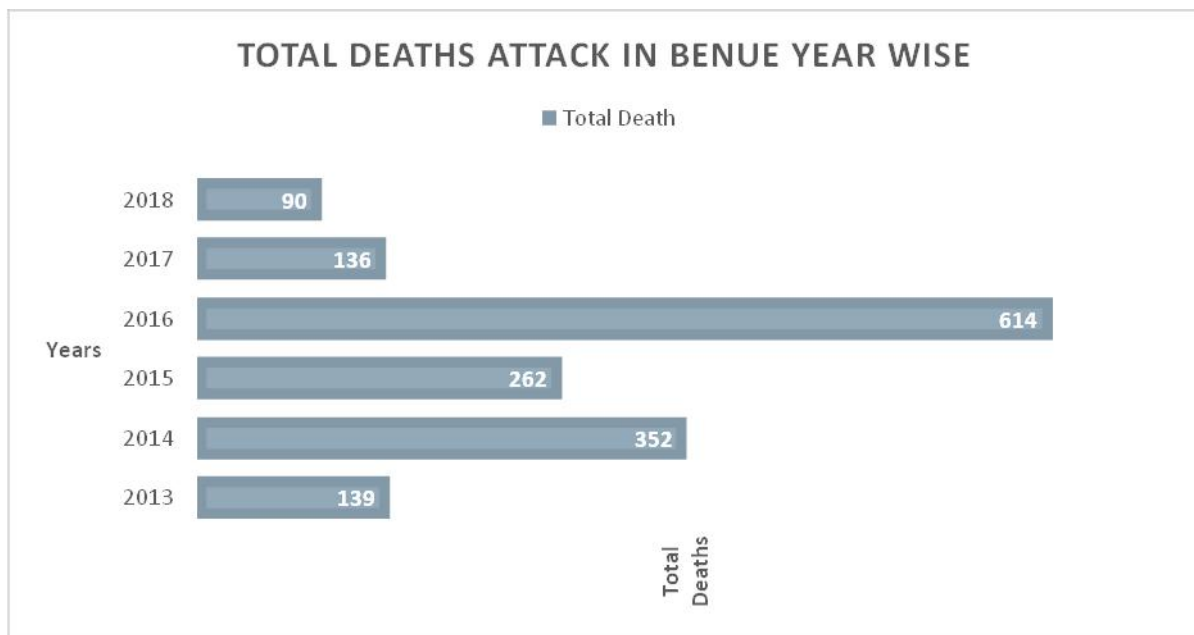


Table X: Total Deaths Attack in Benue 2013-2018

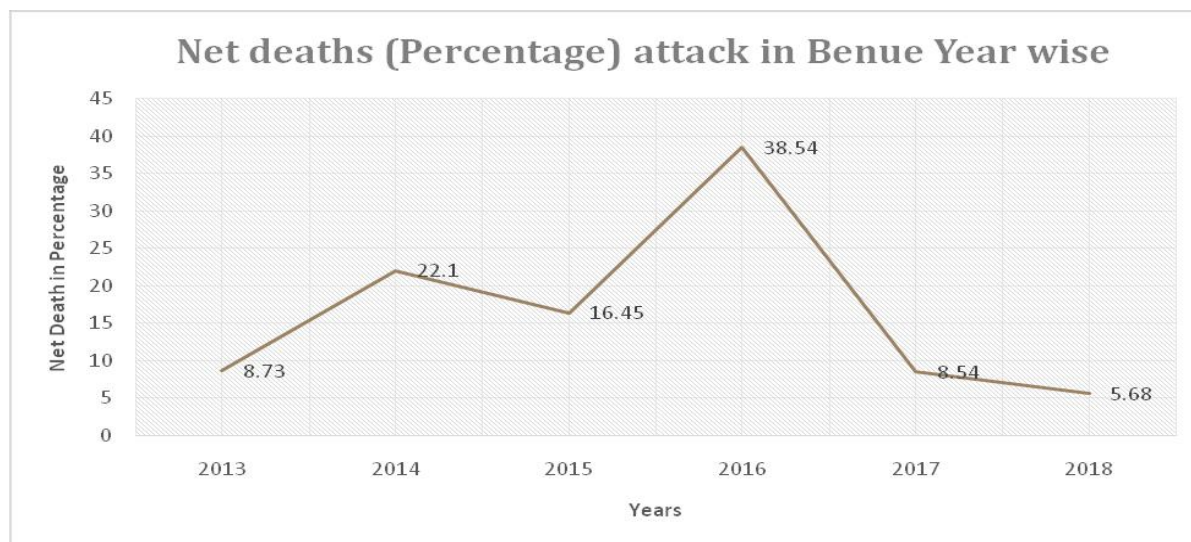


Table XI: Net Deaths (%) Attack in Benue 2013-2018

Net deaths have gradually increased from 2013 with 8.37 % and reaching its peak at 38.54% in 2016. The peak increase was based on the dynamics of government's neglect, politics and non-intervention in the conflict. The fact that a Fulani man is the President of the Nigeria also gave the herders the effrontery to perpetuate more violence with impunity. However, it is observed that there is sudden reduction in percentage from 38.54% to 8.54 % in 2017 and 5.68% between January to March 2018. The sudden decrease is influenced by the implementation of Anti-Open Grazing Law in Benue. The implementation mechanism has in its apparatus various security networks which include the Army, Police, Navy, Air force for surveillance, Nigerian Civil Defense Corps and the Local Security Network (Vigilante Forces) as community liaison to upgrade intelligence gathering, early warning and rapid response mechanism on preventive mission to checkmate the menace.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Table I above shows that between January to March 2013, 50 persons were killed as the figure increased to 67 between May to August, but the figure came down to 22 in September and December bringing to a total of 139 persons killed by the Herdsmen. Between January and May 2014, 235 lost their lives while no lost was recorded between May to August but the Herdsmen struck between September to December killing 100 persons bringing the total death in 2014 to 352. The violence continued in 2015 with 144 being killed in the early year (January to April) while 106 deaths were recorded between May and August but the death rates came down to 12 towards the end of the year between September to December. However, the total death recorded for 2015 was 262. The year 2016 was notorious for the blood thirsty herdsmen who killed 10 persons between January and April. Between May and August, 524 innocent people were brutally murdered while the rate came down to 80 between September and December bringing the total death to 614 for the year. The killings continued between the herdsmen and the farmers 2017 with 32 deaths between January and April, 54 deaths between May to August while 50 deaths were recorded in September to December bringing the total death to 136. However, between January and March 7, 2018, a total of 90 deaths were recorded as at the close of this research making the total death 90 for the early year in 2018.

From Table XI, the percentage of (%) of Net Deaths in 2013 was 8.73%, 22.1% in 2014, 16.45% 2015, 38.54% in 2016 with the highest percentage while it was 8.54% and 5.68% respectively for 2017 and the early year in 2018. The total deaths recorded between Fulani herdsmen and farmers' violence was one thousand five hundred and ninety three (1593) for the years under consideration.

CONCLUSION

This study has situated and analyzed extreme violent conflict resulting from struggles over grazing within its historical, cultural, political, and social contexts. The causes, however, were identified to be fundamentally economic and centered on land issues. It is crystal clear that the enactment and enforcement of the Anti-Open Grazing Law 2017 by the government with the creation of grazing routes did not stop the killings. In the final analysis, the study finds that violence from cattle conflicts was not restricted to specific periods of the year. Rather, the Fulani herdsmen have been psychologically conditioned through a cultural practice of revenge because according to the Fulani's culture, to forgive is a crime to the extent that killing does not amount anything to them than a mere game of pleasure, they are the killers and at the same time the camera men covering the events of their savagery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- De-radicalization and healing of the minds of the Fulani herdsmen from psycho-cultural believes and attachment by way of structured system of education for the youths, in which case, it will trickle down their generation.
- Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs for the Fulani herdsmen. The authorities must, with sense of responsibility and patriotism, disarm and also train the youth to re-integrates and to break the cord of conflict. The killings and atrocities being committed by herdsmen have compromised the security situation in the country and demands immediate national intervention.
- Formation of Farmers/Pastoralists Conflict Resolution Committee:-The formation of these committees at the State and Local Government levels will promote peace through early warning systems and dialogue platforms. The Committees should work in tandem with the National Joint Peace/Conflict Resolution Committee that is tasked with resolving land and pasture crises between crop Farmers and Fulanis.
- The government should create Farmland Insurance Policy. The policy should cover both the farmer and his crops with the government and the farmer contributing a quota to the insurance policy.
- Identification and Demarcation of Intra Grazing Routes. This exercise is particularly important for free movement of pastoralists within the grazing areas.
- Streamlining of Herdsmen Leadership. The leaders of pastoralist groups in Benue State should be appointed at all levels of governance where applicable.
- Adequate awareness and sensitization on the Anti-Open Grazing Law should be created through synergy involving all communities and traditional rulers.
- The social fabric that connects the various communities and the actors should be knitted and strengthened. This will promote peace building, love brotherhood within the conflict zones.
- Strengthening of regional cooperation within the sub-region. The dynamics of the herdsmen – farmer's conflict can be fully addressed within a regional framework. This will require the government to work in close coordination with neighboring countries both to manage human and cattle movements across borders and to fight illicit arms trafficking since Fulani herdsmen are present within neighboring countries.

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- SAM OLATUNJI AJIYE, Master of Laws(LL.M) (University of Abuja, 2011); Research Fellow, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja (2011-); Visiting Scholar at Rotary Peace Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand(2018); current main interest: Transitional Justice.