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THE POLITICS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF FARMERS-HERDERS' CONFLICT IN THE NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA, 2015-2023

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Abstract
The study interrogated the politics of conflict management in Nigeria, with emphasis on farmers-herders conflict in North Central zone under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. It examined the triggering factors, government policy response in managing the conflict and its consequences on the socio-political and economic development of the region. The study was anchored on relative deprivation theory. It adopted Ex-Post-Facto research design. Documentary method was used for data collection while data analysis was carried out using qualitative descriptive approach. The study found out that change in climate condition, population surge, land-ownership right and poor response to early warning signals were among the major causes of the conflict. It also observed that the impact of the conflict on human security, economic wellbeing, socio-cultural practice of the people and food security has been particularly grave, with potentially serious political and security repercussion. The study therefore recommended the establishment of ranches and strengthening of dialogue mechanism between herders and farmers as part of the solutions to the conflict.
Keywords: Conflict management, Farmers-herders conflict, Politics, North Central Nigeria, Pastoralists

1.0 Introduction

The occurrence of different types of conflicts (political, religious, environmental, ethnic resource etc.) is not elien to Nigeria and the West African region at large (Abbas 2012; Okeke, in Akerjir 2018). There has been a great number of conflicts in recent times linked to the farmer-herders conflict such that in various parts of Nigeria, farmers and herdsmen conflict has been ongoing over the years. Internal insecurity, particularly herdsmen and farmers clashes in the country, has become the defining characteristic of the Nigerian political scene which takes a recurring turn on the very fabrics of the Nigerian State and deepens its pangs in the process (Okeke, 2022a). Available data suggests that the past five years witnessed killing of thousands, such that fatalities may have reached an annual average of more than 2000 from 2011 to 2016, excluding Boko Haram insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2017; Amadi et al., 2019).

The constant clashes between herdsmen and farmers have resulted in avoidable loss of lives and property, threatened the security of the state, reduced its economic productivity, and deepened food crises. In the midst of the deteriorating security situation, Nigeria grapples with daunting challenges which pose serious threat to her socio-economic development (Okeke, 2022b). In the past, agricultural farmers and the pastoralist groups had a cordial and stable relationship that enabled the people to work side by side for decades. Farmers were concerned with food production, using land as both factor of production and source of livelihood while herdsmen, on the other hand, were in dare need of arable land for grazing, as well as a source of livelihood for themselves and their cattle (Okeke, 2022a). This interdependent relationship on each other is evident that both groups depended on each other for survival and that formed the benchmark for exchange and which brought about even development. The agricultural farmers and pastoralists have a long heritage and economic relationship, though there were sources of disagreement existing between both groups that were resolved by both groups peacefully. Today, farmers and herders in Nigeria face challenges worsened by suffering, climate of fear, death, destruction of sources of livelihood, excruciating economic challenges and internal displacement (Udemezue 2019, cited in Okeke, 20222).

Activities of the pastoralists include the movement of their cattle to graze on farmlands which belongs to crop farmers, while the farmers require from the pastoralists protein in the form of diary products that are needed for their day-to-day consumption and manure to fertilize their field. Similarly, the survival of the pastoralist group is formed under interaction with sedentary farmers. Thus, it becomes apparent that the interdependent linkage flows as each group needs water, land, fodder and other land use for their economic activities. Unfortunately this form of relationship that has existed centuries back has been truncated with many disputes arising across the regions that have grown into widespread violence, death and internal displacement of persons. The situation is such that Nigeria has become home to internall contradictions where peaceful co-existence among citizens is difficult to achieve (Monord 2018, cited in Akerjiir, 2018; Okeke & Omojuwa, 2022).

Various scholars such as Akerjiir (2018 have come up with different plausible explanation that accounted for the breakdown in the mutual relationship, resulting in the increase in conflict, some of which can be understood from the perspective of environmental degradation, irregular or low rainfall that has placed constraints on grass land, grazing movement potentials, crop production, cattle rustling, property rights, as well as surging population which leads to fierce competition for land and space. While farmers-herders conflict rages in various parts of the country and North-Central in particular, the government approach towards finding lasting solution to the menace has been weak, insincere and one-sided. Enforcement of policies and regulations by government is perceived to be weak (Obiekwe, Ezeamama & Okeke, 2022). Despite the efforts of past governments in managing the problem, the conflict continues to linger. Despite the aforementioned strategies adopted by various governments to tackle farmers-herders conflicts in Nigeria and North Central in particular evidence abound that the Nigerian government is struggling to find solution to the problem as the conflict continue to linger on for decades with major consequences on socio-political and economic development of the region. This study therefore, attempts to unravel the reason why various resolution strategy adopted by the Nigerian government have failed to provide lasting solution to the age long farmers/herders conflict in the North Central Nigeria.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Nigeria and Farmers-Herders Conflicts

Nigeria is under severe internal socio-economic and security threat. Each of these dimensions has greatly affected the nation's stability and can be traced to the Fulani- herdsmen and farmer crisis, poverty, insurgency, armed robbery, corruption, Economic sabotage and environmental degradation (Damba, 2007 cited in Ogbette, 2018). Historically, the first crisis between herdsmen and farmers was recorded in 1948. The second in 1951 this led to the migration of Fulani Bororo to Sudan. In 1955 there was a clash/genocide which led to the Sudanese Government issuing a quit notice to all Fulani Bororo to relocate to their home countries. These people were mainly from Bororo, Sokoto and Kano states in Nigeria. In April 1956, the Nigerian Government sent a delegation comprising Alhaji Mohammed Ribodu-Minister of lands, Alhaji Abubakar, Alhaji of Sokoto native Administration, Malam Maaji Shani- legal Adviser Borno Native Administration and Mr. J. H knowledge, a senior veterinary officer. This led to the Fulani's eventually relocation to Nigeria two years later (Ogbette et al, 2018).

Urbanization as in the case of Federal capital territory (FCT) dislocated existing ranches, dams and power project as in Mambila and Mokwa, resulting in permanent dislocation for herders. This led the nomads to forcefully design their own grazing corridors and/or to acquire temporary site which inevitably are farmlands of farmers. Furthermore, it is on record that by 1964, the government has gazetted the about 6.4million hectares of land which was enacted in 1965 in 144 locations or area's in the savannah region of Northern Nigeria with about 3 (three) between Oyo and Ogun states. This was primarily started by Malam Hamisu Kano, working with pastoralists on livestock vaccination. These, however, were literally abandoned or not fully realized and have been massively encroached upon as grazing reserves. The cattle routes have also been abandoned or have succumbed to the similar factors of urbanization, creating a source of friction as the known livestock routes overseer were no longer employed to preserve the routes. The consequences are enormous. These include

insufficient use of natural resources to engender fairness and wellbeing (Ochi, Okeke & Ezeamu, 2024). By 1978 Nigeria Government introduced the land use act which vests the custody of land in the federal capital territory on the federal government/Federal Capital Territory Administration. Custody of urban center land was vested in the state government and the custody of rural area land was vested on local government councils. This is to make it easier for non-indigenes of a particular area to apply and secure land on lease in their host communities as well as provide opportunity for natives to apply and be given a certificate of occupancy to claim ownership of their ancestral land. Most herders who are used to migration from one place to the other did not take advantage of this. Consequently they lack where they could claim as their grazing routes and grazing land. There increasing movement from one place in the eyes of modern law amount to trespass and encroachment of the properties of others. Over the years this brought conflicts of interest on land in some places (Ogbette, 2018).

2.1.1 Government's Strategy towards the Resolution of Farmers-herders Conflicts

The major responsibility of any government is to guarantee the safety of lives and property of the people it governs. Providing security for citizens is a duty that is of paramount importance to every responsible government and is seen to be a topmost priority since actualizing developmental objectives of the State depends on provision of security (Okeke, 2023). Unfortunately, reverse is the case in Nigeria, most especially with the assumption of office by President Mohammed Buhari, going by the high incidence of conflict in Nigeria. Federalism under Buhari worsened the problems which the administration inherited (Okeke & Omojuwa, 2022). The government's approach to conflict management most especially as it relates to farmers-herders conflict was inadequate, epileptic and insincere. The best way of dealing with conflict situation is to pre-empt or nip them in the bud. This implies an ability to pick out conflict situation in their infancy; to understand their nature, causes and possible danger signals that may herald their eruption, and to act quickly and decisively to arrest such situations before they explode into open violence. However, the incapability of the Nigerian police to contain the high level of insecurity has become apparent and raise serious concerns (Aborisade & Adedayo, 2018; Okeke, 2024). The magnitude and frequency of conflicts in the country underscore the failure of government institutions saddled with the responsibility of conflict prevention and management – the Police force, security and intelligent agencies, and the military. There appear to be poor intelligence gathering, management and usage with regard to internal security in the country. Often, warning signals are ignored or poorly utilized. Conflict and crisis management institutions particularly the police are ill-equipped, poorly paid and trained, badly supervised, and grossly inefficient.

Though the farmers-herders crisis predates Buhari's administration, the administration's actions and inactions in the face of continued confrontations subjected it to too much flak by Nigerians. One of the most prominent attacks allegedly perpetrated by herdsmen in the Buhari's era was the Agatu massacre in Benue State. In February 2016, over 300 persons from the communities were massacred, while some 7000 were displaced. Some reports showed that many people died in ten Agatu communities at the hands of suspected herdsmen in early 2016. These killings were accompanied by the destruction of houses and other properties as well as allegations of rape. According to one of the herder leaders, the attacks were reprisals against the Agatu people for killing a prominent Fulani man and stealing his cattle in 2013. That it took the president more than one week to issue a statement of condemnation and order an investigation, and that his spokesman showcased his tacitum stance on the crisis on the grounds that "the president is not a talkative" angered many Nigerians. Moreover, allegations of either inaction or outright collusion with the herdsmen were leveled against the government and security agencies (Ogbette et al, 2018).

In an interaction, the member representing Agatu in Benue State House of assembly, Mr. Sule Audu, accused the military of allowing the herdsmen to occupy the sacked communities, while their cattle numbering over 100,000 freely grazed on their farmlands. That the president is a Fulani also added ammunition to his attackers, who saw his slow response as a tacit support for the killers (Nwosu 2017, cited in Ogbete et al, 2018). The International Crisis Group Report (2018) comprehensively captures various measures adopted by the Buhari's government to

address the farmers-herders conflicts in the North Central zone and Nigeria at large. These measures range from consultations between senior federal officials and administrators and residents of the affected states to the deployment of additional police and military forces, schemes for cattle colonies, or cluster of ranches with services herders and national livestock plan.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study adopted Relative Deprivation Theory as framework of analysis. Sociologist, Robert Merton used the term 'social anomie ' to describe aspect of deprivation. Merton (1938) argued that such anomie which could be a social construction leads to deprivation and contented that relative deprivation emerges from a feeling of dispossession by a group of individual which could trigger violence as a result of the denial of access to resources for subsistence or livelihood of an individual or a group. Deprivation accounts for a number of factors such as rebellion, wars, and rise in resilient social movements (Walker & Smith, 2001 in Amadi et al 2019).

2.2.1 Theory Application

Relative deprivation provides useful theoretical in-sights which could advance knowledge on dynamics of farmers-herders conflict in the central Nigeria. This theory puts in proper perspective the understanding of the fundamental trigger of the violence in the particular case of our study. The violence is linked to distortion, alienation and deprivation of the farmers of their land by the herdsmen who forcefully graze on their farm, resulting in destruction of their crops and subsequent violence crisis. The relative deprivation theory explores the causes and effects of some of the fundamental problems inherent in the existential realities of farmers-herders conflict such as poverty, vulnerability, insecurity, diseases, distortion of livelihoods and alienation. Most of these realities under-pin the core development challenges in the North Central and form the need to advance theoretical knowledge of farmers-herders conflict in the social sciences. The land resources (such as farmlands, crops, grass/ pasture, fresh water, etc.) are scarce in Nigeria and are needed by both farmers and herdsmen for sustenance of their various sources of livelihood. Conflict however, would not only occur between herders and farmers as both strive with another in pursuit of these resources.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted Ex-Post-Facto research design. Documentary method was used for data collection while data analysis was carried out using qualitative descriptive approach.

4.0 Consequences of Farmer/herders' Conflict in North Central Nigeria

Generally, most problematic issue in conflict is the consequence. The consequence does not necessarily end with death and the destruction of property. It includes the impact and effect on the development of the conflict zone. Development in communities that experience situation of conflict is retarded either through the destruction of existing structure and/or discouragement of investment. Outside this, conflict also hinders political, economic, social, development and also destroys the environment (Ogbete et al., 2018). Maybe because farmer-herder's conflict started very early in the North Central, it became very unconducive for both business and residency. As a result of this, we may conclude that there is a great relationship between the state and recurrent nature of farmers-herders conflict in the North Central and the underdevelopment of the zone.

The peace and stability of the North Central states has, in the last one decade, been threatened by violent and volatile clashes between farmers and herdsmen. The resultant effects on human security, Economic well-being and socio-cultural practice of the people of the state have been devastating Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2016). The surge of attacks and counter attacks exerted heavy humanitarian and economic tolls, with potential serious political and security repercussions. The humanitarian impact is particularly grave such that from September 2017 through June 2018, farmers/herder's violence left at least 1,500 people dead, many more wounded and about 300,000 displaced an estimated 176,000 in Benue, about 100,000 in Nasarawa, over 100,000 in Plateau. Two third of these people fled from their communities (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2016).

In Benue State, across Agatu, Buruku, Logo and Tarka L.G.As, the violent conflicts between herders and farmers greatly affected access to education and violated educational rights of school age boys and girls. School enrolment figures of Local Government Education Authorities of selected L.G.As believe that prior to the full escalation of violent in the communities, an average of 1 out of every 3 boys; and 1 out of every 5 girls of School age were not in school due to extreme poverty and other socio-cultural inhibitions in Agatu. The enrolment level in Buruku and Logo L.G.A.s prior to the conflict was 1 out of every 4 boys; and 1 out of every 6 girls while that of Tarka was 1 out of every 6 boys; and 1 out of every 8 girls ((Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2016). The executive secretary of the Benue State Teaching Service Board, Wilfred Uji, reported that persistent attacks had forced 300,000 children out of school and twelve of the state's nomadic schools were shutdown. In Nasarawa state, armed attack and the establishment of internally-displaced persons' camps forced over 35 primary schools to close, interrupting the education of thousands of children. The situation in the communities presented an enigma of challenges in achieving educational development in the affected areas. There were worrisome evolving trends such as early marriage and prostitution of adolescent girls in nearby towns. Violent conflict also created imbalances in psychological attitudes, cultural practices and traditional coping mechanisms. The inhabitants of local communities that recorded violent conflict between herder's and farmers in Agatu, Buruku, Logo and Tarka LGA's in Benue State, depend on crop farming, fishing and Petty trading for livelihood. Women and youth constitute the most productive age groups. However, many of them lack skill in multiple income generating activities. This partially explains the reason for trauma, depression and the difficulty faced by communities in coping, recovery and resilience building (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2016). The economic toll has also been huge as the federal government was losing $13.7 billion in revenue annually because of herder-farmers conflict in Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa and plateau states. The study found that on average these four states lost 47 percent of their internally generated revenues. In March 2017, Benue state governor Samuel Ortom asserted that attacks from herders coming from more northern states, and possibly also from Cameroon and Niger, had cost his state N95 billion (About $634 million at that time) between 2012 and 2014.

The impact of escalating violent conflict is significant on local economics, Population displacement and continuing insecurity have disrupted agriculture in parts of Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau states. Thousands of herder's displaced from Benue State cannot find fodder from their herds in Nasarawa state, as the cattle multiply and graze all the pastures bare. On the other hand, thousands of farmers fearing attacks are unable to work in their farms. In Benue, Nasarawa and plateau states, food production is vas estimated to drop by 33 percent to 65 percent in 2018 as a result of attacks and population displacement in farming villages. This predicament, in states that make up much of Nigeria's bread basket, affected food production nationwide, drove up already high food prices and impaired businesses related to agriculture. It also deepened rural poverty in the North-central geo-political zone. The conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria, centered in the Middle Belt, escalated sharply under Buhari's administration. From January to June 2018, at least 1,300 people were killed, about six times the number of civilians killed by Boko Haram over the same period. The first half of 2018 witnessed more than 100 incidence and more fatalities than any previous six months period since the conflict started worsening in 2014 (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Plateau state which was relatively peaceful, for about two years witnessed renewed confrontations, with farmers and herder's trading blames as to who triggered the resurgence. One report claims that at least 75 people were killed, some 13,726 displaced and 489 houses burnt down, largely in Bassa Local Government Area, from 8 September to 17 October 2017. The violence continued into 2018. From January to March 2018, over 300 people were killed in attacks on villages in Bassa, Bolkos, Barkun Lado, Riyom, Mangu and Jos South Local Government Area. The deadliest sequence of events was the 23-24 June attacks on eleven villages in Barkun Ladi and subsequent reprisal on a highway, which altogether killed more than 200 people (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Benue State witnessed recurring surge of farmers-herder's conflict. In February 2, 2016, there was a reprisal attack in Agatu community in which seven people lost their lives. The herders subsequently invaded Tom-Anyin and Tom-Ataan communities in Buruku where 10 people were massacred. Between February 24 and 28, 2016, there was another reprisal attack in Agatu against the alleged killing of a prominent Fulani Man by the people of Agatu in 2013. In this particular incident 300, persons were massacred while 7,000 were displaced. In January 2017, another crisis erupted between the farmers and herders in Ipiga village in Ohimini local government area, where two herders and thirteen villagers were killed. In March 2, 2017 there was renewed hostility between herdsmen and farmers in Mbalimin Community, Gwa East Local Government Area, Where no fewer than 10 person's were killed. TIV community, Mkgovur village kuruku local government area was equally attacked on March 11, 2017 and seven persons lost their lives. In March 27, 2017, herders attacked farmers in Adam village, Kwande local government are, killing one person and raped many women. In May 12, 2017, herders ambushed farmers in Tse-Akaa village Ugondu Mbamah district of Logo LGA. Table 1 presents data on the farmers/herders' conflict in the North Central Nigeria specifying death toll.

Table 1: Farmers/herders' Conflict in North Central Nigeria, 2016-2018

S/N	PLACE	DATE	IMMEDIATE CAUSE(S)	DEATH TOLL/CASUATY/DEGREEOF DESTRUCTION
A.	**Incidences of 2016**			
1.	Udeni Ruwa, Nasarawa state	January 6	Destruction of crops and many wounded.	Between 12 and 38 people were killed
2.	Agatu, Benue State	February 2	Reprisal Attack	7 people were killed
3.	Tom communities in Buruku LGA, Benue State.	February 7	Clash between farmers and herders	10 people were killed and the community was raided
4.	Agatu, Benue State	February 24 & 28	Reprisal attack against the alleged killing of a prominent Fulani man	Between 300 – 500 persons were killed and wounded and others were displaced.
5.	Mbaye-Tombo, Benue State	March 13 & 17	Dispute and destruction of farm crops.	Over 35 persons died and properties destroyed.
B.	**Incidences of 2017**			
6.	Ipiga village in Ohimili LGA, Benue State	January 24	Grazed cattle destroyed farmlands	15 persons were killed
7.	Mbalimin Community, Gwa East L.G.A, Benue State.	March 2	Renewed hostility between herdsmen and farmers in Mbalinin community.	No fewer than ten persons were kiled
8.	Tiv community, Mkgovur village in Buruku LGA, Benue State.	March 11		7 persons were killed
9.	Adam Village, Kwande L.G.A, Benue State	March 27	Herdsmen attack	1 killed, 1 injured, women raped in their farms
10.	Tse-Akaa village, Ugondo Mbamai District of Logo LGA, Benue State.	May 8	Farmers clash with herdsmen	3 persons were killed
C.	**Incidences of 2018**			
11.	Bassa Bokos, Bakinladi, Riyom, Mangu, & Jos South LGA, Plateau State	23-24 June	Herders attack	200 people were killed
12.	Doma, Awe, Obi & Kuana LGAs Nasarawa State	February to June		260 people were killed

Source*:* Oli et al (2018) with modification by author.

The table above shows that the constant clash between herdsmen and farmers results in significant loss of lives. This attendant loss of lives and property informed Benue State government decision to enact a law against open grazing in November 1, 2017. But the anti open grazing law, rather than quelling the conflict aggravated it the more. From 1st to 7th January 2018, armed men widely believed to be herders angered by the law rounded six farming communities across Logo and Guma local government area, killing over 80 people. The attacks continued with over 309 killed. Logo and Guma, largely populated by farmers of Tiv ethnic groups suffered the highest death tolls. Nasarawa state also suffered an increase in violence involving both farmers' and herder's. On 6th January 2016, crisis erupted between farmers and herders over the destruction of farm crop in Udanu Ruwa and between 12 to 38 people were killed and many wounded. From January to June 2018, over 260 people were killed in several incidents, mostly in the southern zone covering Doma, Awe, Obi and Katana local government area.

If the escalating violence has brought a heavy human cost, its impacts on local economies is also significant. This predicament in states that make up much of Nigeria's food basket could affect food production nationwide, drive up already high food prices and impair businesses related to agriculture. The killings severally undermined one of the president Buhari's major 2015 campaign pledges to bring security and stability to the country. His inability to curb the escalating violence and particularly his long delay before visiting the hardest hit states have been roundly condemned in the Middle Belt, but also some Northern leaders who accused him of lacking empathy for the group bearing the brunt of the conflict. Both farmers and herders complain that their demand for justice for past criminal acts and warning of imminent attacks get little or no response from federal authorities, For instance, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), a prominent herder group alleged that the government arrested no one in the murder of what it described as about 1,000 herders, including women and children and the slaughtering and theft of two million cattle over the period of June 2007- January 2018. Similarly, then Benue State governor, Samuel Ortom, reported that in the late months of 2017, he sent several letters to President Buhari and federal security chiefs alerting them to the danger of herder militia strikes on farmer in his state. He said he received no response. The police inspector general claimed the governor's alert did not reach him. The presidency said that letter it received did not mention any threat to any specific one of the 23 local governments. This apathy is, however, in marked contrast to the Buhari's administration vigorously response to other real or perceived security threats, such as the Shiites group, the Islamic movement in Nigeria and secessionist agitator like Igbo and Yoruba nation agitator in the south east and south west respectively. In the middle belt and south, many believe that Buhariis inattentive to the killings was because he himself is a Fulani and complicit in herder attacks. The government's failure to either punish perpetrator of previous violence or respond to distress calls has however, emboldened militia in herder-farmers violence.

4.1 Federal Government's Interventions against Farmers-Herders' Conflict

The efforts of the government through the security agencies in managing the lingering farmers-herders conflict in the North Central zone included stepping up its security measure. It deployed more police and military units to the troubled states. Following January 1, 2018 attack in Benue State, the then inspector general of police, Ibrahim Idris sent 663 additional personnel to support existing units in the affected areas. He subsequently assigned five additional mobile police units to Nasarawa state. On 9th January, President Buhari ordered Idris to relocate to Benue State and remain there until the killings stopped. The police chief spent two days in the state and left. However, the army also deployed more troops. On February 7th 2018, it announced what it called Operation Cat Race, which it said would dovetail with real-time operations, aimed at curbing conflict and criminality in Benue, Taraba, kogi, Nasarawa, Niger and Kaduna States. The air force also established new stations and deployed more assets, more assets including 1,300 personnel and two Mi-35 helicopter gunships, to the region. On June 19th 2018, the Whirl Stroke 1 force commander, Major General Adeyemi Yekino, reported that troops supported by the air forces helicopter gunships had carried out two major operations (code-named Deadly Strike and Dark Down) against armed militias in Benue and Nasarawa states, including a raid on about 40 herdsmen where some armed with AK-47 rifles camped at Kwantan Gyemi on the boundary between the two

states. These deployments signal, at least in principle, a more rubust response to the conflict. But they have produced mixed results at best. They have curbed violence and repelled invading militias in certain areas, enabling some of the displaced in Benue State to return to their villages. Yet killings continued; many sacked communities remain deserted, and thousands of displaced are barred from returning home, as security forces say they cannot yet guarantee the village security (The International Crisis Group, 2018).

According to the International Crises Group (2017) report, between 2002 and 2010, the Federal Government appointed different commissions headed by Justice Okperie, Shuhu Idris, Emir of Zazzau, Major General Emmanuel Abisoye and Chief Solomon Lar, respectively to investigate the violent conflict (largely herdsmen/farmers) around Plateau, Nasarawa and Benue. However, the reports did not see the light of the day. President Goodluck Jonathan during his regime set up inter-ministerial technical committee on grazing reserve headed by Gabriel Suswam, former governor of Benue State, to propose strategy to end farmers-herders conflict. President Buhari, after assuming office in 2015, directed the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to formulate a comprehensive livestock development plan in order to curb farmers-herders clashes. The ministry subsequently recommended the development of stock routes and grazing reserves. The recommendation however, was condemned, opposed and rejected by most North-Central states and their southern counterparts, with a view that such policy will favour the herders at the detriment of the farmers (International Crisis Group, 2018).

4.2 Management of Farmers-herders Conflict under Buhari's Administration, 2015 – 2023

Historically, the federal government over the years has explored various responses towards the management of farmers-herders conflicts most especially in the North Central zone. After his election and inauguration in 2015, President Buhari came up with a policy through the federal ministry of Agriculture and rural development, to formulate a comprehensive livestock development plan including measures to curb farmers-herders clashes. In August 2015, the Federal ministry of Agriculture committee recommended short, medium and long term strategies, including development of grazing reserves and stock routes. On 25th January, 2016, the government announced it was presenting a plan to the Nigerian Governors Forum to map grazing areas in all states as a temporary solution for cattle owners until they could be persuaded to embrace ranching. This was followed by the national grazing reserve (establishment bill 2016), sent to the National Assembly to pass legislation to address conflict between farmers and herders. The controversial National Grazing Reserve 2016 Establishment Bill which ultimately was not passed largely due to the fact that the land use act of 1978 vests all powers related to the regulation of ownership, alienation, acquisition and administration of management of Nigerian land with the state governors.

Most central and southern states governors and legislators alike vehemently opposed the above plans which they described as favoring the herders. In a bid to surmount this opposition, the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Audu Ogbe, announced in March 3 2016, that the government was sending a bill to the national assembly to prohibit cattle from roaming in cities and villages. He added that the government had ordered fast growing grass from Brazil to provide massive hectares of grasses, which would be ready for consumption within the next three months. Up until the time Mr. Ogbe left office as the Minister of Agriculture, nothing was heard about the bill and the improved grass.

4.3 The Federal Government Livestock Transformation Plan

In 2015, the federal ministry of Agriculture and rural development formulated what was referred to as a comprehensive livestock development plan through the recommendation of a committee set up by the ministry to map out measures to curb lingering farmers-herders clashes. In August 2015, the committee recommended short, medium and long term strategies, including development of grazing reserves and stock routes. On January 25, 2016, the government announced it was presenting a plan to the Nigerian Governors Forum to map grazing areas in all states as a temporary solution for cattle owners until they could be persuaded to embrace ranching. This

plan was vehemently opposed by most central and southern states with the argument that it was pro-Fulani herder's.

As a long-term solution to the farmers-herders conflict, the government, in January 2018, announced a new plan to establish cattle colonies across the country. The Minister of Agriculture, Audu Ogbe, stated that each colony was to cover 5,000 hectares (about 25km by 20km) and would be a cluster of ranches, with resources and facilities including grass, water, veterinary services mills for converting agro waste to livestock feed, schools, hospitals and markets, all secured by agro rangers. States were expected to provide land and the federal government would bear development and maintenance costs. Ranchers and Herders were to pay "a small fee". The government argued that benefits would include protection from cattle rustlers, fewer farmer-herder disputes, healthier stock, high meet and diary production, and more revenue for state governments. The Minister further stated that the plan attracted the endorsement of sixteen states, mostly from the North West and North East which promised to allocate land. Some Governors from the North Central states of Kogi, kaduna and Kwara who accepted the proposal were opposed by their people. According to the International Crisis Group Report (2018), elsewhere in the Middle Belt and much of the South, the "cattle colonies" proposal has prompted criticism from or outright rejected by state governments, ethnic pressure groups and other civil society organizations.

With burgeoning opposition from different states most especially the North Central and Southern states on the federal government's proposed cattle colony, the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Ogbe, swiftly announced yet another policy, a national livestock transformation plan which he claim will run from 2018 to 2027, as a multifaceted intervention intended to modernize livestock management, improve productivity and enhance security. He further stated that the plan aimed at encouraging a more gradual switch from open grazing to ranching. Under that new plan, ten states – Adamawa, Benue, Ebonyi, Edo, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Oyo, Plateau, Taraba and Zamfara were selected as pilot states with 94 ranches to be established in clusters of four at 24 locations spread over those states. To participate in the plan, cattle herders are expected to organize and register as cooperatives that will then be able to rent land from state governments and also benefit from loans, grants and subsidies. The federal and state governments were expected to provide a total of 70 billion naira (about $195 million) for the pilot phase, spanning three years, while private interests are expected to invest in excess of 100 billion naira (about 278 million) between the fourth and tenth years (International Crisis Group, 2018)

5.0 Conclusion

This research provided appraisal of farmers-herders conflict in North Central Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. Historically, relations between Herders and farmers have been harmonious as they lived in a peaceful symbiotic relationship. Herders' cattle fertilized the farmers land in exchange for grazing rights but conflicts have spread with increasing violent clash across the North Central states. The major effects of the increasing farmers-herders conflict in the North Central states most especially, under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration are destruction of farm lands by herders due to by climate change and the search for pastures for cattle, cattle theft and rustling. The government was not sincere and thorough in the management/handling of the conflict. Government's responses towards preventing these crises have been poor and ineffective. The consequent effect is that farmers and herders adopt self defence strategy to protect their crops and cattle respectively, and this has only exacerbated the conflict causing more loss of lives and properties as well as displacement of people.

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