Ethnic Conflict and Displacement in Nigeria since 1999 and International Response

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ABSTRACT

With a great complexity of about four hundred ethnic groups, ethnic conflict is one of the most serious issues in Nigeria. This has led to a large number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), particularly since the country's return to democracy in May 1999. The plight of the IDPs is a major problem in Nigeria, which is not directly addressed by any international instrument or by local agencies. Ultimately, this has led to the ad hoc nature of response strategy to such crises. This paper examines the causes and background of ethnic conflict as well as the patterns of ethnic conflict and displacement in Nigeria. It also examines the challenges faced by IDPs in the country and international response to all such problems. The paper finds that the prevalence of socio-economic and political inequalities among various ethnic groups is one of the most important factors responsible for ethnic conflict in Nigeria. It also finds that population displacement arising from ethnic conflict has had dire impact on safety and security of the affected people. The paper finally concludes with recommendation that a strong government is needed to support and strengthen the local and international agencies in order to provide a strategic relief and humanitarian assistance to the IDPs.

Key Words : Ethnic conflict, Internal displacement, International response, Humanitarian assistance

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to conceive of a human community where there is no conflict at all among members or between persons.[1] In reality, conflict is a worldwide phenomenon and it has been a feature of human society since time immemorial. Conflicts that arise may be organized around ethnicity, social class, religion, region, or some combination of these factors. In the contemporary world, most of the developing countries are ethnically diverse. Ethnic identity in these countries, therefore, plays a crucial role in the escalation of ethnic conflicts, which ultimately leads to poor economic performance.[2] Ethnic cleavages and overlapping affiliation of religion and region may also undermine the prospects of economic and political development. With a great complexity of about 400 ethnic groups, belonging to several religious sects,

Nigeria has remained a multi-ethnic state since independence. The Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo are the three largest ethnic groups concentrated in their specific region in the country. About half of the population is Muslims. Christians are the largest minority group numbering around 40 per cent and about 10 per cent of the population embraces indigenous religion.[3] Though most of the ethnic conflicts are legacies of the past, they have been continued and modified in present Nigeria. The country is deeply involved in fierce contestations over control of state power, resource allocation and citizenship rights among other factors. Nigeria has seen many phases of corrupt and ineffective civil rule and repressive military rule since its independence in 1960. However, ethnic contestations and conflicts have become pervasive and intense due to increase in ethnic politicization and mobilization after democracy opened up political space in May 1999 after a long period of military dictatorship.[4] These factors have led to recurrent outbreaks of conflicts in Nigeria, which have ultimately led to fluctuating but consistently large number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). There is a lack of reliable data on the number of IDPs in the country and no comprehensive survey has been conducted to know the exact figure. Generally, the estimates provided by the government and non-government agencies have only included people who have sought shelter at temporary camps, and police and army barracks. They do not reflect those who have taken refuge in mosques, churches, and with family and friends.[5]

In the absence of any concrete IDP policy and legal framework, assistance given by the UN, NEMA (National Emergency Management Agencies), SEMA (State Emergency Management Agencies), and other humanitarian agencies have been fairly ad hoc.[6] In general, humanitarian agencies have paid their attention towards providing material assistance than to involve them with participation, protection, and violence related issues.[7] The international community has mainly focused on development activities,[8] such as encouraging democratic process, respect for the rule of law, etc. than on humanitarian issues.

Conceptualizing the Dynamics of Ethnicity, Conflict, and Displacement :

In the contemporary world, the issue of ethnicity has attracted global attention. In fact, it has become the principal concern of one's anxiety, group conflict and political turmoil. The meaning of ethnicity is still obscure and it is hard to define in concrete terms.[9] But in general, ethnicity is characterized as a sense of group belonging, premised on the ideas of common origins, history, culture, language, experience, and values.[10] Apart from real or putative common descent, cultural or physical characteristics, and a set of attitude and behavior, in some cases, physical attributes like skin colour or body shape are some of the aspects of forming ethnic identity. The members of an ethnic group share ideas, behavior patterns and feelings. They distinguish themselves from others and perceive that they have a common destiny.

In contemporary underdeveloped and developing countries, ethnic movements have become common in meeting with their desired goals and aspirations. In most of the cases, the practice of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities in any country has led to widespread agitation for cultural autonomy, political freedom, economic justice, and fraternal social order.[11] In such situations and circumstances, conflicts occur between individuals and groups due to the desire for more equitable order in socio-economic and political resources.

In most of the cases, violent conflicts further lead to displacement of a large number of people, leaving them on the way of misery and destruction. Apart from these, they are also the companions of war, civil strife, armed violence, and prolonged economic deprivation.

The IDPs are not simply individuals and families but entire group of people. They face lots of problems and struggle for their safety and survival. Tension and frustration also become part of the displaced.[12] Besides, people face many impoverishment risks such as joblessness, homelessness, marginalization, food insecurity, increased morbidity and mortality.[13] These risks threaten the lives of the displaced, which become hurdles for their better existence.

Causes and Background of Ethnic Conflict and Displacement :

Nigeria is usually characterized as a deeply divided state in which the major problematic issues are the complex ethnic, religious, and regional divisions of the country. Conflicts over access to control of state power, resource allocation are frequent. Consequently, disintegration, secession, civil strife, minority agitation, and violent conflicts have become quite common in Nigeria leading to displacement of a large number of people.

During colonialism in the late nineteenth century, the subsequent amalgamation of northern and southern region in 1914 has been one of the most important factors of group divisions in Nigeria. By bringing the different Nigerian groups into a culturally artificial political entity, the British encouraged inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources that fostered violent ethnic conflicts. The colonial urban setting significantly worked in the development of ethnic contact, competition, consciousness and organization, as the urban centre encouraged the formation of kinship, lineage or ethnic associations in order to tackle with insecurity, instability, alienation and competitiveness of colonial urban life. Besides, the deliberate colonial policies of the British, such as the exclusion of the Christian missionary activity from the north, the discouragement of any official contact between north and south, the official promotion of segregated residential settlement patterns, inflexible land tenure system, and the lopsided recruitment of Nigerians into the army and police created uneven socio-economic and political development between the north and the south in Nigeria.

Further, the creation of a federal structure of three units namely, the northern, eastern, and western regions by the British in 1954 was the single most divisive policy of the British. This tripartite federal structure was inherently divided, disintegrated and unstable, which promoted political hegemony and fostered ethnic majority chauvinism and secessionism around the identities of the three major ethnic groups, *viz*. Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. Consequently, after colonialism, Nigeria has seen many phases of corrupt and ineffective civil rule and repressive military rule. Political instability, economic decline, and 'divide and rule' policy are among the problems that have increased group divisions in the country. The 1962 declaration of a state of emergency in the western region, dispute over 1962- 63 census, 1964 federal election crisis, 1965 western region election debacle, overthrow of first Democratic Republic in 1966, Civil War of 1967- 70, ethno- military coup in 1975, Kano riot in 1980, and Kafanchan-Kaduna riot in 1987 and 1999 have been some of the major ethnic crises in Nigeria that have led to the country to a dangerous point.[14]

After the end of the military rule and the return to democracy in May 1999, not only colonial legacies but also increasing internal factors have played a significant role in violent

ethnic conflicts in most part of Nigeria. The major causes of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are tied with group loyalty and discrimination against members of other ethnic groups, accusations and allegations of neglect, oppression, domination, exploitation, victimization, and bigotry. There is intense rivalry and competition among individuals and groups in order to achieve socio-economic and political resources. When the political system fails to regulate the competition over resources, conflicts are bound to happen. Moreover, ethnic conflicts are instigated by political elites through ethnic mobilization to serve their own interests, which demonstrate that the interests of the ethnic leaders and their followers are not compatible with each other. All these factors constitute the root causes of displacement of people in Nigeria. The country is facing with serious ongoing challenges responding to a fluctuating but consistently large number of IDPs.

Patterns of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria :

With a complex web of about 400 ethnic groups belonging to several religious sects, Nigeria has been affected by recurrent outbreaks of conflicts and violence. In particular, ethnic, communal, and ethno-religious polarization and mobilization have increased with the opening of political space in the newly formed democratic system.[15] Broadly, conflict pattern in Nigeria since 1999 can be classified as ethno-religious conflicts, inter-ethnic violence, intra-ethnic violence, and inter-group economic clashes.[16] All such conflicts have led to complex patterns of displacement of a large number of people.

Ethno-religious Conflicts :

Partly because of their tendency to spread from the origin to other localities, state or regions, ethno-religious conflicts are the most violent cases of conflicts in Nigeria. This pattern of conflicts mainly occurred in the Middle Belt and cultural borderline states of the Muslim north, where Muslim Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic groups confronted each other. The major examples of violent ethno-religious conflicts are Kafanchan- Kaduna crisis in 1999; Tafawa-Balewa clashes in 2000; Kaduna shari'a riots of 2000 and 2002; Kano riots of 2004; the Jos riots of 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011 and 2012.

Inter-ethnic Violence :

Inter-ethnic clashes in Nigeria have also been violent, especially where relatively large groups like Hausa- Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Jukun, Ibiri, Bassa, etc. are involved. This pattern of clashes increased sharply with the emergence of militant ethnic groups. The major cases of inter-ethnic clashes are Hausa-Yoruba conflicts of 1999 in Ogun state, Tiv-Jukun crisis of 2001 in Benue state and Tiv- Ibiri conflicts of 2001 in Nasarwa state among others.

Intra-ethnic Violence :

Intra-ethnic conflicts are very common in Nigeria. Many ethnic groups have often fought with each other over a piece of land, the site of market, citizenship rights, etc.

The major recent instances of intre-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are Ife-Modakeke conflicts in Osun state and the Aguleri Umuleri conflicts in Anambara state. Apart from these, some

of the significant tensions have also developed in the Muslim north between the two major brotherhoods of Quadriya and Tijanniya. The violence between Ozumi and Idozi in 2001, the Ihima/Adavi Eba crisis in 2002, the Ohiowan and Emani conflicts in 2006 and 2007 are major examples of intra-ethnic violence in Ebira land, the north- central region of Nigeria.

Intra-group Economic Clashes :

Almost all intra-group conflicts are linked to the mobilization of ethnic identities in competition either for socio-economic or political resources, or both. But there is still a class of conflicts that are exclusively related to the scarce economic resources. For example, communal clashes in the oil rich Niger Delta have involved struggles for high revenues, including infrastructures and financial compensations from multinational companies.

In actuality, conflicts in the Niger Delta region are basically tied to environmental degradation caused by the MNCs, high incidences of poverty, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure development, unfulfilled promises, perception of inequity, etc.[17] All these grievances have led to a number of acts of sabotage, including kidnapping, hostage taking and vandalism against the oil MNCs by militant groups seeking a greater share of oil revenues.[18]

Patterns of Displacement :

Due to recurrent outbreaks of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria, particularly after the democratic set-up in May 1999, internal displacement has become a very common problem in Nigeria.[19] It is estimated that presently there are around 3, 300, 300 IDPs in the country. However, there are no reliable statistics on internal displacement in Nigeria and numbers differ because of complex displacement patterns and the absence of any comprehensive and reliable survey. The figures provided by the government and non-government agencies are only estimates, which refer to localized displacement situations. The estimates generally include people who have sought shelter at temporary IDPs camps, and police and army barracks. They leave out those who seek refuge with family and friends in anticipation of violence to subside so that they may return to their homes. Further, in absence of official IDP camps of a long lasting nature to provide better facilities in the country, only temporary shelter in the form of army or police barracks, schools, hospitals, or public buildings have served as IDP camps only for a limited span of time.

According to IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre) report, the vast majority of displaced people seek refuge with family and friends or host communities in areas where their ethnic or religious groups are in the majority. Some of the IDPs seek shelter in schools, mosques, churches, town halls, government buildings, or in the temporary camps. In some cases, people find refuge along coastal areas for their livelihood. In the process, the situation gravely affects their health and security. But they stay there in anticipation of getting assistance from government or other humanitarian organizations. Many return to their homes when the violence subsides. Some integrate into local communities or resettle in other parts of the country for their safety and survival. These shelters are often overcrowded and unsuitable for accommodating the surge in displaced population in terms of water and sanitation facilities, cooking and privacy, especially for women. There is often no right and proper waste

management and electricity, which lead to hygiene based epidemics in camps.[20]

International Response :

In recent years, particularly after coming to democracy in May 1999, the number of IDPs in Nigeria has increased due to frequent internal conflicts, particularly based on ethnic and religious differences. Although the exact number is not known, the NCR (National Commission for Refugees) estimates that there are around 3, 300, 000 IDPs all over Nigeria,[21] of whom women and children comprise the most. They suffer from acute problems, such as human rights abuses, lack of access to basic services like food, shelter, and health care. The issues like rape, abduction, sexual harassment, forced marriage, genital mutation, torture and murder, etc. have created chronic physical and mental trauma among the victims. They are also found to be prone to several illnesses and sexually transmitted diseases and uncontrolled birth often leading to high infant and maternal mortality in make-shifts IDP camps in Nigeria.[22] In fact, large scale displacement has led to enormous waste of human resources, distorted local, regional and national economies, and torn apart communities and families.[23]

To prevent internal displacement and find durable solutions for the IDPs, there requires respect for human rights and the protective rules of international humanitarian law. It also demands the passage of legislation and its implementation for the protection of right to liberty and security against precarious situations affecting IDPs. Presently, Nigeria has no legislation that effectively deals with IDPs. Though the National Policy on IDPs was prepared and presented to the government in 2011, no effective measure has been introduced so far. The policy is premised on the UN Guiding Principles on Internal displacement of 1998 and the African Union Convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs in Africa. It aims to guide the various branches of government, donors and humanitarian agencies in order to prevent displacement and provide protection and assistance to the IDPs. It also allocates responsibilities to the appropriate government bodies for the proper response of various aspects of short, medium and long term internal displacement. The NCFR (National Commission for Refugees) has the responsibility for coordinating all agencies, including international humanitarian agencies. It also empowers the NCFR, the Human Rights Commission, and the IPCR to work with NCFR in order to support the activities of the states and local governments in implementing the policies in rightful manner. The policy emphasizes the fundamental human rights of all its citizens under 1999 constitution. It also recognizes the vulnerability of women and children and gives them special guarantees. It further measures for the protection against displacement and sets out standards for the delivery of humanitarian assistance by both national and international agencies. Despite all such provisions, the policy has no legal status. Therefore, it is incapable of enforcement by the government or the delegated actors.[24]

The UN has no procedural strategy for mandating the responsibility for the protection of IDPs on international forum. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement provide only practical guidance to governments, NGOs and other agencies working on behalf of the IDPs. In general, agencies have been more willing to give attention and resources to provide material assistance than to involve themselves with participation, protection, and violence issues. In Nigeria, the UN system consists of numerous agencies, including UNDP, UNICEF,

UNHCR, WHO, FAO, UNAIDA, UNFPA, and ILO. Since 2000 it has been organized around a Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), which is actually a planning tool to enhance the co-ordination and effectiveness of UN contributions in the development of Nigeria. The three main priority areas of the UNDAF are promoting good governance and human rights; reducing poverty; and reducing the incidence and impact of HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases.[25] Besides, a few international NGOs have been involved both on the short and longer term levels, e.g. Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF), Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Save the Children UK (SC UK), the International Red Cross, Red Crescent Movement, etc. Despite all out efforts made by these humanitarian agencies, no effective results have come out so far on many grounds, including lack of proper planning, management and co-ordination, and above all lack of good governance.[26] Moreover, the continuing shortage of data on internal displacement due to lack of comprehensive survey has resulted in an alarming lack of understanding of the country's displacement dynamics, which in turn has led to fragmented and generally inadequate response efforts. Nigeria ratified the Kampala Convention in 2012 and took steps to draft a national policy on IDPs in line with the convention's provisions. However, no tangible effort has been to cope with all such problems.[27]

In reality, the international community in Nigeria has mainly focused on development rather than humanitarian issues, as no humanitarian agency has been determined to cope with the problems of IDPs. In fact, there requires a tangible and supportive government in Nigeria only then the local or international humanitarian NGOs can work effectively. Therefore, the primary necessity is to make a strong reform which may support good governance and strengthen the institutions engaged in conflict prevention and resolution, and above all assistance to those affected by ongoing conflicts.

Conclusion and Recommendation :

Ethnic conflict is endemic in Nigeria. There is a strong relationship between ethnicity, conflict, and displacement in the country. Among many factors, the presence of inequalities in social, economic and political gains among different ethnic groups has significantly raised the risk of conflict as these difference shave coincided with each other. Ethnic conflicts in Nigeria are clear indications of imperfections and a loss of confidence in the Nigerian state. These factors have often led to displacement of as large number of people.

The longer term needs of the IDPs have been given poor attention and humanitarian assistance has been virtually non-existent. In absence of clear mandate and procedural strategy together with proper planning, management and coordination, the international response to IDPs has been fairly ad hoc. There has been no consistent effort for durable solution. In general, the agencies have mainly focused on development rather than humanitarian issues, as no humanitarian agency has been determined to cope with the problems of internally displaced people. They have been more willing to give attention and resources to provide material assistance than to involve themselves with participation, protection, and violence issues.

There requires a tangible and strong government in Nigeria in order to support and strengthen the local and international agencies engaged in tackling with the problems of the

IDPs.

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Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci. | Sept. & Oct., 2017 | **4** (9&10)

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