HERDSMEN AND FARMERS CLASHES IN NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA: NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

ANGELA AJODO-ADEBANJOKO, PHD
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, FEDERAL UNIVERSITY LAFIA

ROSEMARY IJEOMA NWOFOR
NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, rnwofor@noun.edu.ng

KEYWORDS
Herdsmen, Farmers, Conflicts, Insecurity, livestock

ABSTRACT
Conflict between herdsmen and farmers has been on for decades. While both groups enjoy a symbiotic relationship, this relationship is sometime characterized by competition over natural resources such as fresh water and land. In Nigeria, while herdsmen and farmers' clashes are rife in different parts of the country, the north central geopolitical zone has become a theatre of conflict between both groups. Herdsmen and farmers conflict in the zone has been prevalent in Plateau, Kogi, Nasarawa and Benue with negative impacts on the communities and these clashes have been characterized by wanton destruction of farmlands, farm produce, loss of lives and displacement of people. This paper examines the national security implications of herdsmen and farmers conflict on Nigerian national security. It provides the necessary recommendations which include developing mediation and conflict prevention capacities of the communities involved and early warning signal as well as training herdsmen and farmers at the local level and within rural community on the need to live peaceful communal life togrther.

Introduction

Conflicts are rife across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria with the most current and worrisome of these being herdsmen/farmers' conflicts which are disputes associated with competition over control and access to natural resources such as pasture and water, cattle rustling and in recent times exacerbated by political incitements, ethnocentrism, increasing levels of poverty and idleness amongst the youth and proliferation of illicit arms. While the conflict is viewed often to be between herdsmen and farmers, some analysts view as herdsmen onslaught against farmers arguing that the invasion, massacre and sacking of entire communities by herdsmen, is more of an act of aggression by the herdsmen on the people than a battle between the herdsmen and farmers (Channels Televsion, 2018). Benue State Chairman of the National Association of Yam farmers, Processors and Marketers, Dominic Dekera said in Vanguard (2022) that the real herdsmen that they knew in the past lived with them and were not violent, they knew their mode of operation and lived without issues. However, uncontrolled conflicts threaten the

country as many lives and properties worth millions of naira have been lost in the past years. This affects the living standards of citizens in all ramifications. Atobatele1 & Moliki (2022) are of the opinion that these crises not only affect lives and properties but increase the incidence of poverty, reduce children enrolment in schools, commerce, internal security, low level of agricultural production, religious and ethnic intolerance to mention but a few. Some people believed that the onset of herdsmen attacks was primarily due to clashes with farmers over grazing of cattle on their farmlands. Herders or pastoralists who are largely nomadic depend on livestock for their livelihood and rely on access to pasture and water, for the survival of their livestock. Such resources are scarce and under increasing pressure and as a result they move around for greener pastures. Farmers on their part depend on arable land for agriculture. The resultant increase in competition for arable land has often times led to serious manifestation of hostilities and social friction among the two user-groups (herders and farmers) in many parts of Nigeria (Blench, 2004).

While clashes between the two groups have been on for decades, their frequency and scope is becoming worrisome. Since 1999, herdsmen and farmers' clashes have killed thousands of people and displaced tens of thousands more. The resultant insecurity and violence amidst inadequate policing and state security arrangements have led many populations to create self-defence forces and ethnic militias, which have engaged in further violence, thereby worsening the security landscape. According to the Global Terrorism Index (2015), Fulani militants were the fourth deadliest terrorist group in 2014, using machine guns and attacks on villages to assault and intimidate farmers. Between 2010 and 2013 they killed about 80 people and in 2014, 1, 229. Most attacks and deaths occur in Northcentral Nigeria, in particular in the states of Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba where there have been over 1, 500 deaths (Channels Television, 2018). In 2016 and 2018, Benue State became the focus of attention with the Agatu killing with recorded over 300 deaths and the recent massacre in Logo and Guma areas of the State with over 70 deaths (Abonu, 2016). These conflicts have adversely affected the security of lives and property of the people with far-reaching consequences on their livelihood and societal well-being.

The North central can be described as the hotbed of crisis owing to the prevalence of communal conflicts and citizenship crises which have their roots in the plurality of the zone. Since 1999, the Zone has witnessed major civil disturbances which have made scholars to argue that nowhere else is civil disturbance and the broader contest for citizenship, identity and politics of inclusion and exclusion more ferocious and persistent than in the Zone (Alubo, 2011). Today, there is no State in the Zone that has not experienced one form of identity conflict or the other. The prevalence of Herdsmen/ Farmers' clashes in North central Nigeria has not only worsened the security landscape of the area but poses both food and national security problem. That was why Familugba and Adedayo (2020) in their study suggested indigenous conflict resolution which has contributed immensely to resolving many ethno-religious and societal conflicts. The then Minister of Agriculture, Dr Mohammed Mahmood Abubakar, while presenting his ministry's scorecard from 2015 to 2023 in Abuja, ascribe the rising cost of food items to inflation and COVID 19 pandemic. This was immediately refuted by farmers in Plateau, Kaduna State and other states, They attributed the food scarcity to frequent invasion of their farm land by Fulani herdsmen (Vanguard 2022). The farmers said they have lost different types of grains, tubers and vegetables among other crops to the unwholesome activities of herdsmen. A farmer in Zamfara state, Shehu Danja said farmers in the state witnessed massive reduction in rice and other farm produce in the 2022 rainy farming season because of the activities of bandits. This explains why farmer could no longer go to farm since they are afraid of being attacked by herdsmen who feel obliged to feed their cattle at the expense of farmer's crops. There is tension everywhere as people no longer feel safe in their communities and in the bid to save their communities, fight ensured then casualties of war. Love ones are lost and wounded, emotional and physical stress sets in polished by hunger and loss of hope not knowing what the future holds. Children are forcefully denied education and they move about unceremoniously without aim. The women are the most confused since they are worried about their lives, that of their families especially the children. As Chinua Achebe puts it that there is anarchy in the land and the center cannot hold. All these and more calls for concern hence the paper herdsmen and farmers clashes in North central Nigeria: National security implications

Understanding Herdsmen/Farmers' Conflicts: Conflict between herdsmen and farmers can be grouped under what conflict scholars have identified as resource-based or environmental conflicts-

conflicts that arise over ownership, use of, access to or competition over natural resources such as water, land, mineral resources and petroleum resources. According to the Environment and Conflicts Project (ENCOP, cited in Onduku, 2001), resource-based conflicts are traditional conflicts induced by an environmental degradation". Environmental conflicts are usually complex in structure and history and impact public interests and goods, including non-represented interests (e.g. future generations) and although rarely the only cause of conflicts, when interwoven with such elements as population growth, poverty and injustice, environmental problems increasingly contribute to existing and future political tensions and their escalation to violent conflicts. This fact is buttressed by a United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP, 1999) report which identified a growing trend in international and intra-national conflict which appears to be linked to the deteriorating environmental conditions and resources. Water flow, diversion, salinization, floods, pollution, resource depletion issues like deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, flooding are revealed as the most common elements around which conflicts can erupt with the vast majority of such conflicts occurring in developing regions. In his attempt to explain the causal relationship between natural resource endowment and the outbreak of violent conflict, Homer-Dixon (1999), developed the eco-violence theory also known as environmental conflict theory. According to him.

> *Decrease in the quality and quantity of renewable resources act singly or in various combinations to increase the scarcity, for certain population groups, of vegetation, farmland, water, forests etc. This scarcity of ecological resources can reduce economic productivity, both for the local groups experiencing the scarcity and for the larger regional and national economies. Consequently, the affected people may migrate or be expelled to new lands. Migrating groups often trigger ethnic conflicts when they move to new areas, while decreases in wealth can cause deprivation conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.2).*

The central argument is that declining availability of renewable natural resources which results into competition over scarce resources engender violent conflict (Ajaero et al 2015). This view was expressed by Anan (2006) when he stated that 'environmental degradation in forms such as desertification, resource depletion and demographic pressure exacerbates tensions and instability... as a result of frustration which leads to aggression. John Dollard in his frustration-aggression argues that collective behaviour is an aggressive response to feelings of frustration of more actors' goal achievement. In other words, conflict can be the product of the unfulfilled personal or group goals and the frustration that this brings.

The increase of farmer-herder conflicts has been linked to an expansion of agriculturist population and cultivated land at the expense of pasturelands; deteriorating environmental conditions, desertification and soil degradation; land and water disputes among others (Foreign Affairs, 2015). Frustration resulting from these forces and the inability to gain access to greener pastures in their sojourn, have pitched herdsmen against local crop farmers whom they perceive as blocking their access to these resources critical to their survival.

The conflict is also likened to guerrilla warfare where the Fulani who are regarded as armed non-state actors attack entire communities. This basis of this theory is that cattle rearing business in Nigeria is undertaken by the Fulani as well as political and business elite who arm herdsmen who are sometimes foreigner but are directed by local Fulani herdsmen.

While these theories help our understanding of the factors responsible for the herdsmen/farmers' clashes, they failed to show the fact that political motivations are sometimes at the root of the onslaughts by herdsmen. The question on every lip is what the real agenda of the Fulani is for the various attacks which are characterised by mass killings, butchery and sacking of entire villages. The situation is worsened by a statement credited to the Secretary to the Association of Cattle Rearers, Miytte Allah who was alleged to have said that Benue belonged to the Fulani, which seems to portray the fact that they were on a mission of conquest. It is on this note that many have alleged that there is a conspiracy to annex or colonise Nigeria through a jihad which is currently unfolding in Benue State. This argument is further buttressed by the fact that the Nigerian government seems to favour cattle colonies in all parts of the country, a move which many describe as a subtle

attempt to finish the task first embarked on by Othman Dan Fodio. While others have dismissed this allegation as a mischievous attempt to divide the country through religious sentiments, the fact remains that the killing and sacking of entire communities is akin to genocide. Whatever the argument, herdsmen and farmers' clashes continue to worsen the security landscape of the country with implication for national security.

Herdsmen and Farmers' Conflict: A Historical Analysis

The Fula people also known as Fulani in Hausa language, are a culturally diverse group in Africa but predominant in West Africa and live primarily in arid or semi-arid areas. The Fulani are widely dispersed and speak the Fula language. They are mostly nomadic in nature, herding cattle, goats and sheep across the vast dry grass lands of their environment, making them the world's largest pastoral nomadic group. The Fulani are spread across several countries but found mainly in West Africa and northern parts of Central Africa as well as in Sudan and Egypt. The main Fulani sub-groups in Nigeria are: Fulbe Adamawa, Fulbe Mbororo, Fulbe Sokoto, Fulbe Gombe, and the Fulbe Borgu (Eyekpimi, 2016).

The exact era when Fulbe pastoralists first moved into Nigeria is unknown, but it is generally assumed that they first arrived as nomads in the far north between the 14th and 16th centuries. 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 trypanomiasis or sleeping sickness) in the central and southern zones in addition to wanting to evade the much-hated cattle tax (jangali) imposed by the British colonial government in the northern region (Blench, 2004). During this early period they were confined to a narrow strip along the northern border of what is today Nigeria but with time moved to other parts of the country as a result of political and military expansion and the high altitude grasslands, lower risk of diseases and relative security as threats of armed raids on grazing herds were rare (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Herder/farmer conflict has existed since the beginnings of agriculture, but in Africa the prevalence and frequency of these conflicts was not until the twentieth century. The marked expansion of riverine and valley-bottom (*fadama*) cultivation in Nigeria since the 1980s has meant that pastoralists and farmers now compete very directly for access to wetland areas with a consequent increase in conflict (Blench, 2004).Pastoralists derive their livelihoods mainly from natural resources–pasture, water, natural vegetation and livestock while farmers derive theirs from their farm produce and as an Internally Displaced Person in one of the camps in Benue State observed, the two cannot meet (cohabit) for if they do, there will be a spark. Reduced access to land and water, has increasingly put pastoralists under intense pressure, as a result, they are increasingly finding themselves fighting for their survival as they are forced to often migrate greener lands. However, physical boundaries cutting across traditional migratory routes and wars in neighbouring countries continually bring increased problems in accessing traditional grazing resources. On the other hand, as the pressure on arable land in the semi-arid zone increased, soil fertility inevitably decreased and farmers are obliged to move to regions of uncleared bush or to increase their holding size, often a problematic strategy. This attempt to survive by both sides, often pitch them against each other.

The majority of farmer-herder clashes have occurred between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian peasants, exacerbating ethnoreligious hostilities. Prior to 1999, security was considerably firmer and internal crises were containable easily invariably because of the military apparatus. However, since the onset of civilian rule from 1999 till date there has been a poor and an inadequate response to the security of lives and property. The advent of democratic rule seems to have opened the gate of ethno-religious conflicts which manifested around the Farmer-Herder conflicts while some politicians have cashed on the land use conflicts to feather their nest. For instance, in Mambilla Plateau of Taraba state, herders and farmers have lived peacefully together for centuries until recently in years 2001 and 2002 when clashes broke out between the two groups believed to have been politically motivated (Abdulrahman, 2017). While violent conflict involving pastoralists and farmers is widespread and increasingly severe in Nigeria, it is predominant in the North central with the most affected States being Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau (This Day Live, 2015).

In the early years of return to democratic rule, Plateau State also witnessed ethno religious crisis. Many of the settled and transhumant pastoralists were caught up in the crisis between the urban Hausa-Fulani Muslim and the Christian tribes; which set the stage for subsequent conflicts that lasted many years.

The situation has not been the same in Nasarawa State where there have been persistent clashes between Fulani herdsmen and local crop farmers (Abdulrahman, 2017). In 2018, six communities in Logo and Guma Local Governments Areas of Benue state were attacked by armed herdsmen who gunned down, machete and gruesomely murdered people including women and children. While recent killings in the State has been attributed to the passing of the anti-open grazing law in the State, there have been over 50 to 60 attacks by herdsmen in the area before this time (Channels Television, 2018). The law was the State's response to repeated attacks against residents, including the February 2016 massacre of over 300 villagersinAgatu.

National Security Implications of the Crisis in Northcentral Nigeria

Northcentral Nigeria also known as the Middle Belt comprises six States namely Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Niger, Nasarawa, Plateau States and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The Zone is a plural society spread across over 600 ethnics, sub-ethnic and cultural groups, thoroughly intermingled and overlapping in their geographical locations. Agriculture is the mainstay of the Zone and in particular the Zone is famous for the production of yams among other produce. Apart from agriculture, mining and forestry are also comparatively viable. For instance, Nasarawa State is the location of solid minerals. According to Ayi (2003), there is no Local Government Area of the State without one solid mineral or another which is why it is referred to as 'the Home of Solid Minerals'. The major ethnic groups in the Zone include; Eggon, Tiv, Alago, Hausa, Fulani, Mada, Rindre, Gwandara, Koro, Gbagyi, Ebira, Agatu, Bassa, Idoma, Aho, Ake, Mama, Arum. Beroms, Anaguta, Afizeres, Ganawuri, Irigwe, Jarawa, Rukuba, Pengana, Jarawa, Biyi, Rukuba, the Irigwe and Kanuri.

TheNorthcentral is critical to the National Question and as such crises in the Zone deserve serious attention. Alubo (2011) identified the importance of the Northcentral in terms of its strategic location, composition and as the producer of the bulk of Nigeria's food and the implications of these for the security of the nation.

The strategic location of the Zone provides a vital link between the north and the south and by implication, a buffer for unity and stability of the country. The implication is that insecurity and instability in the area will no doubt affect the security, stability and unity of neighbouring zones as well as the entire. For instance, many states outside the Zone have begun to show sympathy to the Zone in the recent onslaught by herdsmen while supporting the anti-grazing law which has its origin in the Zone. The intensity, scope and frequency of Fulani pastoralists and farmers' conflicts have shown the fragility of unity of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and the tendency to maintain a 'no retreat and no surrender' stance by all parties in the conflict indicates the porosity of Nigeria's national security (Abass, 2017).

Furthermore, the composition of the Zone is such that conflicts in the area have a spill over effect on other parts of the country. This is because the States in the Zone share boundaries with other Zone such as the Southsouth, Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, and the Northeast. People who have been displaced in the Northcentral often constitute refugees in these other Zone thereby heightening insecurity in such areas.

The Northcentral Zone is centrally located and by virtue of its strategic location, conflicts in the area would impede movement of goods and persons across the country and consequently affect the development of the country. The Zone produces the bulk of Nigeria's food. Agriculture is the means of livelihood of the States in the region. Benue State for instance is referred to as the Food Basket of the Nation because of its rich agricultural endowment. The conflicts have not only heightened the level of insecurity, but have also demonstrated high potential to exacerbate the food crisis in Nigeria and other affected countries due to loss of farmers' lives, animals, crops and valuable properties (Cotula, Toulmin & Hesse, 2004). In a study conducted by Ajodo-Adebanjoko et al (2015) it was found that the production of yams in Lafia had decreased while the cost had increased because of crisis in the area. The same is no doubt applicable to other States in the Zone. At a time when the country is seeking to diversify from dependence on oil to agricultural produce and exporting yams which is the main produce of the Zone, continued crisis can lead to food insecurity. According to Mercy corps (cited in Eyekpimi, 2016), the incessant clashes between by herdsmen and crop farmers have a drastic effect on food security and have caused a loss of $14 billion in three years and in another research carried out between 2013 and 2016 on the causes and effects of the perennial clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria, it found that ongoing conflict thwarts the country's economic development to an enormous extent with states affected by these conflicts losing an average of 47% of taxes (Internally Generated Revenue) during these attacks and if conflicts were

resolved the average household affected today could see income increase by at least 64 percent, and potentially 210 percent or higher.

Violent conflicts between herdsmen and farmers have had very negative and severe impacts on the communities that are involved in these conflicts. As already noted, several lives and property have been lost to the crisis in addition to disruption of socio-economic activities and livelihoods as whole communities have been sacked. The result is a deepening humanitarian crisis resulting in several Internally Displace Persons (IDPs) and refugees within and outside the Zone. There is an estimated over 175,000 IDPs currently in Benue State alone (Channels TV, 2018). The problem of IDPs and refugees poses a security challenge to a country that is already reeling from humanitarian crisis resulting from terrorist activities in the northeast.

Sacking of entire villages means that academic activities are disrupted since schools are closed indefinitely. Statistics from UNESCO (2015), shows that the number of children of primary age not attending school in Nigeria increased from 8 million in 2007 to 10.5 million in 2015, the highest figure in the world. Some of these children are found in the Northcentral where insecurity is rife. Even when such conflicts have ended the children may never return to school because their parents do not have the wherewithal to train them having lost everything in the conflict. Such children eventually end up on the streets and this results in the emergence of a new group of children who constitute not only a social menace but a security risk.

Another implication is the emergence of various militia groups. Insecurity and violence have led many communities to create self-defence forces and ethnic militias, which have engaged in further violence. The emergence of ethnic militia groups is because of the failure of the government to secure the lives and property of the citizens. Many communities have lost faith in the Federal government and have thus resorted to self-defence. As Abass (2017) puts it, 'when the state pays a lip service to the security of the means of livelihood of its citizens, like farmlands; and there is no sufficient guarantee for safety, fear and suspicions amongst them emerge' and the people resort to self-defence. This accounts for why today, there are different militia groups in several communities. The problem with the militia groups is that they sometimes unleash terror on their communities and innocent citizens in the name of security. The proliferation of militia groups therefore portends evil for the nation's security.

Closely tied to the upsurge of ethnic militia is the proliferation of small arms and ammunition (SALWs), in the State. While scholars do not agree on the fact that SALWs are at the root of conflicts, they agree that they contribute to and sustain conflicts (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2018). Out of an estimated 640 million SALWs in circulation world-wide, 100 million are estimated to be in Africa, about 30 million in sub-Saharan Africa and 8 million in West Africa alone and Over 70% of about eight to 10 million illegal weapons in West Africa are in Nigeria and as at 2002, the number of SALWs in Nigeria was estimated by various reports and studies at between 1 and 3 million (Osimen & Akintunde, 2015). According to Enuka (nd) the availability of small arms, ammunition, light weapons and explosives circulating in African states since the end of the Cold War has made easy the escalation of tensions between groups facing disagreement.

Some of the literature reviewed include Gamgum (2018) conducted a study on the herdsmen and farmers conflicts in Nigeria: another dimension of insecurity. He used both primary and secondary sources to collect data. He noted that conflicts created tension and terrorized every community. and profer solutions to make the state a violence-free community.

Familugba and Adedayo (2020) carried out a study on indigenous conflict resolution strategy and sustainable development in Nigeria. The study explained the need for indigenous conflict resolution because it had played important roles in resolving major ethno-religious crises in Nigeria

The Way Forward

The Federal government should as a matter of urgency review her border patrol system and provide more security personnel while deploying new technological facilities that will aid the immigration and other security agents to verify and admit any foreign herder entering the country. In addition, all herds must have the International Transhumance Certificate as provided by the ECOWAS Protocol on Transhumance (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Furthermore, the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol of 1998 and the ECOWAS Protocol of Free Movement of Goods and Persons in West Africa which allow herders access to designated stock routes and

grazing lands/reserves through the West African countries need to be reviewed to ensure efficiency and to identify new routes and away from the routes have already been turned farmlands. Nigeria also needs liaise with neighbouring countries to stem cross-border movement of non-Nigerian armed herders: Nigeria should work with Cameroon, Chad and Niger (the Lake Chad basin countries) to regulate movements across borders, particularly of cattle rustlers, armed herders and others that have been identified as aggravating internal tension and insecurity in Nigeria (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Measures directly aimed at conflict prevention such as developing mediation and conflict prevention capacities of the communities involved and early warning system, training and indigenous peace building processes should be put in place at the local level and within rural communities particularly in areas that have been most affected by conflict (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Proactive policing as against reactionary policing is recommended. The Nigeria Police should be proactive in preventing and not merely reacting each to such crises. Since it is a known fact that these crises are predominant in the dry season, they should put their mechanisms in place to deter such conflicts.

Traditional conflict resolution mechanism which was helpful in resolving herdsmen and farmers conflict in the past should be resorted to. Traditional institutions and religious bodies have a role to play in this regard in ensuring that these persistent conflicts are addressed harmoniously.

There are 19.5 million cattle in Nigeria as against 50 million in Ethiopia, yet the latter has been able to manage pastoralist and farmers crisis very well. Nigeria should learn from this and other countries the acceptable practice.

Government needs to address impunity. It is unfortunate that despite the spate of attacks by herdsmen nobody has been brought to justice. A situation where people commit crime and go unpunished will encourage impunity but where punishment is meted, others are deterred. It is therefore imperative to create special tribunals to investigate, prosecute offenders and compensate victims.

The need for State police is overdue. Although there is fear that State Governors may abuse their power using the State police apparatus, the truth remains that we cannot throw the baby with the bath water. The presence of the State police will discourage the recourse to the use of the militia as well as ensure rapid response in the event of crisis. In this regard the constitution of 'Operation Amotekun' in the southwest is a welcome development.

Finally, security is the responsibility of all members of the society and as such community policing should be encouraged. People should be conscious of what goes on around them and where they notice strange behavior or faces, they should report such. This is line with the maxim; 'if you see something, say something'.

Conclusion

Violent clashes between nomadic herders and farmers have escalated in recent years owing to climate change; population explosion, cattle rustling; political and ethnic strife and proliferation of SALWs among others (International Crisis Group, 2017). As these conflicts increase in frequency, intensity and geographical scope, so does their humanitarian and economic toll. Thousands have been killed while fatalities from the crisis are said to have exceeded the toll from the Boko Haram insurgency. While these crises occur in different parts of the country, in recent times the Northcentral has become the focal point and the nature of the attacks by herdsmen which involves the massacre of entire communities has been faulted by many.

Herdsmen attacks in the Northcentral as in other parts of the country have made life insecure as people now live in fear. Whole communities have had to relocate to other communities where they constitute a humanitarian crisis. The Northcentral crisis therefore constitutes a national emergency and a national security problem.

National security is the pivot of every nation; the entire polity-economy, education, health etc is dependent on a secure environment. It is high time the federal government acknowledged the menace of herdsmen as a major threat to peace and security in the country. To this end, the executive and legislative arms of government should muster the political will to deal with this menace.

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