ARMED CONFLICT AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study critically examined armed conflict, which has disrupted socio –economic activities in South East Nigeria. There has been a growing concern over the growing incidence of insecurity in a zone that has remained peaceful after the civil war, a peaceful atmosphere that enabled the people to comfortably pursue their legitimate means of livelihood. In recent times, the region known for its rapid growing economy that has attracted both local and international investors has degenerated to a conflict zone with investors leaving the region for other areas with living conditions and socio-economic development dwindling on a daily basis, while lives and property are being wantonly destroyed. The objective of this study is to determine the causes of this armed conflict and its consequences on socio-economic development and equally come up with solutions for peace. Through the qualitative, relying on secondary sources, the study employed content and descriptive analysis. The study adopted Frustration Aggression theory as its theoretical framework. The study findings reveled that, the perceived marginalization of the South East geopolitical zone by central government as well as the bad governance of the political leaders in the zone are responsible for the armed conflict, it equally discovered that the conflict has disrupted socio economic activities in the zone thereby increasing the rate of unemployment, poverty and crime rate. The study recommends that the Central government should treat all the zones equally in terms of infrastructural development, political appointments and as well, engage the arm groups in dialogue rather than use of force.

Key words: *Armed Conflict, Socio-Economic, Development, Resources, South-East Nigeria*

Background of the Study

Nigeria, a very large country in West African sub-region is endowed with abundant natural resources that includes iron ore, coal, tin, gold, lead, zinc, oil and gas among others, and occupies the 10th largest oil reserve globally with about 37 billion barrels and one of the world's top oil producers (Obona, 2023). This is in addition to arable land and good climate that favor all year farming which made the country to depend favorably on agricultural product before the discovery of oil in commercial quantity 1956 (Elem & Nweke, 2017).

The abundant natural resources is seen as good advantage that could propel the leaders of the

country to move the state to a level that everyone would live a comfortable life in terms of ability to have access to basic needs of life, unfortunately the country against the expectation of a state with such advantages, has continued to find itself at the bottom line of poverty index as its citizens wallow below poverty level, and occupies the world's second largest poor population, with over 57% of the people living below the poverty line (Nwobashi & Elem, 2018). Despite this rating, they maintain that the southeast geopolitical zone, being one of the six geopolitical zones that make up the country continues to maintain an average living standard.

The zone experienced civil war with the Nigerian government that lasted from 1967 to 1970 that devastated the economy of the zone (Ekpo & Agorye, 2019). However, with hard work and resilience, she was able to bounced back to overtake other geopolitical zones in terms of socio-economic development, a development that earned the zone the second richest after South West. With farming as the major occupation of the people especially in the rural communities, the zone is known for her industrious nature in terms of trading, manufacturing among others, turning Ariara market in Aba, Abia state, Onitsha main market in Anambra, as well as Nnewi to world class business hubs that attract investors from all parts of the world , including the United states of America, Europe, Canada, Australia, Asia and African countries .

The above scenario boosted the socio-economic activities in the region as people engage in one form of economic activity or other, with very low rate of unemployment, high average living standard for households, enabling the people to embrace early education. With the rising socio-economic activities, occasioned by development in the areas of infrastructure, good road network, schools, hospitals, security among others, the zone is already being touted to be the Dubai of Africa as noted by NACCIMA (2022).

However, all these dreams seems to have been dashed due to armed conflict that unexpectedly sprang up from everywhere in the country as noted by Jacob, Nwobi and Igboji (2020). The whole country like a movie scene was thrown into a perpetual conflict occasioned by various armed groups that sprang up from various corners of the country, and the southeast was not spared. In the Northern Nigeria, there is the incidence of Boko-Haram which later splinted to form another deadly armed group known as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This is in addition to the activities of various other groups such as; the Ansaru bandits that engage in cattle rustling kidnapping for ransom and attack on villages, Lakurawa Jihadist group among others. In the South West are the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) armed group for self-determination, in the South-South especially in the Niger Delter region, are the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Avengers (NDA); and in the South East are the Movement for the Actualization of the State of Biafra (MASOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Eastern Security Network (ESN), Unknown Gunmen, Fulani Herdsmen among others.

While these armed groups in various areas attack, kill, maim, kidnap, and rustle cows among others, the situation in the South East has degenerated into killing, kidnapping for ransom, destruction of property, restricting movement, imposing sit at home order at will, especially on Mondays among others, with extra deadly enforcement of the imposed sit-at-home order on the

citizens. At the initial stage, the sit-at-home order was based on the order from the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) especially each day their leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu is appearing in Court, but another splitter group of IPOB emerged and imposed a perpetual sit at home order every Monday of the week. This enforcement of this sit at home order by IPOB unarguably disrupted business activities, including markets, schools, hospitals, transportation, farming activities, social engagements, and government services among others.

Despite several efforts to reach a consensus with these armed groups to understand the havoc such activities bring to socio-economic development in the South East, their actions remained unabated. Osita, Anoke, and Eze (2022), note that this action has forced many businesses, including industries, to relocate to other zones as some investors from within and outside the country that are formerly based in the South-Eastern region now relocate or are forced to close business. The markets in the South East don't open on Mondays, and on any other day the armed groups deem necessary by mere internet order. Since it seems that they have overpowered the security agents, everyone is obeying their order to avoid losing lives and property (Omole, 2021). In the farms, the farmers obey the order of sit at home and as well have t to contend with the Fulani herdsmen, as they use their cattle to destroy the farmer's ' crops, and since they are armed, it becomes difficult to confront them, while those who ventured to resist them never lived to tell their story. Since the conflict is coming from various fronts unabated despite various dialogues initiated by both South East governors and the Ohaneze Ndi-Igbo Socio-Cultural Organization, everyone has become helpless.

This situation has further thrown the people who are already grappling with the economic situation in the country into a more precarious situation. The rate of poverty in the South East has astronomically squared up with other regions of the country, such as the North East (Obona, 2023).

It is on this note that this study has set out to find the major causes of armed conflict in South East Nigeria, determine the consequences of this armed conflict on the socio-economic development of South East, and also find possible solutions to end armed conflict in the region.

Statement of Problem

In the South East made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states, the security situation has degenerated to the extent that people are forced to stay indoors on regular basis for fear of their lives, occasioned by the activities of unknown gun men, kidnappers for ransom, organ harvesters, ritualists and the armed groups that constantly order people to sit at home on Mondays and some other days as may be pronounced from time to time (Okolie & associate, 2022). They note that farmers abandon their farms for fear of their lives; marketplaces are frequently closed, while transporters are forced to stay indoors. This is in addition to the closure of schools and other social activities. The governments that ought to put an end to the situation seem to look helpless and overwhelmed as the security agents run and hide for their lives and obey the orders of these hoodlums. These are non-state actors that have taken over the states not

only in the South East, but in the entire federation. This has made the people lose hope in the government, especially when government institutions obey the orders given by these groups, such as Mondays sit at home where government activities are suspended, including ministries and schools.

Although various communities and villages have continued to create and sponsor vigilante groups to protect them from these attacks, these groups are mere night guards that emerged as response to theft and armed robbery. These groups existed as an appreciable form of non-state security agencies with the ultimate objective of fighting crime to ensure safety and security of lives and properties of the people. However, owing to the present form of organized crime which defies the capabilities of village and community vigilante groups that operate with only cutlass, bow and arrow with little or no training, the present rate of insecurity is not a match to them as they do not have the capability to confront them (Obona, 2023).

The South East governors in an effort to tackle the insecurity situation in the zone occasioned by these armed groups, announced the resolution of the South East governors to set up security outfit in the five states of the region to be known as Ebube-Agu, to complement the efforts of the security agencies in the fight against the upsurge in crime (Nnachi, 2023), noting that the announcement came up after their South East Governors Forum meeting held at Owerri, Imo state on 11th April 2021.

Despite these efforts of the South East Governors in setting up State security outfit in their various states in the South East and the arrest and prosecution and sentencing of the leader of the split unit of Indigenous people of Biafra in Finland; Mazi Simon Ekpa to imprisonment, that people believe that controls the unknown gunmen armed group of the agitators, it is still astonishing that the activities of armed groups in the South East is still at its pick, with Onitsha main market in Anambra State, one of the largest markets in Africa still under lock and key every Monday of the week, while Orlu, Okigwe, Owerri and other major places in Imo State as no go areas. In Aba, Abia State, the story is the same, including Enugu state and Ebonyi, indicating the existence of many armed groups in the South East outside the Eastern Security Network and the Unknown gunmen men that are actually known by their community members.

It is on this confusing situation that this study sets out to assess armed conflict and socio economic activities in South East. Nigeria. To achieve the objectives of this study, the following research questions have been raised;

1. What are the major causes of armed groups in the South East Nigeria?
2. What are the consequences of the activities of arm conflict on socio-economic development of south East Nigeria?
3. Are there solutions that could restore in South East Nigeria?

Methodology

Content analytical approach was utilized in the study. This analytical technique is adopted as a result of the need for a reliable scientific method for assessing, analyzing and interpreting a large variety of materials. For clarity of purpose, content Analysis is a research technique adopted primarily for the objective, systematic and qualitative analysis and interpretation of information.

Data were sourced from existing records like books, journals, United Nations documents, World Bank publications, government and other official publications, internet materials, other documents related to armed conflict and socio-economic development in Nigeria and direct observation.

Conceptual Clarification

Armed Conflict

Conflict is a frustration-based attitude or protest against lack of opportunities for development and against lack of recognition and identity' (Wadzari, Ogundairo & Ogwuche 2023). When weapons are employed in unleashing that frustration, armed conflict is said to occur. They added that armed conflict is a state of open, armed, often prolonged conflict between nations, states or parties. It can also mean a condition of active antagonism or contention to wage or carry on warfare. Armed conflicts can be classified according to their causes: caused by ethnic, civil or social competition. They can also be classified according to whether they are intra-state (within a state) or international (between states). Fielde (2009) classifies most post 1945-armed conflicts under three categories, viz:

a. Inter-state conflicts.

b. Internal conflicts.

c. State formation conflicts.

Fielde (2009) further submits that armed conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle- related deaths in one calendar year. However, other definitions include the armed confrontation between different types of organized groups other than a government, and put the threshold at more than 100 deaths per year.

In the view of Francis (2007), armed conflict is characterized by the following;

1. The end of the Cold War and the greater possibility of using machinery to maintain and restore peace.
2. Most of the armed conflicts are internal in nature and most of the victims of those conflicts are civilians.
3. Obligations under international humanitarian law aimed at limiting the suffering caused by armed conflicts are constantly violated, due to non-eradication of war. The resultant

consequences lie in a continued deterioration of the situation of persons whom the laws intended to protect.

4. The civilian population is becoming more and more frequently the principal victim of hostilities and acts of violence perpetrated in the course of armed conflicts, for example where they are intentionally targeted or used as human shields, victims of odious practice of 'ethnic cleansing' as seen in the case of the armed conflict in Darfur. There is a marked increase in the acts of violence directed against women and children.
5. Contempt for the international rules and the collapse of governmental and military structures in a number of situations makes discussions with authorities inconclusive. Armed conflict, as shown by the characteristics above, is a dire human situation in which scarcely any human progress can be made.

Abbas (2018), states that a conflict generally is a situation in which two or more parties strive to acquire the same scarce resources at the same time, noting that it is the result of opposing interests involving scarce resources, goal divergence and frustration. It also includes incompatibility or differences in issue position. Contributing to this, Obona, (2023) states that conflict structure simplifies the complex reality in an understandable manner. However, it is complicated by the fact that conflicts often occur in mixed-motive relationships where the parties involved both have cooperative and competitive goals. The competitive element creates conflict and the cooperative element creates incentives to negotiate an agreement. The competitive element can be expanded to include frustration, obstruction, interference, tensions, misunderstandings, political and economic interests, and historical animosity.

Socio-Economic Development

Socio-economic development is seen generally as a sustained action of policy makers and communities geared toward promoting and improving the standard of living of people in the areas of improved health services, human capital development, infrastructural development, health safety, improved literacy, job opportunities, good road network, and good drinking water, among others (Ifegwu & Ethel, 2022). Ifegwu and Ethel (2022) noted that socio-economic development can't be achieved when the citizens still lack access to job opportunities, improved living conditions, and security of life. This prompted the federal government, through the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), to affirm that though Nigeria has achieved reasonable growth since 1999; those achievements have no significant effect on poverty alleviation and employment opportunities. The Ministry pointed out that the unemployment rate rose from 13.3% in 1999 to 19.7% in 2009 and 21.1% in the final quarter of 2010, while between 1999 and 2009, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased from about $250 billion to $836 billion, yet the number of unemployed people increased from 5.9million to 17.5 million.

November 20th every year is commemorated by the United Nations and the African Union Commission as African Industrialization Day (AID) to raise awareness and to spur up actions that would lead to ensuring sustenance of industries by African States to diversify the economy,

improve on the nations socio-economic and infrastructural development which would in turn create jobs and lift the citizen out of poverty line. This notwithstanding, the World Bank Reports have continued to rate the country as one of the 20th poorest countries in the world (Akwara, Awara, Enwuchoia, Adekunle, & Udaw, 2013). Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta (2010), notes that socio-economic development is the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people in the areas of social amenities such as education, healthcare services, power, housing, pipe-borne water, roads, access to means of production, participation in governance among others, stressing further that the components of socio-economic development in any country include; economic development, socio-cultural development, life expectancy, literacy and level of employment and their impacts on overall human development. Orugun and Nafiu, (2014) observes that socio-economic development expressed in GNP can increase human development by expenditure from families, government and organizations such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), adding that with the increase in economic growth, families and individuals would likely increase expenditures with the increase in income which can lead to greater human development, showing that socio-economic development can be measured in terms of jobs created, justice dispensed and poverty alleviated.

Contributing to the issue of socio-economic development in Nigeria, Anoke, Osita, Eze and Muogbo (2021) postulated that one of the major causes of Nigeria's backwardness in socio-economic development is the non-diversification of the economy, arguing that since Nigeria discovered oil, the agricultural sector that was the main stay of the economy was neglected, and as well neglected other sectors including the manufacturing sector that would have propelled socio economic development.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The theory adopted for the explanation of this work is the Frustration-Aggression Theory. Frustration–Aggression Theory was proposed by John Dollard and his colleagues in 1939 and posits that frustration is a primary cause of aggressive behavior. The theory believes that frustration always leads to aggression and that aggression is as a result of frustration. The theory argues that it is the interaction of various factors that leads to conflicts. The frustration–aggression theory postulated that frustration was a necessary antecedent of aggression, and that aggression was an inevitable consequence of frustration (Dollard et al., 1939; Miller et al., 1941). This portends that people are aggrieved as a result of the unbearable situations they find themselves in terms of inability to feed themselves and their family members, lack of funds to take their dear ones to hospitals when sick, inability to send their children to school, and take care of some other basic needs of life.

The authors of the frustration-aggression theory assume that the tenet is too obvious to require much elaboration, as they centered most of their attention on the fact that whenever frustration occurs, aggression of some degree will inevitably result.

This is concretized by the contention that life in a society is inevitably frustrating, which leads to

unlawful attitudes that degenerate to carrying arms and subsequent destruction of lives and property at the slightest provocation. This manifests in efforts to secure means of livelihood to assuage their sufferings, which are not secured.

This theory justifies the type of reactions that lead to armed conflicts in South East Nigeria. The South East region fought a war of secession with Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. At the end of the war, the region suffered significant casualties including; lives and properties, in a war purportedly declared as no victor no vanquished. However, the promise of reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation promised by the Nigerian government was never fulfilled; rather, the region continued to witness hatred, marginalization, and deprivation. The people are denied in benefitting from the common resources of the country. Political positions are schemed against the region as major positions, including the position of president has never been allowed to come to the zone. Presently, with only five states as against other zones with six states and seven for North Central, the citizens in the zones have continued to feel like slaves in a country where they ought to have equal opportunities. This has forced them to resort to commercial activities and farming. Those into commercial activities spread all over the countries, but instead of encouraging them, the government, from time to time, comes up with policies that would undermine their businesses. This is followed by incessant attacks and destruction of their properties in different parts of the country over any slightest issues that may not have any connection with them. It is at the height of this frustrating situation that agitation for the state of Biafra resurrected, which degenerated into the formation of an armed group that turned to violence as they see anything connected to the government as enemies, including those they perceive as a hindrance to their agitation.

The Frustration Aggression Theory is most suitable for this study as it reveals the frustrating conditions that gave birth to armed conflict in the region, infiltrated by criminal elements, ritualists, armed robbers, among others, as some see it as an opportunity to vent their anger on the system that frustrates them into a state of hopelessness. However, lack of control on armed groups with infiltration of criminals and others with different interests turned into the above situation with the attendant dwindling economic situation. The attacks on South East members in different parts of the country have continued to force the people to call for secession as their various calls for restructuring have never been listened to. This has cumulated to frustration of the Igbos of South East as the frustration turned to aggression

Theoretical Review

Arm Groups in Nigeria

A number of armed groups operate in Nigeria, presenting complex security challenges across the country's different regions. The specific nature and motives of these groups vary significantly, including Islamist extremists, separatists, criminal gangs, and militant groups and they operate in different forms.

Boko Haram/JAS

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), more commonly known as Boko Haram, is a Salafi-jihadist movement that aims to establish an Islamic State. The group opposes Western education and seeks the violent overthrow of the Nigerian government. The group's stronghold has been in Northeastern Nigeria, particularly in Borno and Yobe states, where it continues to pose a serious threat despite being weakened.

Boko Haram has used a variety of brutal tactics, including mass kidnappings (such as the Chibok girls), bombings, armed raids on villages, and attacks on both military and civilian targets. A splinter faction of Boko Haram, known as Ansaru, emerged in North-Western Nigeria and aligned with local bandits.

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)

In 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), rebranding itself as ISWAP. A split occurred in 2016, with a more hardline faction continuing under ISWAP and another reverting to the name; Boko Haram.

ISWAP is primarily active in the Lake Chad region and the North-East, where it has engaged in sophisticated attacks against military bases and captured strategic towns.

ISWAP is considered a highly dangerous and organized threat, responsible for daily attacks on civilians and security forces in the northeast. The group is known for its tactical proficiency and provides some social services to local populations to gain support.

Banditry in the North-West and North-Central Regions

Originally involving long-standing tensions between pastoralist herders and settled farmers, banditry in North-Western Nigeria has evolved into large-scale, a systematic criminality. The armed gang is driven primarily by economic motives rather than ideology. The most affected states are Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. The bandits engage in mass kidnappings-for-ransom, cattle rustling, extortion, and motorcycle raids on villages, causing massive displacement and destruction. Some bandit leaders, referred to as; Warlords, control significant territory and levy taxes on locals, effectively acting as proto-states.

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is the most prominent of several separatist movements in South-Eastern Nigeria that are agitating for the independence of the former Republic of Biafra.

In 2020, IPOB formed a paramilitary wing known as the Eastern Security Network (ESN), leading to escalating armed clashes with Nigerian security forces. While originally claiming non-violence, the movement has been accused of attacks on police stations, killings, maiming,

destruction of property and other state infrastructure.

Niger Delta Militant Groups

A range of militant groups in the oil-rich Niger Delta region agitate for resource control, environmental justice, and regional autonomy. Notable groups have included the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA). These militants have carried out attacks on oil infrastructure, causing major disruptions to Nigeria's economy as well as attacks on security agencies.

Transnational Criminal Organizations and Cults

Nigeria is a hub for organized crime, with gangs and cults becoming more sophisticated and violent. Groups like the Black Axe, Eiye, and Vikings have expanded beyond their university origins to operate as transnational criminal networks. Their crimes include drug and human trafficking, cyber fraud, extortion, and high-level violence, especially in urban centers.

Vigilante and Volunteer Groups

In areas where the state has failed to provide adequate security, local militias and vigilante groups have emerged to protect their communities. The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in the North-East fights against Boko Haram, while other ethnic and community-based militias exist in other regions. The proliferation of these armed groups is a security concern, as they can sometimes become perpetrators of violence themselves or act as thugs for politicians

Armed Conflict and Insecurity in South East Nigeria

Insecurity has been a continuous challenge to the Nigeria state since its independence in 1960. This started with the struggle for political powers from different major ethnic groups and individuals, culminating in the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970. However, with the end of the civil war, the South East has continued to focus on rebuilding the devastated region occasioned by the civil war that it engaged with the rest of Nigeria. At this stage, the region was relatively calm and secured (Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta 2024). However, as observed in other societies, the South East has experienced some level of insecurity primarily caused by communal land disputes, struggle for traditional dominance and political power as well as social vices which has posed threats to lives and property.

The region known for its efforts in farming, commercial activities, developmental strides and social activities has most recently witnessed unprecedented armed conflicts that are associated with the efforts to actualize secession. While the Indigenous People of Biafra that emerged after the Movement for the Actualization of State of Biafra (MASOB) has continued to claim that its

agitation is non-violent , its militant wing (Eastern Security Network) as well as

the "Unknown Gunmen" have continued to exhibit reasonable level of violence as they are well armed and attack the law enforcement agencies in constant gun battles, thereby turning the region to a theatre of war. This situation is made worse by their other activities that includes; kidnapping, armed robbery, political assassination, ritual killings, farmer-herders clashes and

Okeke (2024) revealed that a total of 254 people died in 63 incidents within five months in the South East in 2021 with Ebonyi State recording the highest with a total of 101 which included 92 civilians and 9 security agents. This record is followed by Imo state with 60 deaths that comprised of 35 civilians and 25 security agents. In Anambra state, the records show the death of 37 with 25 civilians and 12 security agents while Abia state recorded 33 casualties with 19 civilians and 14 security agents; Enugu state recorded the least casualty in the South East with a period of 23 fatalities that includes 17 civilians and 6 security agents within the period. Okeke (2024) further noted that out of the 63 incidents that claimed the lives of 254 people in South East within this period, 53 incidents were attacks by unknown gunmen. In some cases, police stations were attacked and weapons carted away, and with more weapons in their hands, their activities become more pronounced and deadlier as they spread their actions into kidnapping for ransom in the geopolitical zone as noted by Okoafor (2019).

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Armed Conflict and Insecurity in South East Nigeria

Insecurity has been a continuous challenge to Nigeria state since its independence in 1960. This started with the struggle for political powers from different major ethnic groups and individual, culminating into Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970. However, with the end of the civil war, the south east has continued to focus on rebuilding the devastated region occasioned by the civil war that it engaged with the rest of Nigeria. At this stage, the region was relatively calm and secured (Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta 2024). However, as observed in other societies, the south east has experienced some level of insecurity primarily caused by communal land dispute, struggle for traditional dominance and political power as well as social vices which has posed threats to lives and property.

The region known for its efforts in farming, commercial activities, developmental strides and social activities has most recently witnessed unprecedented armed conflicts that are associated with the efforts to actualize secession. While the Indigenous People of Biafra that emerged after the Movement for the Actualization of State of Bifra (MASOB) has continued to claim that its agitation is non-violence, its militant wing (Eastern Security Network) as well as the Unknown Gunmen have continued to exhibit reasonable level of violence as they are well armed and attack the law enforcement agencies in constant gun battles, thereby turning the region to a theatre of war. This situation is made worse by their other activities that includes; kidnapping, armed robbery, political assassination, ritual killings, farmer-herders clashes and other criminal activities (Okeke, 2024).

Okeke (2024) states that a total of 254 people died in 63 incidents within five months in the south east in 2021 with Ebonyi State recording the highest with a total of 101 which include 92 civilians and 9 security agents. This record is followed by Imo state with 60 deaths that comprised of 35 civilians and 25 security agents. In Anambra state, the records show the death of

37 with 25 civilians and 12 security agents while Abia state recorded 33 casualties with 19 civilians and 14 security agents; Enugu state recorded the least casualty in the South East with a period of 23 fatalities that includes 17 civilians and 6 security agents. Okeke (2024) states further that out of the 63 incidents that claimed the lives of 254 people in south east within this period, 53 incidents were attacks by unknown gunmen. In some cases, police stations were attacked and weapons carted away, and with more weapons in their hands, their activities become more pronounced and deadlier as the spread their actions into kidnapping for ransome in the geopolitical zone as noted by Okoafor (2019).

Table 1: Spate of Armed Conflict in South East (January - May, 2021)

State	Civilian Deaths	Security Agents	Total
Ebonyi	92	9	101
Imo	35	25	60
Anambra	25	12	37
Abia	19	14	33
Enugu	17	6	23
Total	188	66	254

Source: Ifegwu & Ethel (2022)

Table 2: Selected Attacks in South East January 2021 to April 2022

S/N	Town/State	Incident	Casualty	Month/Year
1	Orlu/Imo	Clash between Nigeria army personnel and suspected members of Eastern Security Network	Unspecified number of people killed, properties destroyed	January 22, 2021
2	Orlu/Imo	Military air strike against Easter Security network launched	Unspecified number of people killed, properties destroyed	February 18, 2021
3	Aba/Abia	Raiding of suspected Eastern Security Network camp	Camp captured, 16 ESN fighters killed	March 18. 2021
4	Owerri/Imo	Attack on Imo State Police Command Headquarters and Owerri Correctional Centre	Building torched and 1844 inmates freed	April 5, 2021
5	Orji/Imo	Shooting of 45 year old businessman, Mathew allegedly killed by soldiers	I Killed	May 25, 2021
6	Owerri/Imo	Attack on Politician, Ahmed Gulak	I killed	May 29, 2021
7	Enugu	Attack on retired State High Court Judge, Stanley Nnaji	1 killed	May 31, 2021
8	Owerri/Imo	Attack on German -based businessman, Uguchi Unachukwu at security checkpoint	1 killed	May 31, 2021
9	Enugu	Attack on Executive Officer of AutoEase, Ifeanyi Okeke	I killed	July 4, 2021
10	Enugu	Attack on Executive Director of Scientific Equipment Development Insitute, Professor Samuel Ndubuisi and his orderly	2 killed	July 7, 2021

11	Akpawfu Amagunze & Akpugo/ Enugu	Invasion of communities allegedly by soldiers after gunmen killed five colleagues and burn their vehicle days earlier	Unspecified	July 23, 2021
12	Umuoji/ Anambra	Attack on medical Doctor, Dr. Chike Akunyili, his driver and police orderly	3 killed	September 28, 2021
13	Njab/Imo	Attack on traditional rulers holding a meeting	2 Monarchs of Okwudor and Ihebineowerre killed. Others escaped injured	October 19, 2021
14	Umuhu Okabia/ Imo	Arson on home of State Commissioner for Labour, Employment and Productivity, Ford Ozumba. Attackers threw petrolbomb into the compound	No life was lost as nobody was in the house at the time of the incident	March 31, 2022
15	Ikpor/ Anambra	Arson on Nnewi South Local Government Council	1 killed	March 31, 2022
16	Amichi/ Anambra	Arson on Police station	Unspecified number of Policemen allegedly killed	April 1, 2022
17	Ikwo/ Ebonyi	Gunmen attack on policemen attached to construction company working in the area	1 gunman killed, police officer injured	April 1, 2022
18	Ebonyi	Attack on a member of Ebubeagu security outfit	1 killed	April 1, 2022
19	Ezinifite Aguata/ Anambra and Orsu/Imo	Attack on Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) personnel and arson on Orsu Local Government Council Secretariat	2 FRSC personnel killed, one injured, several buildings destroyed	April 3, 2022
20	Ekwulobia & Igbo - ukwu/ Anambra	Arson on Aguata Local government Headquarters and attack on a cattle ranch	Building destroyed, over 30 cattles and goats slaughtered	April 7, 2022
21	Obibi Awo Idemili/ Imo	Arson on house of Imo State Commissioner for Justice, Cyprian Akpaolisa and father's house	Building destroyed	April 9, 2022
22	Atani/ Anambra	Arson on police station	4 Policemen allegedly killed	April 12, 2022
23	Nteje/ Anambra	Arson on Police station	1 killed	April 14, 2022
24	Ihite Uboma /Imo	Attack at voters' card collection centre at Nkwo Ihite PU004 in Amakohia ward RA02	1 killed, Nwokorie Anthony	April 14, 2022

25	Isuofia/ Anambra	Arson on police observation post	1 policeman killed, 3 injured	April 15, 2022

Source: Okeke (2024)

Table 3: Armed Conflicts Casualties per State in the Southeast (2021-2024)

State	2021	2022	2023	2024
Abia	210	178	27	38
Anambra	221	248	53	50
Ebonyi	195	128	29	27
Enugu	57	156	53	47
Imo	242	166	108	313

Source: Amnesty International (2025)

Causes of Armed Conflict

Various factors have been identified as the causes of armed conflict across the globe; however, while the causes differ significantly in different areas, the consensus is that the causes are majorly on frustration and aggression of injustice, neglect by the government, deprivation, unfavorable economic opportunities, and political factors among others (Okeke, 2024).

In South-East Nigeria, armed conflict is caused by a combination of separatist agitations, political and economic marginalization, and a breakdown of governance, which has been exacerbated by the activities of armed groups, opportunistic criminal elements, and external factors. Key drivers include the grievances of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the state's response to the Eastern Security Network (ESN), alongside persistent issues of greed and corruption that fuel a war economy. Other key causes of armed conflict as noted by Okeke (2024) include:

Separatist Agitations

The incidence of armed conflict became prominent in the South East in 2021 following clashes between the Nigerian Army and the Eastern Security Network (ESN), the paramilitary wing of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which the separatists claimed to have been formed to protect the South Easterners against the incessant attacks by Fulani Herdsmen. The situation was worsened by the continued detention of IPOB leader; Mazi Nnamdi Kanu by the federal government, leading to escalating unrest and violence in the region.

Political and Economic Marginalization:

Another major cause of armed conflict, especially in the South East region, is the genuine grievances over perceived economic and political marginalization of the Igbo people by the Nigerian government that fueled the separatist sentiment. The lack of economic opportunity and poor public services are seen as underlying factors that create a fertile ground for unrest.

Breakdown of Governance

Conflict has created a war economy where greed and opportunism thrive. This is fueled by various actors, including criminal elements, opportunistic security forces, and separatists, who profit from the conflict, prolonging and defying dialogue.

External Actors

Transnational dynamics such as instability in neighboring regions have contributed to increased violence by allowing armed groups to move across borders and access weapons, while external interests may be involved in supplying weapons to non-state actors.

Farmer-Herder Conflicts

Armed conflict is also connected to broader farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, with separatists sometimes claiming their actions are aimed at protecting communities from armed herders and bandits.

Armed Conflict on Socio-Economic Development in the South East:

Table 4: Impacts of Armed Conflicts

Category	Details	Impact
Education	Over one million students were affected in Southeast Nigeria in 2021	Disruption of education across the region
	Closure of 3, 200 schools due to targeted attacks and kidnappings	An increased number of out-of-school children, heightening risks of youth unemployment
		Potential escalation of insecurity due to limited educational opportunities
Migration	South-East recor ds high rates of forced migration within Nigeria	Brain drain as educated youths and professionals relocate abroad
	Over 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) reported in the region	Increased strain on urban centers in neighboring states
Public Resources	Overstretched health and housing facilities in IDP camps	Reduces access to essential services in affected communities

	Significant diversion of funds to security measures	Slower development of critical infrastructure in affected areas
Tourism	Decline in cultural festivals and tourism in states like Enugu and Abia	Loss of revenue from local tourism industries
	Reduced hotel occupancy rates and shutdown of tourism -dependent businesses	Job losses and declining economic activities in the region
Economic Development	Estimated $3 billion in Economic losses in 2021 due to insecurity	Decline in domestic and foreign investments
	Disruption of key sectors such as agriculture and trade	Rising poverty and economic instability, further fueling insecurity

Source: Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta (2024)

Table 5: Government Expenditure on Internal Security in South East (2013 -2022)

Year	Recurrent Expenditure (N billion)	Capital Expenditure (N billion)	Total Expenditure (N billion)
2013	273.1	12.1	285.2
2014	410.2	48.3	458.5
2015	36	0	36
2016	189.5	21.7	211.2
2017	205.3	30.5	235.8
2018	320.8	40.2	361
2019	368.7	45.6	414.3
2020	405.2	60.3	465.5
2021	500.1	70.8	570.9
2022	525	80.2	605.2

Source: Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta (2024).

Discussion of Findings

Armed conflict in South East Nigeria has serious consequences on socio-economic development in the region. This stems from incessant attacks as armed groups in South-East Nigeria, including the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its militant wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), unknown gunmen and criminal gangs, have all created a severe humanitarian and economic crisis in the region.

.This escalating insecurity has resulted in a high death toll, widespread human rights violations, and the disruption of basic services and daily life. Amnesty International in the year 2025 reported that between January 2021 and June 2023, 1,844 people were killed, with hundreds

more forcibly disappeared, while some villages in the South East turned into ungoverned spaces, forcing people to abandon their homes and farms. These killings and disruption of lives occasioned by the brutal enforcement of sit-at-home orders have led to the closure of schools, marketplaces, and businesses. Many residents fear travelling to their homes for fear of their lives.

Ukwu, Mamah and Ojonta (2024) notes that the key consequences of armed group activities in the South East include:

Widespread killings: From January 2021 to June 2023, armed clashes, protests, and general violence in the region led to the deaths of at least 1,844 people. Reports indicate these killings are perpetrated by a mix of armed actors, including non-state groups and Nigerian security forces.

Fear and Displacement: The pervasive fear of violence and insecurity has forced residents to flee their homes, leading to a wave of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and forced migration from the region.

Economic and Social Disruption: Since August 2021, enforced sit-at-home orders, primarily by elements linked to IPOB/ESN, have led to human rights violations and paralyzed daily activities.

The sit-at-home orders have forced the closure of markets and schools across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states, causing severe economic and educational hardship. Economic losses in 2021 alone caused by insecurity were estimated to be $3 billion USD in the Southeast region. This has led to a decline in foreign and domestic investment and increased poverty as commercial activities have been stifled, with local businesses and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) struggling to operate in the climate of fear.

The educational sector is not spared as in 2021, over one million students in the South East were affected by the disruption of education, where about 3,200 schools were forced to close due to attacks and kidnappings by armed groups. In the health sector, the consequences are the same as health system collapse. Armed conflict disrupted healthcare access by destroying infrastructure and displacing health professionals. This has led to lower vaccination rates, malnutrition, and poor maternal and child health collapse. Victims of the arm conflict, including residents and military personnel, equally suffer from high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.

Furthermore, in the political sphere, there is a complete erosion of public trust**.** This is as a result of the state's failure to effectively address the crisis and save lives and property, which is one of the major and critical duties of the state.

Conclusion

The activities of armed conflict in South East Nigeria are very dangerous and devastating to the five states. It is discovered that while the citizens were relying on the government for protections, the security agencies themselves seemed to be overpowered by these armed groups thereby leaving the citizens vulnerable to attacks, maiming and killings. This has left the people with no

option but to obey every order issued by any of the groups against their wish. The study discovered that the sit-at-home order, which the armed group started with, has cost the residents of South East Nigeria a lot in terms of lives and property, as several innocent citizens, both young, average and prominent, have lost their lives in the most gruesome manner, depriving families of their loved ones, who are sometimes breadwinners, and truncating the destinies of the defenseless citizens. The enforcement of various orders including the Monday sit at home, has generated a lot of controversy, as those responsible for killings and destruction of property were assumed not to be known, forcing the government to see them as; Unknown Gunmen, despite the fact that these people are known by their community members, but for fear of attacks, the people choose to pretend as if they are unknown.

In the area of the economy, the entire South East states have been reasonably affected by the activities of these armed groups as many young people have moved in droves to other geo-political zones. These are the youth who participate in farming and commercial activities. In the villages, most farm lands remain have remained uncultivated as those that have been previously used in farm work have relocated to other areas for fear of untimely death.

Socially, the social activities for which the South East States are known have drastically changed. People no longer gather to celebrate their festivals, or go to worship centers to worship their God due to fear of attacks. Marriage ceremonies such as traditional marriages and meetings, associations gathering, and a lot more have been stopped as the sit at home transcend beyond Mondays to any day the group chooses, with the deadly enforcements. This is in addition to other nefarious activities that include: kidnapping, political assassination, ritual killings, attacks on security agents, rapping, among others. Schools are closed, including health facilities, forcing some professionals to relocate to other areas, with the consequence on school drop-out and the attendant increasing rate of illiteracy. This is equally applicable to investors who have relocated to neighboring states for fear of losing their lives, thereby increasing the rate of poverty for those left behind in an economy that is gasping for survival. Those who reside outside the zone no longer return to their states. This made it difficult for people to schedule activities. Movements are equally affected as commercial and private vehicles are vulnerable to attacks, as many loads of commercial vehicles have been severely attacked, with the passengers kidnapped for ransom or killed, thereby creating more opportunities for increased armed conflict as those who are capable would be left with no option than to sort for weapons and form their own group as options for survival in a vulnerable society.

The government that is saddled with the constitutional responsibility of protecting the citizens seems helpless and, in some cases worsen the situation as innocent people are attacked and killed by security agents in their efforts to control the situation, thereby eroding the remaining trust the people have in the government. Although several moves were initiated by the Governors of the South East to bring an end to the situation, the efforts were truncated by the fractionalization of the group. While some groups have known leaders, others operate without any identifiable leaders, making it difficult to dialogue.

Recommendations

In the course of this study and its outcome, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is a need for the implementation of equitable governance and resource allocation and even infrastructural development that can assist in addressing the root causes of armed conflict in South East Nigeria. This can be followed by constitutional amendments to enshrine the rotation of key political positions among the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Some of these positions include: the position of the president of the country, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, as well as some key ministerial positions such as the Ministry of Defense, Works, Finance, Petroleum Resources, Defense Chiefs, Inspector General of Police, among other key positions. This will engender fairness, equity, justice, and equality among the geopolitical zones and will go a long way in reducing agitations for cessation, resource control, and other forms of agitations that occasionally culminate into armed conflict in the country.
2. Governors and leaders of the five South East States should continue with dialogues with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and all their factions, to let them understand the implications of their activities, especially now that the group has been infiltrated by hoodlums. They should also dialogue with the federal government to release the Leader of IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, with the condition to denounce and dissolve the Eastern Security Network, which is the armed wing of IPOB. Those involved should be disarmed after the dissolution and amnesty granted to them, and organize programmes for skills training and empowerment necessary to help them reintegrate into society
3. The Governors of South East states should entrench good governance, by embarking on formulation and implementation of policies and programmes that create job opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths of the zone, while at the same time encouraging and empowering those with skills and creating opportunities for soft loans for small and medium enterprises instead of embarking on elephant projects that are of no benefit to the less privileged. .This will go a long way in engaging the youths in legitilate means of livelihood instead of carrying arms.

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