

## **ARMED FOREST GUARDS: RENEWED HOPE FOR FOREST PROTECTION IN NIGERIA?**

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**ABSTRACT:** Literatures have shown a lot of evidence that criminals have completely taken over forests in Nigeria. Thousands of people have either been killed or kidnapped by these hoodlums. Every Ecological zone of the country has witnessed one form of insecurity or the other. Forests have become the base for most of the criminal activities in the country. Lack of proper management of the Nigerian forests has made the forests safe homes for hoodlums who engage in various evil activities. Government has paid little attention to forest protection within the country. It was concluded that armed forest guards can significantly contribute to combating criminal activities in Nigerian forests. It has been recommended that Forest Guards should be given specialized training in forest combat, warfare, anti-robbery and counter-terrorism.

**Keywords:** *armed, forest, guards, protection and insecurity*

### **1.0. Introduction**

Unfortunately, forests that are supposed to be a blessing to the people have today fallen into the hands of criminals like militants, kidnappers, armed bandits, insurgents, terrorists, unknown gun men, ritual killers, cultists, farmer-herder clashes and armed robbers who have turned them into their hide-outs and operational bases from where they now unleash mayhem

on the innocent citizens (Ojo., 2020). A lot of scholars have attributed these security challenges to lack of protected or ungoverned spaces across the country. According to Brenner (2021), vast areas of unprotected forests have become hideouts for criminals. A lot of forests are left unmanned and unsecured in many parts of the country. The management of most forest reserves have failed to protect the forests (Larinde and Chima, 2014). In the last 20 years, forest guards and rangers who were adequately equipped and lived within and around protected forests, have all disappeared due to poor governance, there by exposing the forest estates in many parts of Nigeria to criminal elements (Popoola, 2014). He also observed that where forest guards and rangers existed sparsely, they were poorly kitted, inadequately armed and poorly remunerated. The ineffective management of the Nigerian forests has made them safe homes for hoodlums who engage in various nefarious activities.

Across the country, evidences abound of complete take-over of forests by these criminals. The origin of the criminal take-over of forest lands in Nigeria could be traced to the activities of the militant groups in the Niger Delta region as well as the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast (Okoye *et al.*, 2025). Thousands of people have either been killed or kidnapped by these hoodlums. Billions of naira have been spent as ransoms. The number of people displaced who are now living in the Internally Displaced Persons camps is over 3 million (Aju *et al.*, 2023). The takeover of forests by these criminals has made forest management a difficult task. The worst case scenario is the situation where some state governments now see forest clearance as a means of fighting insecurity. According to Ibrahim (2021), Nigeria is experiencing the most serious security challenge in its history.

Will armed forest guards curb the menace? This paper seeks for answer to these question.

Government has paid little attention to the protection of forests within the country apart from. This has given criminals the opportunity to take over the forests in the country. Aju and Aju (2018) stated that criminals prefer secluded locations and dark spots that shield them and their activities from the public. They hide in the forests and go out in the night to carry out their criminal activities. Forests have been

observed to be remote and inaccessible, offer refuge and food for criminals (Foreign and Commonwealth Office., 2014).

## **2.0. Evidence to show that Criminals have taken over Forests in Nigeria**

Evidence to show that forestlands pose threat to national security is the case of Niger Delta Militancy. During the critical years of the Niger Delta militancy (2000-2009), the militants used the thick mangrove forests, off the shores and creeks of the Delta, as their operational dens and hideouts (Okoli, 2013). The forest along the Benin City by Pass has been called an evil forest by locals as it is a hideout for armed robbers who launch attacks on commercial buses using that road.

According to Ojo (2020), Sambisa forest in Borno State of Nigeria gained global it's global recognition when Boko Haram abducted the Chibok School girls who were later taken to the forest. Sambisa forest provides a safe haven for the Boko Haram for their operational, logistical, technical and organizational base and destination for the insurgents' prisoners of war. It is also used as a training ground for recruitment of new members, radicalization, executions and a detention place for the abductees. It has bomb-making factories and used as a centre for arms trafficking. It has been a battleground for counter-insurgency between the Boko Haram and the Nigerian military. Over 35 000 people have been killed in Northern Nigeria by Boko Haram insurgents while a lot of people have been displaced (UNDP 2021). The activities of Boko Haram in the North east caused destruction and truncation of health services, education and other basic amenities. Idu and Gwagwa forests in Abuja and Kabakawa forests in Kaduna have also been identified as notorious bases for criminals who regularly mount road blocks to attack travellers and also rob people living in the areas that border the forests (Olaniyan, 2018).

Bandits and cattle rustlers that threaten the North-western and North central zones of the country exploit the various forests in the areas to perpetrate their atrocious activities (Okoye *et al.*, 2025). According to Nigerian Air force (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2020), two forests in Kaduna state were used by bandits as their hideouts. These include bandit hideouts in Kuduru and Kwiambana forests in Kaduna State. In Zamfara State, armed bandits have been attacking, abducting, killing and robbing

villagers and travellers, and engaging in cattle rustling. Zamfara State is mostly surrounded by forests from where bandits launch their attacks on outlying towns, highways and villages. In 2022, terrorists operating in Zamfara State collected an estimated ₦19 million as a protection levy from residents of 14 communities in Anka Local Government Area of the state for them to access their farms (Sahara reporters dated 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2022). Zamfara State also has illegal gold-mining sites inside its forests as well as an enclave of banditry for cattle rustlers (Odogwu, 2022). Amnesty International (2023) reported that illegal mining has led to insecurity and conflicts over control of the mining sites and their resources. These conflicts have been on the increase since 2014, spreading across Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Plateau States (Vanguard Newspaper dated 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2025). The proceeds from illegal mining operations are used for financing terrorism.

Bandits have established operational base in forests in Benue State and have prevented the forest dependent communities from accessing the forests (Meer *et al.*, 2022). Communities where illegal mining activities are going on are bedevilled by insecurity as bandits attack some of the communities like Ayilamu in Logo Local Government Area, and parts of Kwande where illegal gold mining has caused a lot of security challenges (Vanguard Newspaper dated 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2025). Dense vegetation and topography of Katsina Ala Local Government Area is attributed to the bandits' preference for hideout (Meer *et al.*, 2022). The Ikoy-Nyian forest's size and proximity, together with the presence of hills and mountains in Katsina Ala has made it difficult for law enforcement officials to easily spot bandits. Bandits typically escape into the nearby forests after successive attacks on people.

According to Daily Trust Newspaper (Dated 15<sup>th</sup> December, 202), about 333 students (boys) of Government Science Secondary School (GSSS), Kankara were abducted by bandits in **Kankara Local Government Area of Katsina State and took them to Rugu Forest, an expanse of woods, hills and caves where bandits terrorising the northwest have found a safe haven. As a result of the incidence, Katsina State Government ordered for the closure of all boarding schools in the state.** The dreaded Rugu Forest that serves as hideout for bandits terrorising, Katsina, Zamfara and Kaduna states is estimated to span over 220km, stretching from the

Niger Republic and spreading into a substantial part of Katsina State (Adewuyi and Daful 2021).

Bandit hideout was identified by the police within the Magaman-Daji Forest in Niger State (Channels TV dated 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2025). In Niger State 27 students, 3 staff and 12 members of the families of the staff were abducted by bandits in 2021 from Government Science College, Kagara, Rafi Local Government Area of the State (This day Newspaper dated 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2021). Unfortunately, one of the students was shot dead. This also led to the closure of all boarding schools in the state. About 40 passengers who were travelling in the Niger State Transport Authority vehicle were abducted by bandits.

According to the National Security Strategy ‘‘NSS’’ (2019), unprotected areas like our international boundaries, forests and game reserves provide opportunities for criminal networks to foster and promote crime. Criminal herdsmen had used forest areas in many parts of the country to stage kidnappings for ransom, invasion of villages, and killing of farmers notably in Benue, Taraba, Plateau, Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger, Kebbi, Ebonyi, Ondo, Delta, and Enugu among other states (Nwezeh, 2021). Nigeria possesses many unguarded borders and forests that enhance unregulated migratory trends in and out of the country. The movement has serious implications for security because of arms proliferation.

Several forests in the south eastern region of Nigeria have posed security threats because they have been used as hideouts for criminal elements. Shocking discoveries have been made in many forests occupied criminal elements that have been terrorising the people South-east. The shocking discoveries include human corpses and shallow graves.. Killer Fulani bandits and unknown gunmen have been holding the region hostage, killing, kidnapping and destabilizing the social and economic life of the people. About 50 decomposing and 20 headless bodies were discovered in Okija forest (Vanguard Newspaper of 15<sup>th</sup> Novemebr, 2023).

### **3.0. Impact of Insecurity on Forests in Nigeria**

**i. Deforestation:** According to Omorogbe (2024), forests harbouring criminal elements are cleared by security forces thereby causing deforestation. A good

example is the degradation of Sambisa forest in Borno State by Air Force and the Military. The present Governor of Borno State at United Nation's High-level Segment Round table on 'Forest based solutions to the triple planetary crisis' in New York stated that the activities of Boko Haram have caused environmental degradation, deforestation and loss of biodiversity in Sambisa forest. (Business Day Newspaper of 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2024). He noted that the shrinking of Lake Chad which is a vital source of water and livelihood for millions of people in the region has been a direct consequence of climate change resulting from the destruction of Sambisa Forest.

Table 1: Security Threats Posed by Forests and how they are degraded for Reasons of Insecurity

S/No	Forest	Security Threat	Present Status of the Forest
1.	Baltimore Forest	Base of insurgents	Slightly degraded
2.	Falgore Forest	Base of armed robbers	Sections of the forest degraded
3.	Agan Forest Plantation	Base for armed robbers And armed herdsmen	Completely degraded
4.	Kagoro Forest	Camping site for gunmen	Sections of the forest degraded
5.	Sambisa Forest	notorious den and hideout for insurgents	Partially degraded
6.	Kabakawa Forest	Hideout for criminals	De-gazetted and land is built up
7.	Kamuku Forest	Den of armed robbers	Partially degraded
8.	Idu and Gwagwa Forest	Den of armed robbers	Part of the forest encroached and the other side burnt
9.	Rumah/kukar Jangarai Forest reserve	Den of armed robbers and cattle rustlers	Large part of the forest is degraded

Source: Modified from Ladan (2014).

**ii. Illegal exploitation of forest resources by criminals:** Illegal logging, hunting and illegal gold mining have been taking place in forests habituated by criminals.

**iii. The forests become inaccessible by the communities:** The invasion of forest ecosystems by bandits is restricting the free access and use of forest products. Insecurity prevents Non-Governmental Organizations, researchers and communities from accessing forested areas. Forestry students and researchers find it difficult to conduct fieldwork due to insecurity.

**iv.** Displacement of many forest-dependent communities.

#### **4.0. Forest Guards in other parts of the world**

The status of forests in any country greatly depends on the ability of the protection agencies to implement their duties amiably and effectively (Nduku *et al.*, 2018).

In Brazil, Forest Guards have played a crucial role in protecting Amazonian forests by patrolling, monitoring, and enforcing regulations related to deforestation, illegal logging, and other threats. They work hard to protect biodiversity, prevent habitat loss, and safeguard the rights of indigenous communities. Their work is vital for maintaining the ecological balance and cultural heritage of the Amazon. The Forest guards collaborate with indigenous communities, who are often the traditional custodians of the forest, to protect their ancestral lands and cultural heritage (Onyango., 2013). The presence of Forest Guards on the ground, combined with the use of technology and community engagement, has helped to safeguard the Amazonian forest.

In Kenya, the establishment of Forest Guards worked effectively in protecting the nation's forests. The Forest Guards are given better and advanced equipment to work. The commander of forest guards are appointed from the Kenya army as the head and supervisor of forest management in the Country. The force has also extended its services to the Eco-Tourism Department to ensure safety and security of tourists

visiting Kenya Forest. Forest Guards have been able to protect the entire Kenya forest estate which is about 1.2 million hectares by carrying out forest and high way patrols, intelligence gathering, arresting and prosecution of offenders, fire fighting and prevention, and eviction of encroachers (Onyango., 2013).

#### **4.1. Establishment of Armed Forest Guards in Nigeria: Renewed hope for forest protection**

According to (Odutan *et al.*, 2013), Forest guards are para-military personnel trained to oversee and protect forest areas (forest reserves). They are expected to control illegal exploitation of forest resources. They are also expected to forestall acts of encroachments within and around the protected areas of the forest reserves. This is in addition to monitoring and controlling human trespasses in the reserves.

Armed forest guards can significantly contribute to combating criminal activities in Nigerian forests by providing a visible and active presence to deter illegal activities, conduct patrols, gather intelligence, and assist in law enforcement operations. Their presence can disrupt criminal operations, protect natural resources, and enhance the overall security of forest areas, which are often used as havens for various illegal activities.

Federal Government of Nigeria under the leadership of President Bola Tinubu has approved the establishment of forest guards to protect Nigerian forests. The Forest guards are to be well-trained and armed to perform their duties, which is essentially to flush terrorists and criminal gangs hiding inside the forests. The president has vowed that the country would take back its forests (Premium Times of 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2025). There are a total of 1 129 forests across the country but many of these forests are under the control of terrorists (Premium Times Newspaper of 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2025). There have been some mixed feelings about the declaration made by the president. Some Nigerians asking questions like will the forests not swallow the forest guards? That is to say forest guards is not just about making declarations alone. It is about giving them proper training and advanced weapons needed to fight the criminal elements hiding the forests. But above all, there is renewed hope that Nigeria's forests will be safe again.



Enugu State Government has announced the appointment of new leadership for the Enugu State Forest Guards as part of its efforts to strengthen forest security operations across the state. Governor Peter Mbah approved the appointment of Colonel Dan Didiugwu (retired) as the chairman of the Enugu State Forest Guard and Dr. Olamitisoji Akinbanmilayo, a retired Deputy Commissioner of Police as the commander of the Forest Guards (Punch Newspaper of 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2025). This has demonstrated that the State Government is committed to safeguarding lives, property and natural resources.

## **5.0. Conclusion**

Insecurity has taken over Nigerian forests. Forests that are meant to benefit human life have become serious security threats. The forest dependent communities can no longer have access to their own forests for the fear of being killed. Most worrisome is the fact that people who live around these forests have been displaced from their ancestral homes by criminal elements that inhabits the forests. Government is also losing billions of naira that should be generated from the resources found in these forests. The People of Nigeria are now hopeful that armed Forest Guards will curb the menace.

## **Recommendations**

Forest Guards should be given specialized training in forest combat, warfare, anti-robbery and counter-terrorism.

Forest Guards should be well equipped with sophisticated arms.

There should be proper and adequate remuneration for armed forest guards as this will motivate them to work hard.

They should operate with enhanced tactical efficiency.

They should engage with local communities and can build trust and cooperation, which can be vital in gathering information and preventing criminal activities.

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