

External Factor in Armed Conflicts in South-East Nigeria: Implications for Security and Development Sustainability

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Abstract

External interest in armed conflicts within the borders of weak sovereign states remains a major source of concern within the international system and continues to fester. Nigeria's south east region has become a hotbed of armed conflicts largely attributed to secession agitations, particularly since 2021. The increase in violence and failure by government to effectively protect life and property in the region raise serious concerns over the involvement of external interests in the conflict and informed this study which examined possible external factor in the conflict as well as its implications for security and development sustainability in the country. Anchored on the Conspiracy theory, data were collated from primary and secondary sources using questionnaire and key-informant interviews. Among other things, the study found strong but surreptitious foreign interests which undermine national integration and supply weapons used by non-state actors in the conflict. It also found correlations between the external factors and security as well as development implications for the country. In view of the findings, the study recommended strong international collaboration and technology-driven border policing strategy to curb armament of non-state actors in the country. It equally advocated for end to marginalization of the south east region in national affairs.

Keywords: armed conflict, foreign interest, development sustainability, south east, secession

1. Introduction

The spiraling armed conflict in South East Nigeria has attracted immense scholarly attention

in recent time owing partly to the loss it brings as well as the multifaceted impacts on the region and national security. It has been the contention that whereas conflicts are part of an everyday life, the armed conflicts in the region complements the 30-month cascading blood-bath of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war which ended in 1970 but resulted in destructions. More so, the repressive actions of the federal government against the undying agitation for secession by the region, including the socio-economic and political discrimination, inequity and injustice show no signs of abating, thereby exacerbating forms of social disorder and criminalities in the region. On the average, the region struggles with relative security and somewhat abnormal life for her residents as a result of the unceasing armed conflicts that create social tension (Okoreaffia & Nwokorobia, 2023).

Scholars are of consensus that the significance of the south-east to national development cannot be ignored, contending that the unending conflict has far-reaching effects. For instance, it is on records that cities such as Onitsha, Aba and Nnewi are known manufacturing and commercial hubs. Manufacturing makes up 31% and 30% of businesses in Onitsha and Aba respectively. There is concern that the unfolding violence in the south-east poses a serious threat to economic development and social stability in Nigeria (Onuoha & Ojewale, 2022). Since 2021, the relatively calm region has particularly taken a violent twist. There are frequent clashes between government forces and pro-Biafra supporters with the gunmen often targeting security personnel. Over 20 police stations have been attacked with sophisticated weapons. This has been linked to the extraordinary rendition of the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra and British citizen, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu in 2021 and his continued incarceration by the federal government.

Ordinarily, United Nations Sustainable Goal 11 targets making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. In similar vein, Goal 16 seeks the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015). It is against this background that the security situation in the South East region of Nigeria has become worrisome, mostly as it could act as an agent of retrogression in the efforts to achieve the UN sustainable goals by 2030. Besides, external involvement in internal conflicts is a global phenomenon that takes place within the framework of varying scale and mode (Eyeh, et al., 2023). Factions (whether government or non-state actors within the state) sometimes seek external assistance to triumph in the armed campaign. Most internal conflicts are internationalized as a result of intervention by one or more external interests in the prosecution of such conflicts. The intervention may take the form of moral, ideological and material support on the side of either the state or the rebel groups (Lukman, 2013). Non-state actors' penchant for clandestinely seeking external support undermines state sovereignty and sustains conflicts. Sadly, the possibility of external factor in armed conflicts in South East Nigeria has not attracted scholarly attention. There is lack of literature on the subject matter. It is in view of this, therefore, that this study interrogated external factor in the region's conflict and particularly investigated possibility of external support for the non-state actors involved in the conflict, with a view to determining its implications for security and development sustainability in the region.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study has both practical and theoretical relevance. From the practical point of view, it is useful in marshalling appropriate policy towards resolving the challenge of armed conflicts in the south east region and the country by extension. Its recommendations are apt for the role of security agencies in tackling the challenge since it recommends strategic policy measures that could be useful in tackling the insecurity. More so, the effects of the armed conflicts revealed in the study are expected to benefit the general public in working towards security and development sustainability in the region. Theoretically, the study made valuable contributions to the existing body of knowledge in the subject area of armed conflicts in Nigeria, especially as it investigated external involvement in the conflict which has not attracted scholarly attention in the past. The contributions have drawn relevant attention of stakeholders to the twist in insecurity in the south east region of Nigeria and enriched available literature in the subject matter.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Conspiracy Theory was used as framework of analysis in this study. Notable contributors towards the development of the theory in the post-war period were Karl Popper (1945) in his book titled *The Open Society and its Enemies* as well as Richard Hofstadter (1964) in his *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. They are regarded as the most influential in the early development of conspiracy theory as an analytical concept. Conspiracy theories are explanations that describe the secret and wicked plans and actions of a powerful group of conspirators as the most important cause of an event or state of affairs (McKensie-McHarg, (2019). Although such theories are by no means limited to extreme political groups, they are often central to extreme ideologies). At the broadest level, conspiracy theories are a type of explanation that describes the actions of a group of conspirators specifically consisting of nefarious, threatening and illegal actions and goals of a group, with the conspirators able to control the course of events owing to the fact that they are powerful, sly and manipulative, as well as the notion that the group operates in secret and have initiated a cover-up to hide its work through fabrication or removal of evidence and influencing those who control the official narrative (Dentith, 2019) Whether event conspiracy, systemic conspiracy or superconspiracies where a group of people are held responsible for a single even, the plotters are believed to have broader goals of securing control over a country or region, or a hierarchy of where the lower-level conspirators are controlled and manipulated to act against innocent people by powerful and distant forces respectively, the broad goals of conspirators are destruction (Barkun, 2003). Conspiracy theories have long been a central feature of radical and extreme groups, movements and parties. They contribute to further radicalization of attitudes by demonizing the enemy and legitimizing violence as a necessary political tool (Barlett & Miller, 2010).

The lingering armed conflict in the south east region of Nigeria is enmeshed in deep conspiracy where the national government and its security forces appear to believe in conspiracy theory and suspecting involvement of destabilizing interests which seek the dissolution of the Nigerian state. The belief appears to be justified by the sophisticated

weapons of the armed group terrorizing the region and which constitutes into the armed wing of the secessionist agitation by the region. More so, the historical antecedent of support for Biafra secession from Nigeria during the 1967-1970 Civil War appears to add impetus to this conspiracy suspicion. On the other hand, the pro-Biafra independence movements share the belief that the Nigerian state is determined to forcefully quell the agitation and possibly exterminate the people of the region as was the experience during the civil war and are therefore inclined to protect the region at any cost and therefore increasing armed conflict in the region. It is, therefore, in the light of this that the conspiracy theory is apt for this study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perspectives on Armed Conflicts

Scholars have reached a consensus that conflicts are integral parts of modern societies and that no modern society can claim to be immune from conflicts. The contention, however, is the degree at which conflicts are present in several diverse societies as goals, needs and expectations of a party are oftentimes withstood by the competing party in what has been described as acts of aggression and abuse that causes injury or harm to persons and properties. To some scholars such as Abbas (2018), conflict is an attitude, a behavior or an action or a process that introduces strains or stresses in the relationship between two or more parties on, say, the attainment of a set of interests or goals. The import of this is the perception that parties in conflict regard each other as a stumbling block, an obstacle to actualization of objectives. It also connotes that conflict mostly transits to violence, destruction, irrationality and physical violence (Okoroafor, 2021). It is this light that Nwanegbo and Odigbo (2013) outline the consequences of armed conflicts to include disruptions to peace, law and order, economic activities and revenue generation, in addition to damage to infrastructure and social amenities among others. Development cannot be achieved where there are conflicts. In fact, security and development are two different and inseparable concepts that affect each other (Ali, 2013; Okorie, 2011; Salawu, 2010).

2.2 Armed Conflicts and External Involvements

External factor in domestic conflicts which is also referred to as internationalization of conflicts has become a global phenomenon and one of the most pressing issues in contemporary world, with the scale and mode of involvement determined by the issues at stake. What this implies is that internal warring factions (whether government or non-state actors within the state) could sometimes seek external assistance from the international community and supranational organizations. This is a process through which an explicit and conscious decision is made by a party in a conflict to involve international actors in any phase of a domestic conflict. Internationalization of conflict describes the concept of internal (domestic, intrastate) hostility which is made international (Okorie, 2018). What this implies is that foreign actors intervene either on invitation or otherwise (Kraus, 2017). It includes provision of weapons or active fighting force.

In general, scholars are of the view that interventions of actors in foreign conflicts in which the continued existence of an established government is threatened by a group in that state,

tend to raise some concerns and influenced by conflicting interest and international politics. Nigeria is not an acclaimed military weapons manufacturer. Therefore, most of the sophisticated weapons used in Nigeria's internal conflicts come into the country from external sources. During the Nigerian civil war, several countries sold or supplied weapons and other military hardware to the belligerents. Years after, there are concerns that the foreign interests against Nigeria may have increased to favour the secession movements in the south east region.

2.3 Armed Conflict in South East Nigeria

The southeast region of Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented armed conflicts particularly associated with the efforts to actualize secession of the region from Nigeria. The diverse armed violence has been alleged to be carried out by interests affiliated to the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its militant wing (the Eastern Security Network) as well as the unknown gunmen which have engaged the law enforcement agencies in constant gun battles, thereby turning the region into war zones. This situation is further worsened by repeated cases of kidnappings, armed robbery, political assassinations, ritual killings, farmers and herdsmen clashes and other criminal activities (Okeke, 2022). This situation drives social tension and generates high level of socio-political and economic instability compounded by the belief that the zone suffers from marginalization and inequity orchestrated by the federal government.

A total of 254 people were reported to have died in 63 incidents recorded in the first five months of 2021. Ebonyi state recorded the highest statistics with 101 fatalities (92 civilians and nine security agents). Imo state came second with 60 casualties, out of which were 35 civilians and 25 security agents. Anambra and Abia recorded 37 (25 civilians and 12 security agents) and 33 (19 civilians and 14 security agents) deaths, respectively. With 22 fatalities (17 civilians and six security agents), Enugu state is the least violent state in the Southeast for the period under review. Out of the 63 incidents recorded in the Southeast, 53 were attacks by unknown gunmen. In some cases, police stations are burnt and weapons stolen. With more guns in their hands, attackers have become bolder and have branched into other criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom in the zone's five states (Okoroafor, 2021)

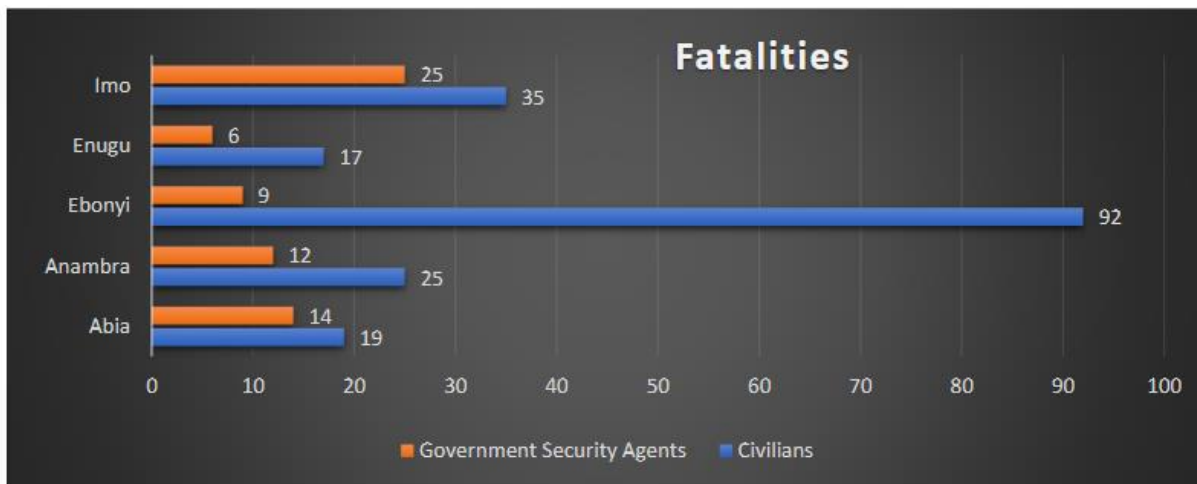


Figure 1. Spate of armed conflict in South East (January – May, 2021).

Source: Ifegwu & Ethel (2022)

Figure 2 presents the types of armed conflicts in the South East Nigeria.

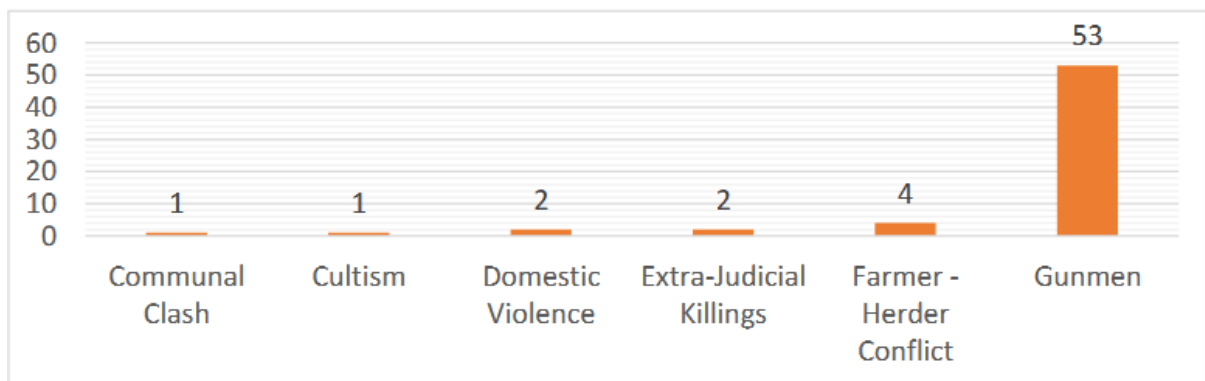


Figure 2. Types of Armed Conflict in South East (January – May, 2021)

Source: Onuoha & Ojewale (2022)

As the figure shows, activities of unknown gunmen were highest within the period. Equally, tables 1 and 2 present human casualty figure in the region in 2021.

Table 1. Human Casualty Figure in South East Nigeria between February and October, 2021

S/N	State	Number of Casualties
1	Abia	10 (9 security personnel and one civilian)
2	Anambra	76 (24 security personnel and 52 civilians)
3	Ebonyi	33 (9 security personnel and 24 civilians)
4	Enugu	34 (25 security personnel and nine civilians)
5	Imo	41 (11 security personnel and 30 civilians)

Source: Ede (2021). Tabular presentation by the researcher.

Table 2. Select Violent Attacks in South East Nigeria, January 2021 to April 2022

S/N	Town/State	Incident	Casualty	Month/Year
1	Orlu/Imo	Clash between Nigerian army personnel and suspected members of Eastern Security Network.	Unspecified number of people killed, properties destroyed.	January 22, 2021
2	Orlu/Imo	Military airstrike against Eastern Security Network launched.	-	February 18, 2021
3	Aba/Abia	Raiding of suspected Eastern Security Network camp.	Camp captured, 16 ESN fighters allegedly killed.	March 23, 2021
4	Owerri/Imo	Attack on Imo State Police Command headquarters and the Owerri Correctional Centre.	Buildings torched and 1844 inmates freed.	April 5, 2021
5	Orji/Imo	Shooting of 45-year old businessman, Mathew allegedly by soldiers.	1 killed.	May 25, 2021
6	Owerri/Imo	Attack on politician, Ahmed Gulak.	1 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 Chief Executive Officer of AutoEase, Ifeanyi Okeke.	1 killed	July 4, 2021
10	Enugu	Attack on Executive Director of Scientific Equipment Development Institute, Professor Samuel Ndubuisi and his orderly.	2 killed	July 7, 2021
11	Akpawfu Amagunze and Akpugo	Invasion of communities allegedly by soldiers after gunmen killed five	Arrest of unspecified number of youths.	July 23, 2021

	communities/Enugu	colleagues and burn their vehicle days earlier.		
12	Umuoji/Anambra	Attack on medical doctor, Dr. Chike Akunyili, his driver and police orderly.	3 killed.	September 28, 2021
13	Njaba/Imo	Attack on traditional rulers holding a meeting.	2 monarchs of Okwudor and Ihebineowerre killed. Others escaped with various degrees of injury.	October 19, 2021
14	Umuhu Okabia/Imo	Arson on home of State Commissioner for Labour, Employment and Productivity, Ford Ozumba. Attackers threw petrol bomb into the compound.	No life was lost as nobody was in the house at the time of the incident.	March 31, 2022
15	Ukpor/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 a 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 of Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) personnel and arson on Orsu local government council secretariat.	2 FRSC personnel killed, one injured, several buildings torched.	April 3, 2022
20	Ekwulobia and Igbo-ukwu/Anambra	Arson on Aguata local government headquarters and attack on a cattle ranch.	Buildings torched, over 30 cattle and goats slaughtered.	April 7, 2022
21	Obibi Awo Idemili/Imo	Arson on house of Imo State Commissioner for Justice, Cyprian Akaolisa and father's house.	Buildings torched.	April 9, 2022
22	Atani/Anambra	Arson on police station.	Four 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 dead (Nwokorie Anthony)	April 14, 2022
25	Isuofia/Anambra	Arson on police observation post.	3 policemen injured, 1 killed.	April 15, 2022

Source: Compilation by Researcher

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Okoreaffia & Nwokorobia (2023) in a paper titled Southeast insecurity and sustainable national economic development in Nigeria employed library research as methodology to explicate the state of insecurity in the southeast and how it undermines national economy of the country. It analysed the prevailing anarchic environment as strangulator of socio-economic life and activities with untold adverse effects on the productivity of the region and the nation, in an era of competitive global march towards sustainable development. The paper found that incessant conflicts and social disorder create severe psychological, political and socio-economic dysfunctions. It further found that the inhabitants face terrorization due to the chaos and violence associated with the activities of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the sit-at-home order and its related issues including kidnappings, farmers/herders clashes and other forms of criminality that cripple daily life and interactions in the area; culminating to a state of uncertainty, fear and low morale occasioned by the fierce gun battles and reprisal attacks between government forces, agitators and unknown clandestine groups. It equally found that the precarious situation significantly paralyzes socio-economic endeavours in the domain of a people characteristic of renowned economic enterprise, and valued contributor to Nigeria's economic growth. It therefore recommended effective reformation of the law enforcement agencies, good governance that addresses concerns of IPOB agitators and the zone; and other strategies for southeast stability and sustainable national economic advancement.

Similarly, Ebisi (2020) in a study titled, Third Conflict in Nigeria: Implications for South East Region examined conflicts across the south eastern states with a view to identifying the underlying causes of the crisis and their general impact on the south east region of Nigeria. The paper adopted a mixed method approach, drawing data from both secondary and primary sources and found out that there have been persistent attacks on communities of the south east with increased criminal activities of kidnapping, rapes, wanton destruction of farmlands and loss of lives. In view of the finding, the paper recommended among others the reformation of existing ranches and establishment of new ones in the northern parts to curb cattle roaming; address environmental challenges of desertification that force herders southward, strengthen law enforcement and security strategies that will ensure equitable justice; restructuring of the already community vigilantes to modern community police for immediate response to crisis.

Also, Ifegwu & Ethel (2022) in a study titled Security challenges in Nigeria and sustainable development: A focus on the Southeast Geo-Political Zone x-rayed how security issues have affected sustainable development in south east Nigeria. It adopted qualitative research method through secondary sources of data and documentary approach of data analysis. The study was anchored on the relative deprivation theory and found out that marginalization of the region as well as the high-handedness of security agents are among the drivers of insecurity in the region. It also found out that the insecurity has adversely affected economic development and wellbeing of the people. It therefore advocated for realignment of the Nigeria polity as well as strategic, fair and purposeful leadership both within the zone in order to tackle the insecurity.

Eyeh, E. et al (2023) in a study titled The roles and consequences of foreign involvement in Nigeria’s internal violent conflicts examined the roles, reasons for and manifestations of foreign involvement in Nigeria’s violent conflicts as well as analyze the consequences of such involvement, noting that even though a number of studies have been conducted on the aforementioned conflicts, emphasis has largely been on the general causes, course and other related internal dynamics surrounding them. The study found out that foreign involvement in Nigeria’s internal violent conflicts has done a lot of damage to the country. It equally found out that in addition to the involvement of foreign actors, some of the conflicts were encouraged by local elements who benefitted from the situation. Among others, the paper recommended that election of purposeful and patriotic leaders and adoption of early-warning early-response system.

3. Methodology

The study utilized the mixed-method research design. Primary and secondary data were adopted and collated using the questionnaire instrument as well as key informant interview respectively. Both stratified and purposive sampling techniques were applied. The population of twenty one million, six hundred and nineteen thousand, four hundred (21, 619, 400) of South East was considered too large. To determine the sample size therefore, the Taro Yamani (1964) sample size determination statistical formula cited in Obi & Ugwu (2012) was applied. Thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where n = Sample size
 N = Population size
 e = Error margin allowed
 I = Constant

$$n = \frac{21,619,400}{1 + 21,619,400 (0.0025)^2} = 399.99 \text{ or } \mathbf{400}$$

Therefore, the sample size for the study is 400. The number of questionnaire used was 400 and distributed with research assistants as follows:

Abia State

$$\frac{3,727,300 \times 400}{21,619,400} = \frac{1,490,920,000}{21,619,400} = \mathbf{68.962} = \mathbf{69}$$

Anambra State

$$\frac{5,271,800 \times 400}{21,619,400} = \frac{2,108,720,000}{21,619,400} = \mathbf{97.538} = \mathbf{97}$$

Ebonyi State

$$\frac{2,800,400 \times 400}{21,619,400} = \frac{1,120,160,000}{21,619,400} = 51.812 = 52$$

Enugu State

$$\frac{4,411,100 \times 400}{21,619,400} = \frac{1,764,440,000}{21,619,400} = 81.613 = 82$$

Imo State

$$\frac{5,408,800 \times 400}{21,619,400} = \frac{2,163,520,000}{21,619,400} = 100.073 = 100$$

Total: 400

Table 2. Sample Size Distribution

State	Population	Sample Size	Percentage (%)
Abia State	3,727,300	69	
Anambra State	5,271,800	97	
Ebonyi State	2,800,400	52	
Enugu State	4,411,100	82	
Imo State	5,408,800	100	
Total	21,619,400	400	100

Source: Research Report, 2024

Table 3. Distribution of Questionnaire

State	No. Distributed
Abia State	69
Anambra State	97
Ebonyi State	52
Enugu State	82
Imo State	100
Total	400
Percentage	100%

Source: Research Report, 2024

Table 4. Return Rate of Distributed Questionnaire

State	No. Distributed	No. Returned	No. Not Returned	No. Condemned	No. Used
Abia	69	62	7	8	54
Anambra State	97	84	13	5	79
Ebonyi State	52	49	3	8	41
Enugu State	82	70	12	11	59
Imo State	100	91	9	10	81
Grand Total	400	356	44	42	314
Percentage %	100 %	89 %	11%	10.5%	78.5%

Source: Research Report, 2024

The raw scores from the responses of respondents were tallied and their frequency and percentage worked out. For the key-informant interview, purposive sampling technique was utilized to select five experts in security and economy matters, as well as international relations for responses.

Area of Study

South East Nigeria is made up of five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. (Brinkhoff, 2018). It has a population of 21 million people (Merem, et al. 2019) with spread shown on table 5.

Table 5. Population of South East Nigeria

States	Population
Abia	3,727,300
Anambra	5,271,800
Ebonyi	2,800,400
Enugu	4,411,100
Imo	5,408,800
Total	21,619,400

Source: Merem et al. (2019).

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Questionnaire Responses

Table 6. External Factor in Armed Conflict in South East Nigeria and Implications

Responses	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
External interests work for disintegration of Nigeria	172 55%	62 20%	17 5%	34 11%	29 9%	314 100%
Foreign interests supply weapons used in armed conflict in South East	120 38%	67 21%	44 14%	28 9%	55 18%	314 100%
Chief promoters of armed unrest in South East protected abroad	156 50%	51 16%	25 8%	50 16%	32 10%	314 100%
Activities against Nigeria receive favourable attention abroad	164 52%	53 17%	37 12%	28 9%	32 10%	314 100%
External factor in armed interest in South East has adverse implication for security sustainability in Nigeria	156 50%	56 18%	28 9%	40 13%	34 11%	314 100%
Sustainable development is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East	168 54%	55 18%	20 6%	43 14%	28 9%	314 100%

Source: Research Report, 2024.

Table 4.1 reveals that 172 or 55% of the respondents used indicated strongly agree on external interests work for disintegration of Nigeria, 62 or 20% respondents indicated agree, 17 or 5% respondents indicated don't know, 34 or 11% respondents indicated disagree, and 29 or 9% respondents indicated strongly disagree. Also, 120 or 38% of the respondents indicated strongly agree on foreign interests supply weapons used in armed conflict in South East, 67 or 21% respondents indicated agree, 44 or 14% respondents said don't know, 28 or 9% respondents indicated disagree, while 50 or 18% respondents indicated strongly disagree. Similarly, 156 or 50% of the respondents indicated strongly agree on Chief promoters of armed unrest in South East protected abroad, 51 or 16% respondents indicated agree, 25 or 8% of the respondents indicated don't know, 50 or 16% respondents indicated disagree, and 32 or 10% respondents indicated strongly disagree. On external factor in armed interest in South East has adverse implication for security sustainability in Nigeria, 164 or 52% of the respondents indicated strongly agree, 53 or 17% respondents indicated agree, 37 or 12% respondents indicated don't know, 28 or 9% respondents indicated disagree, while 32 or 10% respondents indicated strongly disagree. 156 or 50% of the respondents indicated strongly

agree on security sustainability is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East, 56 or 18% respondents indicated agree, 28 or 9% respondents indicated don't know, and 40 or 13% respondents indicated disagree, while 34 or 11% respondents indicated strongly disagree. Equally, 168 respondents representing 54% of the returned copies of questionnaire strongly agreed that sustainable development is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East. 55 or 18% agreed, 20 (6%) indicated don't know, 43 (14%) disagreed, while 28 (9%) strongly disagreed.

Analysis of the responses shows that greatest number of the respondents agreed that external interests work for disintegration of Nigeria, foreign interests supply weapons used in armed conflict in South East, and that chief promoters of armed unrest in South East protected abroad. Also, they believe that external factor in armed interest in South East has adverse implication for security sustainability in Nigeria while sustainable development is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East.

Key-Informant Interview:

On the issue of external interests and disintegration of Nigeria, a top security expert noted that:

Nigeria is a volatile state with porous international borders. There is no doubt that external interests cash in on this to work for the disintegration of the country by arming the non-state actors operational in the south east so that the country can disintegrate. This is international politics at play. A critical question should be: is Nigeria unaware that there are countries that wish to her disintegrate? Of course, there is no reason the country will feign ignorance to this. If not for anything else, experience during the civil war proved that.

The implication of this is that regardless of her policy of good neighbourliness, as well as position disposition at the international level, Nigeria is not oblivious of the fact that certain vested interests work against her national unity by clandestinely supporting activities that push for her disintegration, particularly through secession. This also supports the position of the 172 or 55% of the respondents who indicated strongly agree on the issue of external interests working for disintegration of Nigeria. Part of the mechanisms of achieving the objection is by arming the agents of destabilization against the country as one of the interviewees posited.

On foreign interests supply weapons used in armed conflict in South East, another top security expert noted that:

When you take a look at the weapons used by the criminal elements, particularly those who push the theory that they are fighting for break-up of the country, you will understand what I mean that foreign interests are behind their activities. Ordinarily, there is no open market where such sophisticated weapons are sold. Even the illegal local fabricators do not produce such weapons. Till date, it beats intelligence on how the weapons

manage to reach the hands of the gunmen and arsonists. However, a consensus is that they are smuggled and supplied from abroad through merchants or collaborators. Also, it is believed that those who supply the weapons know exactly what they used in Nigeria for.

On the question of chief promoters of armed unrest in South East are protected abroad and activities against Nigeria receive favourable attention abroad, an international relations expert said that:

Within the ambit of relevant international protocol and through the international police, countries surrender or deport individuals who promote violence in another sovereign state to such states to account for their actions, especially when a request is made to that effect. If you check the records of those who promote disunity in the south east, including Nnamdi Kanu and Simon Ikpa, you will discover that they operate from outside Nigeria. In fact, recall that Kanu is a Nigerian-British citizen while Ikpa resides in Finland, Europe too. It is from these locations that they promote their acts of break-up of Nigeria, including supporting terrorism in south east. Their international engagements also receive the blessings of the global community which has not thought it wise to consider the heinous crimes they commit in Nigeria, with a view to arresting and repatriating them until the extraordinary rendition of Kanu took place in 2021.

The position of the international expert is an affirmation of a known fact. It is mostly difficult to successfully coordinate and execute armed conflict in south east without external collaboration. That the conflict in south east remains a success is largely attributed to the fact that chief promoters of armed unrest in South East are protected abroad and the activities against Nigeria receive favourable attention abroad. These constitute the factors that supply oxygen to the conflict. That the promoters of the armed conflict in south east are not resident in the country is mainly responsible for the continuation of the conflict, and this comes with huge costs.

A key question is whether the external factor in armed conflict in south east will ever lead to security sustainability in Nigeria. On this, another expert in international relations agreed with 156 or 50% of the respondents polled through questionnaire who indicated strongly agree on the fact that security sustainability is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East. According to the expert:

There is no way security in Nigeria will be sustainable with this kind of sabotage. Mind you, the foreign interests, if they are state actors and developed economies, are far ahead of Nigeria and could be manufacturers of the offensive weapons. Since they have indicated interest to destabilize Nigeria, the country will have a long battle to win back her security. It is, indeed, a long ride. Experiences have shown that no country whose security is sabotaged such as Nigeria comes out of insecurity in a short period of time.

This position seems to reinforce the fact that the renewed armed conflict in south east which has also lingered will not come to an end soon. It could have explained why Nigeria security forces appear not to be winning back security in the region. This could have reinforced the belief in the involvement of external factors in the conflict. However, a key question is about the implications for development sustainability in the country.

According to a development expert:

Just take a look on Nigeria and see whether it is developing sustainably. Also, consider the development trajectory in the south east, in view of the ongoing armed conflict there. It is just logical that no sustainable or what they call meaningful development will ever take place in an unsafe environment. With the climate of fear, how will investors come? How will developmental projects be executed? What is the guarantee that efforts to bring development to the region will succeed with the rate of arson ongoing there? You ask yourself, in the context of this conflict situation, is the federal government interested in anything called development in south east region?

The view expressed by the development expert aligns with that of the 168 respondents who strongly agreed that sustainable development is negatively affected by external factor in armed conflict in South East. Obviously, the external agents will equally sabotage development efforts of governments in the south east region, in the bid to achieve their objectives of hindering security and development sustainability there.

5. Conclusion

The increase in armed conflict in south east region of Nigeria and the failure by governments to effectively protect life and property in the region raise serious concerns over the involvement of external interests in the conflict and informed this study which examined possible external factor in the conflict as well as its implications for security and development sustainability in the country. Mainly linked to secession plans, the conflicts have continued in view of the established facts that external interests work for disintegration of Nigeria, with foreign interests supplying weapons used in armed conflict in South East. Also, the study found out that chief promoters of armed unrest in South East are protected abroad and this provides the oxygen that prolongs the conflict. This external factor in the armed conflict is found to have adverse implications for security and development sustainability in Nigeria, thereby calling for concerted efforts to address the challenge

6. Recommendations

In view of the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

1. Need for strong international collaboration and technology-driven border policing strategy to curb the armament of non-state actors in south east. Leveraging on her policy of good neighbourliness, Nigeria can foster security collaboration which can checkmate smuggling of small and light weapon into Nigeria. To achieve this, the existing security collaboration involving Nigeria and her neighbours can be

strengthened through intelligence sharing, investment in security technologies along the border corridors and implementation of joint security agreements among the contiguous states.

2. Equally, Nigeria can take more proactive steps to improve on her multilateral relations with other members of the international system. She needs to reinvigorate her missions abroad and equip the missions with experts in diplomatic practice to enable her maximize the gains of fruitful engagements in a way that promotes her national interest. It is through this mechanism that it can become less difficult for the country to get the understanding of the host countries of enemies of the state to activate relevant international conventions to extradite the promoters of armed conflict in the south east to face the wrath of the law.
3. Nigeria needs to address the domestic challenges that encourage conflict within her borders, particularly in the south east region. This will ensure security and development sustainability and such actions include end to the marginalization of the south east region in national affairs. There is need to promote justice and equity in the state, given that the unending agitations in the region and the concomitant armed conflict there are sustained by the age-long politics of exclusion, nepotism, tribalism, as well as development and socio-economic marginalization of the region.

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The data used in this article are openly available and have been appropriately acknowledged. The data can be shared.

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