

A DISCOURSE ON THE POLICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES IN NIGERIA, 1966 – 1998

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Nigerian Police Force in protecting human rights as it discharged its constitutional responsibilities between 1966 and 1998. Nigeria has experienced political instability, military coups, and authoritarian rule, leaving the Police to manage the consequences during these periods. The Police, as an instrument of state power, have often assumed this crucial role by ensuring that there is law and order. In enforcing law and order, the Police usually fail to adhere to state and international human rights standards. Relying on qualitative methods for analysis and written and unwritten sources for documentation, the paper finds that the role of the Nigerian Police Force in human rights protection has been largely ignored, with much emphasis focusing on police brutality, torture, excessive use of force, extrajudicial executions of suspects, as well as other unprofessional acts. Thus, this paper argues that the Nigerian Police Force has made remarkable achievements in combating the tide of criminality in society, which would have otherwise led to human rights violations by criminal elements. The paper also agrees that police human rights records have been abysmal, which has affected citizens' police relations. The paper recommends sustained efforts to professionalise the Nigeria Police Force and implement measures aimed at promoting accountability within the institution.

Key Words: Nigeria, Police, Human Rights, Violations, People

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the Nigerian Police Force has made significant contributions to preventing high-profile cases from escalating into serious human rights violations. A. B. Dambazau noted the precarious security situation in Nigeria within the time frame of this study when he opined that:

The 1970s in Nigeria saw a rise in the crime rate, attributed to the consequences of the civil war and the spread of small arms. The oil boom of the period gave rise to the get-

rich-quick syndrome and the threat of armed robbery in the country. The 1980s witnessed the expression of fear within communities, with almost every household surrounded by high walls and fences to prevent easy access to individual homes by criminal intruders, especially in larger cities.¹

The seriousness of the situation demanded police intervention. They had, to a large extent, responded to bringing law and order in the face of the emerging threats. The Nigerian Police is a key government institution tasked with maintaining internal security, which includes safeguarding lives and property, preventing and detecting crime, apprehending offenders, preserving law and order, and maintaining public safety, among other things, to ensure peaceful coexistence throughout the nation.² In line with the mandate, the Police have made efforts to tackle criminal activities across Nigeria, which has led to criticism about the Police's human rights violations records due to their mode of operations. It is expected that law enforcement officers play a crucial role in combating crime, and this should be done within the framework of democratic principles and the rule of law.

Complaints of police abuse of human rights in Nigeria and in many African countries and beyond have been so loud in recent times to the extent that questions have been raised about police professionalism.³ Questioning the activities of the Police and their human rights records is expected in a democratic society. It is tenable for the Police to live above board and to be circumspect in their dealings with the civilians. However, this is not to say that the Nigerian Police have not made significant progress in handling internal security issues, which have resulted in the protection of human rights. The Police are the first point of contact in times of emergency, and they have on several occasions risen to the challenge to provide the necessary security, even though this often comes at a cost to human rights. The complaints about police

¹ A. B. Dambazau, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2011). p. 249.

² The Nigerian National Assembly, "The 1991 Police Act Laws of the Federation", www.lawofnigeria.placng.org (accessed and retrieved, July 28 2025)

³ A. B. Dambazau, *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2011), pp. 283-6.

human rights abuses in recent times tend to overshadow their contributions in defending human rights. Thus, this paper examines police contributions to human rights by focusing on police intervention in religious riots in Northern Nigeria, internal conflict matters, armed robbery, and crime prevention across the country, among other areas, to analyse their contributions to the protection of human rights in Nigeria. It also examined areas where the Police had violated human rights, to improve overall conditions for the benefit of the country.

Explaining Human Rights Practices in the context of Nigerian Laws and International Instruments.

Human rights are rights that all humans are entitled to. These rights define relationships between individuals and power structures, especially within the state. Human rights delimit state power and, at the same time, require states to take positive measures and ensure everyone enjoys their rights.⁴ Human rights encompass the total of individual and collective rights established in the state's constitution and international laws. Governments and their agents are obligated to respect and protect these rights. Doing this forms the basis for legal entitlements and remedies in the case of non-fulfilment.⁵ The possibility of pressing claims and demanding redress differentiates human rights from the precepts of ethical or religious value systems. Thus, from a legal standpoint, human rights can be seen as the sum of individual and collective rights recognised by sovereign states and enshrined in national legislations and international human rights instruments. Human rights pertain to all aspects of life. Their observance enables individuals to determine and live their own lives in liberty, equality, and human dignity.

⁴United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, *Human Rights Handbook for Parliamentarians*. Inter-Parliamentary Union for democracy, 2016. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/handbookparliamentarians.pdf> (accessed and retrieved May 22 2025).

⁵United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, *Human Rights Handbook for Parliamentarians*.

Human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as collective rights of the peoples. These rights are guaranteed in article 1-30 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State of the United Nations in 1948, Articles 1-27 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1967, Articles 1-25 of International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICECR) 1967. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) 1981, adopted by the 18th Assembly of Heads of State in Nairobi, Kenya. These rights were domesticated in Chapter Three of the 1960 Independence Constitution, Chapter Three of the 1963 Republican Constitution, and Chapter Four of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, respectively. These rights are:

The Right to life; Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; Freedom from slavery, servitude and forced labour; Right to liberty and security of person; Right of detained persons to be treated with humanity; Freedom of movement; Right to a fair trial; Prohibition of retroactive criminal laws; Right to recognition as a person before the law; Right to privacy; Freedom of thought, conscience and religion; Freedom of opinion and expression; Prohibition of propaganda for war and of incitement to national, racial or religious hatred; Freedom of assembly; Freedom of association; Right to marry and found a family; Right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, vote, be elected and have access to public office.⁶

The reason for stating these rights was to moderate the conduct of states and their agents when dealing with human beings, following the end of World War II in 1945. The carnage caused in the First and Second World Wars made it imperative to accord man the necessary rights to avoid society descending into the state of nature, where life was brutal and nasty. This was because, most of the time, states and their security agencies tend to overreach themselves in the course of performing their duties.

In Nigeria, for instance, there were often complaints of human rights abuses by the security agencies, particularly the Nigeria Police Force, which were widespread. These include:

⁶The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner, Handbook for Parliamentarians.

beating and kicking citizens, unnecessary use of restraints such as handcuffs and leg chains, excessive use of lethal firearms against suspects and members of the public, torture of suspects to extract a confession or extort gratification.⁷ Although the Police have made efforts to address these violations, they are not enough.

The Nigeria Police Force and the Defence of Human Rights in Nigeria

It is trite that the Nigerian Police are responsible for internal security in the country. The importance of saddling the Police with such human rights protection responsibility was to ensure that there were institutions of human nature to watch impartially, thereby curbing the excesses of strong men against the weak and promoting the peace, functionality, and prosperity of the Nigerian state. The absence of the Police in Nigerian communities may result principally in anarchy, where the men of the underworld compromise human rights. Therefore, the Police dignify these in the following areas:

I. Curtailing the Excesses of Armed Robbery Across Nigeria

The end of the civil war in 1970, the Liberian and Sierra Leonean wars saw a surge in armed robbery cases across Nigeria. The Nigerian Police rose to the challenge and contained the emerging threats to Nigeria's internal security. After the wars, many young people who were exposed to the use of weapons, particularly during the civil war, and could not return them, resorted to using the guns to commit armed robbery, which became a problem in Nigeria and for the Police, who were poorly equipped at the time. It was not uncommon for Nigeria to experience such criminal activities at the end of the civil war. Situations involving violent criminal activities were everyday in post-conflict settings. That was why, after conflicts that involved the use of arms, it is always advisable to embark on a comprehensive disarmament plan

⁷ Oputa Panel Report, Vo. 4, p.224.

to prevent former combatants from using the arms to embark on criminal activities that could threaten societal peace.⁸

In the case of Nigeria, it was reported that after the Civil War, the government was unable to retrieve all the weapons, rifles, sidearms, and magazines, which were available in large quantities, where criminal elements exploited their availability and used them to terrorise, kill, and dispossess innocent people of their belongings. This posed a serious challenge to the government, particularly the Police, whose duties were to counter such criminal activities. Thus, Omen asserts:

By the time the civil war in Nigeria ended in 1970, weapons had remained widely accessible. Not all ex-fighters surrendered their guns, and many traded them on the black market. This gave rise to criminal gangs with firearms who could not only challenge the police authority but also, in many instances, dominate local shootouts.⁹

To curtail the excesses of the armed gangs in the country, the General Yakubu Gowon regime promulgated Decree No. 47, legalising the public execution of armed robbers. Public executions were intended to deter armed robbery. Rather than public executions to discourage criminal activities, more incidents of theft were recorded. Omeni noted that armed robbery cases rose from 81 in 1970 to 114 in 1971 in Lagos State alone. 1972 and 1973 experienced a lull in armed robbery activities, but they rose again from 1974 to 1979. For instance, in 1974, 144 cases were recorded, in 1975, 343, in 1976, 656, and in 1977, 1,051. As Nigeria returned to the democratic path in 1979, Decree No. 47 was seen as being draconian, undemocratic, and unworthy of being practised in a democratic setting. Thus, the democratic government of President Shehu Shagari decided to abolish it. However, when the military returned under Muhammadu Buhari, the government agreed to continue the death sentence for armed robbery.

⁸ Akali Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria: A Comprehensive History* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022). p.171

⁹ Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria*, p.171.

In 1995, the Sani Abacha government invoked the Robbery and Firearms (Special Provisions) Act of 1984. His government lined up 43 armed robbers and shot them dead at Kirikiri and other prisons in the full glare of thousands of Nigerians.¹⁰

Despite the public executions, these daring men of the underworld continued to operate without fear, making the Police seem weak and turning them into a joke in the maintenance of the country's internal security. For instance, Ishola Oyenusi, known as the "Doctor of Robbery," and his cohorts shot and killed a car owner without challenge from the Police and took the car along Herbert Macaulay Road, Yaba, Lagos. The reason he gave for killing the car owner and stealing the vehicle was that his girlfriend needed money for makeup. He and his gang also attacked the West Africa Household Utilities Manufacturing (WAHUM) factory in Ikeja, Lagos, stealing £200,000 and killing a police officer in the process. The Police then launched a search, leading to his arrest, trial, and execution in front of 35,000 spectators at the bar beach.¹¹

Another daredevil armed robber was Lawrence Anini. His robbery activities gave the police cause for concern to the extent that the then Military Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida, one day jokingly asked the Inspector General of Police, Etim Inyang, "Where is Anini?" at the conclusion of a meeting of the Armed Forces Ruling Council in October 1986.¹² Anini never spared the Police in his robbery operations. In one of the operations that led to his arrest, he attacked a police Peugeot 504 along Ring Road, Benin City, and wounded the Commissioner of Police, Casmir Akagbosu, who was in the back seat of the car. Akagbosu was injured and taken to the hospital. Another Commissioner of Police, Parry Osayende, who was in Benue State, was transferred to Bendel with marching orders to arrest Lawrence Anini and end his reign of terror. Anini met his Waterloo on Wednesday, October 3 1986, in a carefully planned operation

¹⁰ Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria*, p.174

¹¹ Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria*, pp.186-7

¹² Greg Nwoko, "Now You", *Facebook*, (November 12 2024). Accessed and Retrieved May 28 2025.

orchestrated by Chief Superintendent Kayode Uanreroro. He was arrested and tried under the Bendel Firearms Tribunal, found guilty, and sentenced to death by firing squad.

These daredevil individuals continued to operate with impunity as though they were in legitimate businesses that warranted no long arms of the law. It was that sense of living above the law that prompted these men of the underworld to attack the personal home of the former Vice President of Nigeria in the Second Republic, Alex Ekweme, in Lagos, and raid currency offices in Lagos.¹³ With audacity. The home of the former president ought to have been protected with maximum security in a manner that should have been out of reach for criminals.

Moreso, the armed robbery operations of Shina Rambo could not go unnoticed. Shina was regarded as a terror operating between the South West and the Benin Republic. His stock in trade was to snatch exotic cars and rob banks. In one of his operations, he was believed to have stolen 40 vehicles that constituted a convoy en route to the Benin Republic and sold them in the country. He was eventually arrested by the Police, tried, and sentenced to Agodi Prison for 11 years.¹⁴

II. Police Intervention in Religious Riots in Northern Nigeria

Religious crises were among the other issues the Nigerian Police faced in maintaining law and order in Nigeria years after the end of the civil war in 1970. In the 1980s, deadly religious riots called Maitasine became a serious challenge to Nigeria's internal security, leading to the deployment of security forces to the troubled areas with attendant human rights violations in Kaduna, Kano, Maiduguri, and Yola. Abayomi Olonisakin captured the situation this way:

During the Second Republic, the Maitasine sectarian violence in Kano, Bulumkutu-Maiduguri, and Jimeta-Yola was the major security challenge that necessitated the deployment of the armed forces of Nigeria in internal security operations. The Maitasine riots were a series of violent uprisings instigated by Islamist

¹³ Akali Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria: A Comprehensive History*, p.171.

¹⁴ Enyeribe Ejiogu, "Nigeria's Daredevil Robbers", *Sun Newspaper* (April 23 2017). www.thesun.ng (Accessed and retrieved May 25, 2025).

militants in Northern Nigeria in the 1980s. These uprisings resulted in the wanton destruction of lives and property.¹⁵

The Maitasine riots occurred in response to the preaching of a certain Muhammadu Marwa against the constituted authorities in Northern Nigeria in the 1980s. His preaching drew followers from Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi, Bulumkut, and Yola, where the lower rung of society found solace in his message. His message highlighted economic contradictions in the midst of abundance in Northern Nigeria, encapsulated in the massive poverty and the sufferings of ordinary people. He saw other Muslims who were not following his tenets as unbelievers and declared war on them. The government noticed his pattern of religious preaching as a security risk. It mobilised the Nigerian Police Force to remove him and his followers from where they were preaching to avoid polluting the hearts of the youth, which could lead to the breakdown of law and order.

Consequently, as the Police made efforts to get him and his disciples out of their operational bases, he also mobilised his followers to defend him and his faith, using brutal force that the Police could not contain. The Police sought the help of other sister agencies before they were able to subdue the sect. When the clash ended, scores of human rights violations had taken place. It was estimated that 5000 people died in the riot, including 14 police men, with 1652 families displaced, 401 houses destroyed, 168 houses partially damaged, and 417 shops and commercial dwellings destroyed.¹⁶ But the important thing was that the Police and other security agencies were able to restore normalcy.

In the same vein, the Nigeria Police were also deployed to quell the religious riots between the followers of the *Darka* and *Izala* sects in Makurdi in 1980, JNI and Tijaniyya

¹⁵Abayomi Olonisakin, "The Armed Forces and the Challenges of Internal Security in Nigeria" in Celestine O. Bassey and Maurice Ogbonaya (eds.) *Internal Security Crisis and Community Policing in Nigeria* (Lagos: Concept Publication Ltd, 2019). p.256.

¹⁶Omar Farouk Ibrahim, "Religion and Politics: A View from the North" in Larry Dimond, A. Kirk-Greene and Oyeleye Oyediran(eds.) *Transition Without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society Group Under Babangida* (Ibadan: Vintage Publishers, 1997). p.511.

members in Sabongari, Gusau, Sokoto State in 1980 clash, Muslim Students Society (MSS) riots against the establishment of the Anglican Church in Sokoto in 1982, 1986 Palm Sunday riots in Ilorin, Kwara State, University of Sokoto Miss 'Nana' riots of 1986, Bauchi government Secondary School fracas, 1986, Kafanchan religious uprising 1987, 1987 Government Girls' Secondary School Rabah religious riot, 1988 Gumi Secondary School rampage, 1991 Katsina, Bauchi, and Kano Riots, 1991 Reinhard Bonke Religious riot in Kano, 1992 Jalingo riot, 1992 Zango-Kataf crises, and January 1994 Kaduna religious riots.

However, an eyewitness account, Umar Kefas, explained "that without the police and other security agencies, Christian communities and their adherents would have been wiped out in the North". He especially pointed out the level of anger and resentment the Northern Muslims have about Christians, and also having a church close to the Mosque, regardless of whether the church was there before the North was immaterial to them. He made a particular point about St. George Anglican Church in Sokoto, even though the church had been built on the site before the Mosque was constructed. He appraised the efforts of the Nigerian Police for always being around when a crisis occurs. In his words: "the Nigerian Police have always been there to save the day, even though sometimes they don't respond on time". He further spoke about the riot that happened when Reinhard Bonnke came to the North, and how the Police and other armed forces had sheltered and rescued them from the rampaging miscreants. "When the riot broke out, we were more than 10,000 who ran to the police and military barracks for cover, and they protected us".¹⁷

Another account that witnessed most of the crises in Northern Nigeria opined that the Police had intervened to save the day. He pointed out that the Northern youth who professed Islam are allergic to Christianity, and once they hear Allah Kuba (Allah is Great), they are not interested in who shouted it and the reason it was shouted. The mob followed through with

¹⁷ Umar Kefas, 62 years, trader, Kaduna City, Kaduna, 16 April 2024.

violence against Christians and their property, regardless of whether they were Northerners. And once they are rioting, it is difficult to control them, except that the Police are drafted in or other security agencies are deployed. He praised the Police for upholding their responsibility of protecting lives and property across Northern Nigeria.¹⁸

In the wake of the devastating sectarian crises that engulfed Northern Nigeria, the Nigeria Police Force usually undertook a series of decisive and coordinated efforts to curb the violations of human rights and restore peace in the affected areas. Recognising the gravity of the crises which has led to loss of innocent lives and the destruction of property, the Police have always initiated a robust intervention strategy aimed at halting the violence and safeguarding the rights of affected citizens. One of them was the quick mobilisation of men and women from the institution to the troubled spot, and the deployment of neutral police commissioners or Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIGs) to the state to help ease tension and possibly bring the riots under control.¹⁹ At the peak of the Maitasine riots in 1980, for instance, Mr Sunday Adewusi was redeployed to Kano to oversee the end of the riot. In 1984, Mr Victor Pam was sent to Jemita in response to a similar problem, and Mr Mamman Nasarawa was transferred from Kano to Kaduna during the Kafanchan riot in 1987.²⁰

Beyond the interventions in religious riots, the Police had several times intervened in local boundary disputes across Nigeria to avert further human rights violations. In 1987 and 1993, for instance, the Nigerian Police intervened in the border crisis that ensued between Ukwa Eburutu in Odukpani Local Government Area of Cross River State and Okpo Ihiechuwa in Arochukwu Local Government Area of Abia State. The border crisis between the two communities had assumed a deadly dimension with an untold destruction of means of livelihood

¹⁸ Jubril Abdulahi, 57 years, Driver, Kano City, Kano, January 18 2024.

¹⁹ Hussaini Abdu, *Clash of Identities: State, Society and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (Kaduna Devreach Publishers Nigeria Limited, 2010). pp.198-9

²⁰ Hussaini Abdu, *Clash of Identities*, p.99.

until the intervention of the Police Mobile Squadron (MOPOL) from the Cross River axis. The Police also made further interventions in the border conflicts between Etono and Biakpan in the Biase Local Government Area of Cross River, as well as between Ikun in Cross River and Okon in the Ohafia Local Government Area of Abia State. Additionally, they made efforts to facilitate peace and avert further human rights violations in the Adim and Ugep boundary conflict, as well as in the Igbo Imabana and Igbo Ekureku conflict, among others.

The Nigerian Police have remained the oldest institution in Nigeria since its inception, tasked with maintaining internal security and order across the federation. To effectively tackle crises that threaten human rights, the police squadron was established in 1962. The establishment of the Mobile Police unit aimed to create an all-time-ready police unit that would be mobilised at the quickest call for quick intervention in the event of riots or other disturbances occurring within the federation.²¹ This has been very effective, considering the number of Mobile Police officers posted to troubled spots around the country for quick intervention, including the troubled Niger Delta of Nigeria.

III. Through Crime Prevention

As the primary law enforcement agency, the Nigeria Police Force is constitutionally tasked with preventing and detecting crime, apprehending offenders, and protecting life and property.²² The Police utilise a variety of strategies, both traditional and modern, to reduce criminal activities and promote public safety and human rights. One of the key strategies in crime prevention methods was deploying officers for regular patrols in urban and rural areas. Visible policing acts as a deterrent to potential criminals and reassures the public of their safety.

²¹ Ehindero cited in Hussaini Abdu, *Clash of Identities: State, Society and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (Kaduna Devreach Publishers Nigeria Limited, 2010). pp.197-8.

²² Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, "When Did the Police Become (Y)our Friend?: Changing Roles of Civil Society in Promoting Safety and Security in Nigeria" in Etambi E.O. Alemika and Innocent Chukwuma (eds.), *Crime and Policing in Nigeria: Challenges and Options* (Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2005). p. 39.

For instance, in high-crime districts of Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Calabar South Local Government Area of Cross River State, an increased police presence has been associated with a decline in street robberies and assaults. These patrols are often conducted on foot, by vehicle, or with mounted units, depending on the terrain and local community needs.²³

Moreso, through intelligence gathering and surveillance, the Nigeria Police Force relies heavily on information to preempt criminal acts. Officers collect data through informants, surveillance operations, and cooperation with other security agencies, including the Department of State Services (DSS) and the Nigerian Army. This intelligence is essential for identifying criminal networks, planning raids, and intercepting illegal activities. For example, intelligence-led operations have played a vital role in dismantling highway robberies on the Benin Ore Road, the Calabar-Ikom Highway in Kaduna, and in Lagos State, among others.²⁴

Another area of protecting human rights is in community policing. Community policing represents a shift in crime prevention, emphasising partnership between the Police and the local communities. This approach encourages citizens to act as partners in justice by reporting suspicious activities and participating in neighbourhood watch programmes. Added to community policing is the concept of Rapid Response Units, which address emergencies swiftly, such as the Quick Intervention Force (QIF), the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), and the Special Task Force, among others. These rapid response units were equipped with vehicles, communication tools, and specialised personnel. These units were trained to respond to distress calls, armed robberies, and violent crimes across the country.²⁵

The Nigerian Police Force and the Abuse of Human Rights

²³ Bassey Ekpong Ekpenyong, 48, Serving Police Officer, Calabar, Cross River State, May 20 2025.

²⁴ Abi Essien Ene, 70 years, Retired police Officer, Calabar, Cross River State, July 16 2025.

²⁵ Ezinne Udochukwu Nkpor, 55, Serving Police Officers, Calabar, Cross River State, June 10 2025.

The Police are constitutionally authorised to provide internal security for Nigeria. Section 4 of the Police Ordinance of 1943 reinforced by the Police Act of 1967 and Police Act (Laws of the Federation 1990), states the functions of the Nigeria Police as the "prevention and detection of crime, apprehension of offenders, preservation of law and order, protection of life and property, due enforcement of all laws and regulations, and the performance of such military duties within and outside Nigeria as may be required of them under the law".²⁶ These laws expected the Police to be on alert at all times to ensure that there was no breakdown of law and order in Nigeria. However, the Police could not do much to contain various human rights abuses, as will be seen below.

I. The Police and the Failure to Manage the Fallout of the 1966 Coup

However, this expectation was challenged in 1966, shortly after the first military coup. The security of the lives and property of the people of the Eastern region, particularly the Igbo people, deteriorated in Northern Nigeria in a manner that led to the killing of many Igbo and the destruction of their properties. The Police, whose responsibility was to maintain law and order, could not do much to help the Igbo people and their look-alikes in Northern Nigeria. The violent actions of the mob challenged the capability of the Nigerian Police Force, particularly the 1966 violent riots, in the maintenance of law and order in the country. Ola Balogun corroborated the extent of the killings and destruction when he noted that on June 6, 1966, 92 Igbo people were killed and 506 were wounded. By the 10th of the same month, 300 were killed, and 600 were injured.²⁷ The killings and destruction continued up to October 1966 in what was widely regarded as a pogrom against the Igbo people and other Easterners.

Going by the extent of the killings and destruction, some accounts opined that the Nigerian Police in the North was practically involved in the crisis by guiding and giving

²⁶Chidi Anselm Odinkalu, "When Did Police Become (Y) our Friend: Changing Roles of Civil Society in Promoting Safety and Security in Nigeria" in Etannbi E. O. Alemika and Innocent C. Chukwuma, *Crime and Policing in Nigeria: Challenges and Options* (Lagos: CLEEN Foundation, 2004). p.39.

²⁷ Ola Balogun, *The Tragic Year: Nigeria in Crisis 1966-1970* (Benin City: Ethiopie Publishing, 1980). pp.27-28.

instructions to the rioters about where Igbo property was located and how to locate them for destruction. For instance, an eyewitness, G.O. Ezekwe, former Senior Lecturer in the Mechanical Engineering Department, Ahmadu Bello University, in 1966, cited in Ben Obumselu, corroborated that the Police did not live up to their responsibility when he stated:

I witnessed the disturbances on Sunday, May 29, at Samaru, Zaria. I observed actions carried out against Easterners at Samaru village from the neighbourhood of my house, which was situated just across the road. Looting of merchandise, smashing of homes and property, and attacks on the persons of people of Eastern Nigerian origin occurred on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday morning. The only petrol station in Samara village, belonging to an Efik man named Mr Okon Ikete, was ransacked and its money removed. Native Authority Police accompanying the looters were seen taking a share of this money. These same Native Authority Police indicated to the mob which houses to attack in Samaru. However, a house under construction opposite mine, belonging to the Officer-in-Charge of the Nigeria Police, Zaria, was throughout the disturbances guarded by Nigeria Police Constables, numbering at various times from two to four. These constables had no identification numbers. The Bank of West Africa branch in Samaru was also protected from attack by the Police posted there. It is particularly worth noting that the same Nigerian Police did not lift a finger to discourage the mob elsewhere. When I telephoned the Army on Sunday, I was asked to contact the Nigeria Police, Zaria. When I telephoned the Police, I was told that the situation was being brought under control. Persons were killed in Samara on Tuesday morning. Bloody violence was wrought by Hausa mobs and fierce Tuaregs from the Republic of Niger, whom the University had employed as night guards.²⁸

So many accounts held the same view of Ezekwe, considering the spate of killings of the Igbo and the destruction of their property, and the inability of the Police to salvage the situation. The killings and the destruction of Easterners' property in the Northern region pointed to the fact that the Police abdicated their duties to contain the crisis. The massacre and destruction of property of the Easterners were believed to be part of the payback for the January 15, 1966 coup that took

²⁸ Ben Obumselu, *Massacre of Ndi Igbo: Report of the G.C.M. Onyuike Tribunal* (Lagos: Tollbrok Ltd, 1966). pp.54-56.

away the lives of the top political and military leaders of Northern extraction.²⁹ The Northerners believed that the Igbos had orchestrated the violence in their attempt to dominate Nigeria's political and economic spheres.

Furthermore, there are also counterarguments on the role of the Police in countering the violent uprising in Northern Nigeria against the people of the Eastern region. Contrary to the view that the Police supported the violators, Akili Omeni opined that the Police never took part in the pogrom against the Igbo people and their look-alikes; instead, the Police arrested the perpetrators and protected the Igbo in the mob action. He concluded that 170 suspects were arrested in connection with violent destructions.³⁰ He never said what happened to those who were arrested during the crisis, whether they were tried or made to pay compensation for taking the law into their own hands. Nevertheless, if the Police had done their duty well, they would not have been insinuated that they supported those who perpetrated the pogrom against their fellow Nigerians. And it was on record that the Nigerian Police Force could not do much to contain the pogrom against the people of the Eastern region, particularly the Igbo, at a time their services were most demanded as enshrined in the extant laws. It was believed that the consequences of the massive killing of the Igbo people and other Easterners, coupled with different issues, facilitated Nigeria's descent into 30 months of civil war.

II. The Police and the Violation of the Right to Life

Section 30 of the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria, as well as Articles 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1967), provide for the protection of the right to life. These articles and the constitutional provisions express respect for the sanctity of human life in such a manner that no

²⁹ Constitutional Rights Project, *Human Rights Practices in the Nigerian Police (Lagos: Constitutional Rights Project, 1993)*. p.20.

³⁰ Akali Omeni, *Policing and Politics in Nigeria: A Comprehensive History* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022). p.139.

one is expected to intentionally and arbitrarily deprive anyone of their right to life. But several times, the Nigerian Police, whose constitutional duty is to protect life and property, had been found to have deprived people of their right to life. A few cases would illustrate this in the course of the Police performing their functions. In 1971, for instance, the Police shot dead a 21-year-old Mr Kunle Adepoju, a student of the University of Ibadan. Students at the University of Ibadan demonstrated against the appointment of Mrs Apama as the Matron of Independence Hall in 1971. In the ensuing demonstration, the Police were mobilised to disperse the students. However, due to a lack of professionalism in managing the students' protest, the Police indiscriminately opened fire to disperse the crowd. In the process, Adepoju, who had just returned from class, rushed in to assist one of the comrades in the struggle. In the commotion that followed the indiscriminate police shooting, he was caught in the police shootout, resulting in his death. The death of Kunle marked the first case of a police and student clash in Nigeria.

The death of Kunle Adepoju opened a vista of police killings of Nigerian students on the campuses of Nigerian Universities. Another notable example was the famous 'Ali Must Go' demonstration in 1978. In the demonstration, the Nigerian Police shot and killed 15 students and wounded many.³¹ The death of the students followed a demonstration against an increase in their meal ticket. In 1978, the Federal Military Government, through the Federal Commissioner for Education, informed Nigerian students that while they received free accommodation, there would be an additional charge for their meals.

However, they were asked to make a sacrifice by adding 50 kobo to the N1.50 they were already paying per meal.³² This increment did not receive the approval of the students, who reasoned that Nigeria was financially stable enough not to burden students with meal increments

³¹ Constitutional Rights Project, *Human Rights Practices in the Nigerian Police* (Lagos: Constitutional Rights Project, 1993). pp.21-2.

³² Yinka Odumakin, *Watch the Watcher: A Book of Remembrance of Obasanjo Years* (Lagos: Yinka Odumakin, 2014). p.25.

and other education-related expenses, as the country had made substantial profits from the oil boom in the 1970s. The disagreement led to demonstrations by students across tertiary institutions in Nigeria, demanding the resignation of the then Federal Commissioner for Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali. The demand led to the famous Ali Must protest that shook Nigerian Universities. This was in addition to the protest in 1981, in which 8 female students of Obafemi Awolowo University died at the hands of the Police due to excessive use of force to disperse students during a demonstration in the University.³³

Additionally, in 1980, in Bakolari, Sokoto State, the Police, during President Shagari's tenure, violated the rights to life of the residents of the community, leading to the death of 14 farmers and others wounded, including the Police, in a shootout.³⁴ The issue arose when the community was asked to evacuate to make way for the construction of an irrigation dam that would provide peasant farmers and others with an uninterrupted water supply to irrigate their crops, enabling them to produce food year-round. It was agreed that compensation would be paid to the community for the land the government acquired to facilitate their resettlement elsewhere. This compensation was not yet paid when the contractor began work on the site. The community mobilised and placed roadblocks to obstruct the work. Mobile Police were invited by the state government to provide security and to remove the roadblocks. In an attempt to remove the roadblocks, disagreement ensued, resulting in a shootout. In the defence of the Police, the state governor remarked that the poor farmers opened fire at the mobile Police before the Police responded.³⁵ The issue was, why did the state government delay paying compensation

³³ Constitutional Rights Project, Human Rights Practices. p.23.

³⁴ Bennard Steiner Ifekwe, "Nigeria in Turmoil: Conflict and Crisis from Politics of Presidential Democracy 1979-1983" (Unpublished Undergraduate Project submitted to the Department of History, University of Calabar, 1985). pp.102.

³⁵ Bennard Steiner Ifekwe, "Nigeria in Turmoil

to the farmers until the crisis erupted? Nevertheless, it was on record that the Police violated the rights of peasant farmers in Bakolari.

In 1986, 4 students of Ahmadu Belle University, Zaria, were killed due to police shooting. In that year, ABU students, Zaria staged a remembrance of their comrades who died during the "Ali Must Go" demonstration of 1978, the military government of Ibrahim Babangida dispatched Police to the University. The Police, in their usual manner to maintain peace, broke into the students' hostels and opened fire on the demonstrating students and passersby within the university campus. The shooting resulted in the death of the students of ABU, Zaria. The death of the students later snowballed into violent riots in other universities across Nigeria. Following the reaction of students across Nigerian universities, the Nigerian military government established the Abisoye Commission of Inquiry to investigate the crisis. In the end, the commission recommended, among other things, that the Police should not be deployed on the university campuses as a measure to disperse crowds, let alone use live bullets on students during protests. The military government outrightly rejected that recommendation against using the Police to disperse riots at the time.

The rejection of the recommendation emboldened the Police to violate further the rights to life of not only Nigerian students but also anyone who dared to protest in Nigeria. Had that report been implemented, it would have relatively checked the level of police brutality during demonstrations across the country. As a mark of failure for not implementing the Abisoye recommendation against the use of the Police on university campuses in Nigeria, in 1987, the Police opened fire, killing students of the University of Jos for protesting against an increase in fuel prices. Also in June 1987, students of the University of Benin were killed in a protest against the direction of government economic policies.³⁶

III. Unlawful arrest, detention and the Curtailing of Civil Liberty

³⁶ Constitutional Rights projects, Human Rights Practices, p.25.

Additionally, the Police are responsible for internal security in Nigeria. It is the constitutional responsibility of the Police to maintain law and order in the country. Without a doubt, the police operation to ensure internal security is expected to be conducted within the framework of international human rights instruments, which have been domesticated in the 1979 Constitution of Nigeria. Nigeria is a member of the United Nations and has incorporated the UDHR and other international instruments into its domestic laws since gaining independence. It was expected that all the operations of law enforcement agencies must be in line with the dictates of the UDHR, which had been ingrained in the Nigerian constitution. However, law enforcement agencies often disregard these instruments, particularly police officers, when discharging their duties. For instance, Article 9 of the UDHR and Section 35 and Subsection 6 of the 1979 Constitution frowned at the unlawful arrest and detention of Nigerian citizens.

Again, Article 13 of the UDHR and section 41, subsection 1 of the 1979 Constitution guarantee Nigerians the right to freedom of movement. Article 5 of the UDHR stipulates the rights of suspects in custody as follows: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”.³⁷ However, over the course of police dealings with the suspects, the Police do not adhere to these provisions. Several examples illustrate the police abuse of suspects' rights. For instance, in 1980, the Nigerian Police, in a bid to carry out their duty in some parts of Lagos State, arrested 68 persons regarded as vagrants (People without a specific place of residence and unemployed) and took them to the Central Police Station located at Adeniji Adele Street to be tried for the offence of wandering. From the police station, they were taken to court, where they had been found to have violated the law.

The Judge ordered that the homeless people be remanded in prison pending the determination of their case. The vagrants were taken back to the Ikoyi Prison until they would be

³⁷ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (New York: United Nations, 1948). p.2. (Accessed and Retrieved May 2 2025). www.books.com.ng

brought to court. It was expected that, as the suspects arrived at the prison, they would jump out of the 'Black Maria' and return to their respective abodes, pending when they would return to court, but none of them did. The driver of the Black Maria, after waiting for a few minutes, decided to investigate why the suspects could not exit. To his consternation, the majority of the suspects lay still in the vehicle. He moved immediately to Lagos General Hospital. On reaching the hospital, 47 of them were confirmed dead.³⁸

The death of the 47 Nigerians was roundly condemned both locally and internationally.³⁹ Thus, an autopsy was ordered. The report of the autopsy situated the death of the 47 Nigerians regarded as vagrants within the context of suffocation. The van that conveyed them did not have sufficient ventilation to allow air to reach them. They were subjected to torture and inhuman treatment. Again, their arrest and subsequent death violated the UDHR and their constitutional rights. Their arrest did not necessarily mean they were guilty, given the manner in which they were treated. The Police would have accorded them the required respect as mandated by the UDHR and the 1979 Constitution until they were found guilty, rather than placing them in a van with no ventilation. The death of those Nigerians in that Black Maria revealed the callous nature of the Police. It was a direct contravention of Article 5 of the UDHR and Section 34, subsection (1a) of the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

In another instance, the Nigerian Police Force used torture and inhuman treatment as an instrument of policy to relate with suspects, and it was regarded as a norm rather than an exception. As corroborated by the Oputa Panel, the Nigeria Police more often resorted to hanging-suspension of suspects in the air with the aid of ropes tied to the ceiling fan hooks, shooting at the limbs, cigarette burns, insertion of broom stick or pins into the genitals of male

³⁸ Bernard Steiner Ifekwe, "Nigeria in Turmoil: Conflict and Crisis from Politics of Presidential Democracy 1979-1983" (Unpublished Undergraduate Project submitted to the Department of History, University of Calabar, 1985). pp.94-95

³⁹ B. S. Ifekwe, "Nigeria in Turmoil.

suspects, and inserting neck of beverage bottles into the genital of female suspect, beating with horse whips, electric cables and batons, electric shocks, mock execution, removal of suspects finger nails and cuticles with pliers and denial of food and medical treatment.⁴⁰

These measures were employed as the *modus operandi* to extract confessional statements from the suspects. For instance, Mr Okon Ekpo, a mechanic in Uyanga town, Akamkpa Local Government Area, Cross River State, was arrested by the Police on the order of his neighbour, Adiaha Ekip, in 1999, for stealing a 14-inch Sharp Television belonging to her. He was taken into one of the cells of the State Police Command, Calabar, and kept for long hours without interrogation. At approximately 12:00 a.m., he was brought out for questioning. Okon said he denied the accusation. His denial infuriated his interrogators, who used a horse whip on him to coerce him to confess. When that did not yield any result, they inserted a broomstick into his manhood until he passed out. Finally, when they could not find anything connecting him to the crime, he was released on bail for the sum of N20,000 after being in police detention for two weeks without compensation.⁴¹ Okon could not press charges for the abuse of human rights because he had no resources to pursue a court case.

Another case worth referencing was the incident of someone stealing 20 tubers of yams from Uyanga Market on September 20, 1999, and blaming it on Madam Alice, who lived near the market. Usually, Eka Nkese goes to the North to buy yams. When she returned, she left them in a space bounded by Alice's house and the Uyanga Market, where buyers came and bought items every day. One such day, Eka Nkese came to begin the day's sale only to discover that the heap of yams had been tampered with. On close examination, she found that 20 tubers of yams were missing. Without much ado, she went to the Akamkpa Divisional Police Station to report the incident. Following her complaint, Madam Alice was arrested in Uyanga and taken to the

⁴⁰ Oputa Panel Report, Vol. 4, p.224.

⁴¹ O. Ekpo, 67, Mechanic, Uyanga, Akamkpa Local Government Area, Cross River State, February 12 2024.

Divisional Police Station in Akamkpa for interrogation. Upon interrogation, Madam Alice denied having anything to do with the stolen yam tubers. Her denial got her interrogators angry, who then started beating her up. Besides the beating, Madam Alice was also denied food and access to her medication for 26 days because she had diabetes. It took the intervention of the Clan Head of Uyanga, Chief Eyo Ike, for Madam Alice to be released. When Madam Alice finally regained her freedom, she vowed never to have anything to do with the Police.⁴² When told to sue Eka Nkese and the Police, Madam Alice said she had no money, that she had left everything to God to fight for her.

However, these are a few cases to illustrate how the Nigerian Police apparently treated suspects. Suspects are treated as criminals even before they are convicted of their crimes. The idea of treating suspects with dignity, as espoused in international conventions and the Nigerian constitution, was thrown into the gutters.

The Implications of Police Human Rights Abuses on Police-Civil Relations

In modern Nigeria, police-civil relations are marked by tension between authority and legitimacy. While the Police are constitutionally mandated to protect life and property, enforce laws, and maintain public order, their actions are often viewed through the lens of suspicion and fear. Incidents of corruption, brutality, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings, as opined in the police abuse of human rights section, have eroded public trust. Citizens frequently report being harassed or extorted by police officers, particularly at checkpoints or during routine patrols. These experiences foster a climate of fear and resentment, undermining the legitimacy of the Police and discouraging public cooperation in crime prevention and investigation. Beyond the trust and legitimacy issues, the Police are also the butt of violence arising from their will to enforce legitimate or illegitimate policies of the state.⁴³

⁴² A. Eteng, 70, Trader, Uyanga, Akamkpa, Cross River State, February 12 2024.

⁴³ Alemika and Chukwuma, Police-Community Violence in Nigeria, p.40.

Another issue that came up against the Police as a result of abuse of human rights in Nigeria has been the surge in violence targeted at the Police since independence. Alemika and Chukwuma noted that in the past decades, hundreds of police officers had been killed in the course of their duty, primarily by armed robbers, across the country. Between 1996 and 1998, police officers in uniform were targeted by violence from armed gangs in Lagos.⁴⁴ Moreso, in 1999, armed gangs abducted 12 police officers in Odi, Bayelsa State. The killing of the police officers led to the use of military force by President Olusegun Obasanjo to level the entire community of Odi.⁴⁵ Violence against the Police was a form of protest against the force's operations for a change in their dealings with the masses. It is right for the Police to change course and embark on confidence-building measures to regain the trust of the people. The violence against the Police is a language spoken to the Police that they constitute part of the oppressors.

Conclusion

It is fundamentally clear from the analysis that the Police have made tremendous contributions to the defence of human rights. It is also evident that in the course of defending human rights, the Police have used extraordinary measures that are not in line with the laws of the federation and international human rights instruments. Nevertheless, the presence of the Police in society outweighs their excesses. The disappearance of the Police in communities across the country in a minute could rapidly offer criminals the opportunity to commit crimes that otherwise would have been prevented with the presence of the Police, thus showing the necessity of having the Police. In the future, the Police must emphasise professionalism as a means of remedying their relationship with the masses and regaining trust with the people. In the present circumstance, the Police are considered an oppressive, exploitative institution in Nigeria.

⁴⁴ Alemika and Chukwuma, Police-Community Violence in Nigeria

⁴⁵ E. E. Akak, "Force of Order and Disorder: The Nigerian Military Example", *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2021). pp.84-5.

Beyond that, those who have fallen short of human rights standards should be openly punished as a measure to instil accountability in the system.

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