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UNGOVERNED SPACES AND ESCALATING INSECURITY IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Abstract
From the beginning of the Fourth Republic, Nigeria has faced numerous security challenges in various dimensions. These security challenges range from the Niger Delta crisis, to the Ethno-religious crisis in Northern Nigeria, to the secessionist agitation by the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), to terrorism and banditry like Boko Haram, Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), Herdsmen, Unknown Gunmen, etc. The bulk of the problem occurs in unoccupied or less occupied areas, rural areas, and areas with limited government presence, referred to as ungoverned spaces. This is partly due to Nigeria's large landmass, unpopulated areas, and the absence of adequate human or technological security coverage in these regions. Consequently, criminals frequently exploit these ungoverned spaces, characterised by minimal law enforcement, rugged terrain, poor infrastructure, and porous borders, which serve as safe havens for banditry, kidnapping, and terrorism, etc. This paper examines how these spaces have contributed to the increase in insecurity since the 4th Republic. It also explores how the absence of security presence in remote strategic areas, including land borders, has worsened the situation. The study adopts the theory of state fragility and Routine Activity Theory (RAT) as its framework. It employed a qualitative approach, utilising documentary evidence and content analysis as sources of data and methods of data analysis, respectively. The study recommended decentralisation of the security architecture to ensure proper coverage of ungoverned remote areas, effective intelligence gathering, and prompt response, while the central government concentrates on broader national security concerns. Additionally, deploying security technology, such as state-of-the-art military equipment, drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or UAVs), and satellite coverage, is necessary in ungoverned areas. It will help in early detection, monitoring, and response, with minimal or no human casualties.

Keywords: The Fourth Republic, Insecurity, Nigeria, Terrorism, Ungoverned Spaces

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria transitioned from years of military dictatorship to a democratic regime, known as the Fourth Republic, on May 29, 1999. One of the challenges the country has faced since then was the prevailing insecurity. Over time, this became so intense and multidimensional that every part of the

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country is confronted by one set of criminal elements or the other. In the Northeast, Boko Haram terrorists are ravaging the entire area, the Northcentral is occupied by armed bandits, while herdsmen are killing, maiming and raping unabated in the Northcentral, Northwest, Southwest and Southeast (Abrahamet al, 2025; Nwagbo & Ofoke, 2024). Another serious concern is the persistenceof coordinated attacks and killings by unknown gunmen, cultists in the Southeast, Southsouth and Southwest zones. This has put the entire nation into a state of security quagmire. Since 2015, bandits in the guise of unknown gunmen and herdsmen have maintained dreaded and coordinated attacks across various remote areas in Nigeria (Olapeju & Adeniyi, 2022).

Data from the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) (2023) signifies that the emergence of the restive activities of the Fulani Herdsmen and bandits identified as "unknown gunmen" has worsened insecurity in Nigeria. Hence, apart from Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and herdsmen attacks are among the most contemporary insecurity issues occupying national discourse in Nigeria since 2015. Ojo (2020) laments that the lives of Nigerians, especially in the remote areas and areas with less security presence, are now at the mercy of criminal syndicates who often provide options of either paying ransoms, taxes or being killed.

However, providing adequate and maximum security across all parts of a country remains a key duty of a government. According to Social Contract theorists, the state was formed to provide security (Nwagbo& Eze, 2015). Security is achieved through effective governance. The monopoly on the use of force is a significant feature of a proactive, effective, and well-managed state. It helps to strengthen national security and defend territorial integrity (Nwagbo&Ofoke, 2024). Conversely, one factor that has increased insecurity in Nigeria and poses a threat to national security and territorial integrity is the presence of ungoverned spaces, where government presence is minimal or undermined.

According to Taylor (2016), an ungoverned space is a place where the government is unwilling or unable to exert control or effectively superintend, and also, where a local or regional government does not govern fully or effectively as a result of inadequate governance capacity, lack of political will, legitimacy crises, political conflict or social disorder. In other words, ungoverned areas could also be described as ill-governed, under-governed, exploitable and contestable areas (Chikwe, 2024; Forest, 2011). In the view of Diggings (2011), ungoverned territories can be characterised as failing or failed states, poorly controlled land, airspace, or maritime borders, or areas where the authority of the central government does not extend. In support of this view, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (ND) infers that ungoverned space is a catchword that is contestable because it poses a question mark on the sovereignty of the state where such space is located. It creates an illusion of a vacuum where state power is limited. It means another unrecognised or somewhat illegitimate authority has taken over a jurisdiction that falls within a state's control. It is a description of terrorist control that shows failed, failing or a weak state. If a part of a sovereign and strong state becomes ungovernable, it portends that state actors are in collusion with criminal and terrorist elements that control that jurisdiction. Under such circumstances, the state and its institutions struggle to maintain law and order, provide vital services, or implement government policies (Raleigh & Dowd, 2013).

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Furthermore, an ungoverned space is characterised not only by the absence of a law enforcement agency but also by a lack of welfare institutions and basic facilities (Ejiofor, 2022; Rothberg, 2002). The absence of these fundamental government institutions to maintain law and order and improve citizens' lives in such terrain is a significant concern. Therefore, it encourages citizens to seek solace, especially from traditional or tribal leaders and informal networks, for protection and the provision of basic needs. This leads to low adherence to state laws and, at times, to a contesting of the state's relevance, which adds to security challenges. Moreover, such an ungoverned area is characterised by illegal activities, including the unlawful exploration of natural resources, illegal migration, the smuggling of arms and drugs, and the formation of various criminal groups, which often do not readily attract the government's attention (Abraham, 2025). Foreign and Commonwealth Office (ND) states that it is a haven where terrorists can plan, train and indoctrinate, secure access to weapons and equipment, the ability to engage in illegal smuggling to generate income, and the benefit they can derive from the existence of staging grounds and transit zones. It is an area synonymous with detestable violence that destabilises the state's coordinated action. Based on the description so far, one could conclude that ungoverned space is a breeding ground for insecurity caused by the absence of government presence, strong security architecture, basic amenities and at times the convenience of state actors for the purposes of exploiting natural resources or the punishment of people of such areas, especially in a plural society.

Examining Nigeria's structure and habitation, it is reasonable to conclude that the country has a larger proportion of ungoverned areas. Security and other fundamental structures are available and strongly felt mainly in the urban areas. Once one moves outside the suburbs, almost all rural areas and joining unhabited and unhabitable lands are ungoverned or exhibit the characteristics of ungoverned spaces. States with vast land masses, such as Niger, Kaduna, Zamfara, and Borno, have become hotspots for security threats due to limited government presence (Chikwe, 2024). Many Nigerian borders, especially the Lake Chad region, Sambisa, and similar areas, have proven to be ungoverned zones that foster insecurity; Boko Haram, bandits, herdsmen (Chukwuma, 2022), and the unknown gunmen and ESN have been operating from the forest regions of the Southeast (Nwagbo, Ofoke&Ezeamu, 2025).

Apart from Boko Haram and unknown gunmen who sometimes attack security agents and their facilities, assessing the mode of operation of the rampaging bandits and herdsmen, one can observe that ungoverned spaces have been their safe haven as they train and receive their logistics majorly in the forest and attack mostly from remote areas where the presence of government and security operatives are barely felt. The manner in which these criminals operate for hours and even days without the presence of security operatives to confront them suggests how ungoverned the Nigerian remote and vast regions are. Sometimes, the police hardly respond to distress calls, especially in areas with poor communication, rough terrain, and a bad road network. Hence, policing, especially in these areas, has been characterised by delayed responses and other inconsistencies, which have made the remote areas more porous and susceptible to attacks. From the foregoing, this paper examines how ungoverned spaces have exacerbated insecurity in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

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The paper sourced data from secondary sources, such as textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, editorials, and official gazettes. The sources were selected based on their relevance to the study's focus on ungoverned spaces and insecurity in Nigeria. Specific criteria included the currency of publications, the authors' credibility, and the applicability of the content to the research questions. The thematic analysis method was utilised to interpret the collected data, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to ungoverned spaces and their impact on insecurity. Discussions were justified by the theory of state fragility as the theoretical framework, providing insight into the challenges governance structures face in maintaining security.

Review of Related Literature

Ungoverned Spaces and Insecurity in Nigeria

Ungoverned space is an area that primarily lacks government presence, basic infrastructure, and security facilities. According to the US Department of Defence (2019), an ungoverned space is an environment not effectively governed, ill-governed, or under-governed by the state or central government, as a result of violence, conflict, or a lack of governance capacity and willpower. Accordingly, Olaniyan and Akinyele (2017) aver that ungoverned space is characterised by abdicated governance, in which government, either by force or by choice, abandons its control, leaving the area relatively lawless. In the view of Aju and Aju (2018), ungoverned spaces are physical or nonphysical areas where there is a non-existence of state institutional capacity or political will to control. From the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the Niger Delta region was the flash point of ungoverned space as a result of the emergence of militant groups in the zone. The objective of the groups was specific: to agitate against the marginalisation of the zone in the appropriation of national value, even as the highest-value/resources-producing region in the country through crude oil (Nwagbo&Abaneme, 2019; Nwagbo, Ayogu&Chukwujekwu, 2016). In Nigeria, ungoverned physical spaces are forest areas such as the Cross River forest, which connects the Sambisa forest in Maiduguri through the Jos–Bauchi axis to Katsina, Zamfara, and down to Kebbi State. Another example is the Niger Delta area or maritime areas, which are marshy and uninhabitable (Adewuyi &Daful, 2021). Additionally, there are vast unoccupied areas in Kaduna, Niger (Chikwe, 2024), as well as in Benue, Plateau, Sokoto, and Adamawa. Apart from these forest areas mentioned, Aju and Aju (2018) noted that the majority of the Nigerian rural areas and highways are ungoverned spaces. This is owing to recurrent, persistent criminal activities being successfully carried out in these places without being confronted by security operatives almost on daily basis.

In these spaces, criminals easily kidnap, collect ransom, smuggle arms, traffic drugs and humans without being obstructed or apprehended. It is imperative to add that ungoverned spaces go beyond geographical boundaries to include unregulated electronic and maritime spaces, which are exploited by illegitimate organisations to perpetrate crimes against the state and humanity, either to destabilise the state, seek recognition, or pursue established self-gains (financial, religious or otherwise) (Usman & Yusuf, 2021). On t, non-physical space, Usman and Yusuf (2021) went further to argue that it is a financial space where bandits, terrorists and other criminals raise and move money and other resources freely without any interception. The financial space is rife with unregulated criminal activities due to a lack

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of policies that cover certain financial transactions to control financial crimes, or poorly implemented rules that allow criminals to carry out their activities with ease. Often, countries that experience terrorism and banditry have ungoverned financial spaces. Terrorism functions effectively through financial support and transactions, which are often conducted through financial institutions or channels. In recent times, cyberspace has become another unregulated platform, providing a haven for all manner of criminal activities that are often hard to uncover due to the dynamics of cyber evolution and innovation.

Ungoverned space is characterised by factors that make it a haven for terrorist breeding, a fertile terrain for bandits and criminal networks. These characteristic features include geographical remoteness, the presence of unofficial banking and currency exchange, and illegal activities such as mining, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and piracy, among other related factors (Oladopo et al., 2021). Once the government fails to regulate an area effectively, that area becomes dominated by traditional nomadic life, characterised by a lack of physical infrastructure, social and cultural resistance, and a prevalence of the informal economy, along with numerous social issues and vices (Tar & Bala, 2019). The presence of organised armed groups, criminal networks, smuggling, and the flow of arms and ammunition through porous borders characterises such an area. In most African countries, and Nigeria in particular, ungoverned spaces are primarily located in the most remote and peripheral areas, especially along state borderlines. This explains why insecurity has been escalating in northeast Nigeria, which borders Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. These areas are secluded, which makes them vulnerable to radicalisation, extremism, kidnapping, movement of ransom and smuggling of ammunition, drugs and other logistics needed for insurgency. These countries are also known for violent extremism, and some criminal activities in northeast Nigeria are influenced by extremist groups in these countries (Tar & Bala, 2019; Defence HQ, 2016).

There has been a wide range of scholarly opinions regarding the relationship between ungoverned spaces and insecurity. According to Ewetan and Urhie (2014), insecurity is characterised by breaches of peace and safety, and the absence of an effective security apparatus contributes to recurring conflicts and results in the wanton destruction of lives and property. This definition suggests that the lack of security measures and actions fosters insecurity. Achumba et al. (2013) argued that the root causes of insecurity include a lack of institutional capacity, leading to government failure, as well as other proximate factors such as porous borders, which have facilitated the proliferation of small arms and light weapons into the country. Therefore, while porous borders represent one example of ungoverned spaces in Nigeria, the proliferation of firearms and light weapons also reflects the inefficiency of government institutions, particularly security agencies, which have failed to curtail insurgency and criminality in Nigeria, notwithstanding enormous resources directed towards it. It was with this understanding that Chikwe (2024:2) summed that “the existence of ungoverned areas complicates the security challenges faced by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), hindering efforts to combat insurgency, protect citizens, and promote socio-economic development”

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Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) and the Fragile State theory. The RAT was proposed by Cohen and Felson (1979). The Routine Activity Theory posits that crime is more likely to occur when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. According to the theory, although a person naturally has the capability and willingness to commit a crime (motivated offender), a suitable target (soft spots and rewarding opportunities) is also necessary, which is triggered by the absence of a capable guardian. The absence of a capable guardian implies a lack of adequate security personnel or a surveillance system that could ordinarily prevent crime. Hence, this theory argues that the combination of these three factors enhances crime.

The theory offers insight into how insecurity has been increasing daily in Nigeria, largely due to the absence or inadequate security coverage in certain parts of the country. These areas are typically remote areas with poor roads and communication networks, leaving citizens vulnerable to attack. Therefore, through ineffective or absence of security institutions, socioeconomic facilities and social exclusion, these areas have become a breeding ground for criminals, bandits and insurgents, which has increased the rate of insecurity in the country. While the State Fragility Theory provides insights into the structural weaknesses of government institutions, poor governance, vulnerability to internal and external attacks, weak security architecture and lack of basic amenities (Grävingholt, Ziaja, &Kreibaum, 2012; Grävingholt, Ziaja &Kreibaum, 2012; Aliona C. & et al., 2025). The fragility of the Nigerian state entails weak institutions, a poor security network, an unregulated economy, poverty and unemployment. This has triggered the availability of human resources for crime in an effort to survive. The state is also lacking in the effective use of coercive instruments to inculcate orderliness across all its areas of sovereignty, which has led aggrieved populations and groups to engage in crime. Also, enemies of the state have formed coercive forces that contest the state's control and are taking over ungoverned areas. These theories help explore how the condition of the Nigerian state has created ungoverned areas that enable motivated offenders to exploit suitable targets and create insecurity.

Discussion and Analysis

Nigeria, as a country, is endowed with a large landmass, mainly comprising forests, deserts, and water bodies. Examples of these areas include the Sambisa Forest, hills and unoccupied lands in the northern regions (Northwest, Northeast, and Northcentral), creeks in the Niger Delta, and valleys and forests in the Southeast and Southwest. The areas serve as sources of natural resources, including timber, crude oil, gold, uranium, gas, diamonds, precious stones, water, and agricultural products. Surprisingly, a large chunk of them is left unmanned and uncatered for by the government and its security agencies. Lenshie (2018) noted that these areas lack the presence of security operatives and are not equipped with technology; thus, making them hideouts and camping grounds for criminals, bandits, and militants to perpetuate various activities that affect national security.

Since 2009, Boko haram has been so determined and resilient in attacking both military and non-military facilities and its activities festered beyond government control due to vast areas of ungoverned spaces in northern Nigeria. The organisation was a byproduct of state failure and Islamic

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fundamentalism. It has led to the killing of thousands of people, the displacement of millions of citizens and the abduction of thousands of citizens, often young women and girls (Gloria &Rwang, 2022). More worrisome is that abduction has become a lucrative business, which increases its membership's motivation, strengthens its international networks, and makes the fight against it more complex. Kidnapping victims are released after ransoms were paid, some are raped, some are forcefully married, some recruited into terrorism, and some are killed for reasons best known to them (Aly Verjee & Kwaja, 2021). For example, some Chibok school girls abducted by the Boko Haram have not returned for more than 10 years after their abduction. Some were rescued with babies and pregnancies. The villages along these areas are conquered, governed and taxed by the group. This disrupts food production, the food chain and supply to other parts of the country (Alemika, 2022; Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2005). The Boko Haram activities specially from 2015, has affected negatively the cost of farm produce astronomically.In many of these areas, such as Borno, Adamawa, Plateau, Benue, Sokoto, and Niger, bandits destroy farmland, harvest crops, and tax farmers before they can cultivate their lands or harvest the produce (Aly Verjee & Kwaja, 2021); see Table 1. Many farmers have fled their villages, abandoned their farmland, and lived in the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camp. Punch Newspaper reported that bandits destroyed 60 farmlands of over 150 hectares owned by over 170 people in Plateau State, which has left the affected families in the state of despondency and fear of impending hunger and starvation (Punch, 29th August, 2025). The deprivation of access to livelihood sources has impacted the rates of hunger and poverty in Nigeria, therefore adding to the burden of insecurity and development challenges.

Ungoverned spaces have been the major epicentre of criminality in Nigeria. The Sambisa Forest, which spans Borno, Yobe, Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, and parts of Kano state, is comparable in size to Belgium and has served as Boko Haram's operational base. Other ungoverned areas within the Northern enclave include the Duste Forest, Kamuku, Fagore, Kiyanbana Forests, Rijana Forest along the Abuja-Kaduna Expressway, and Dajin Rugu Forest, which stretches from Birnin-Gwari in Kaduna State through Katsina to Zamfara (Abdu, 2015). The Gwoza hills extend to the border with Cameroon.

Adewuyi and Daful (2021) revealed that these climes are strongholds of bandits, terrorists and smugglers who take advantage of the porous nature of such places to perpetrate their criminalities and smuggle assorted weapons. Aju and Aju (2018) regret that, since 2013, when the insurgents took control of these forests, the government has been unable to regain effective control. As a result of this failure, the insurgent has established its headquarters in some of these areas. Furthermore, in Aju's view, the government's sole interest in such areas is to extract mineral resources. In contrast, the areas are left with no meaningful policies to protect and develop. From the foregoing, one can understand that many outbreaks of insurgency and violent extremism in such areas are the resultant effect of age-long government neglect or the weak and ineffective presence of the central government. Basic infrastructures are lacking in most of these areas. The citizens are disconnected by road, railway, waterway, and airway infrastructures, as well as communication facilities. It becomes easier for the insurgents to dominate the areas. It makes it hard for the state to

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intervene at any time there is an invasion by terrorists, bandits and herdsmen. It takes days to connect these communities due to a lack of infrastructure, and some are located in harsh terrain, characterised by valleys, mountains, erosion, rivers, and marshy areas. In 2025, the President of Nigeria could not visit Yelwata in Benue State after the massacre of hundreds of Nigerians by the herdsmen due to the bad roads. The same experience repeated in 2026 in Plateau state, where the victims of herdsmen attack were transported to Jos, the state capital, to meet and be consoled by the Mr President. These instances are a few of so many horrible massacres that government officials and the leadership of the Nigerian security architecture were not able to visit to empathise with the victims and assess the levels of destruction. As a result of the difficulty in accessing these terrains, bandits have repeatedly undermined every threat of the use of coercive force by the Nigerian state against them. Due to a lack of control over some resources, dominant bandit areas have expanded their operations into the mining of minerals such as gold in Zamfara, Bauchi, etc. The enormous wealth generated by mining activities makes the fight against banditry very tough. They use resources to buy arms and, in some cases, exchange minerals for arms.

Olaniyan and Akinyele (2017) noted that, due to ineffective and weak security structures in the areas, the insurgent group had taken control of 14 districts in Northern Nigeria by 2014. The mode of recruitment of the extremists and radical groups in Nigeria remains similar across the board. They take advantage of the ineffectiveness of the government to recruit loyalists and arm them to either revolt against the government or to carry out criminal acts such as kidnapping, killings, mining, etc. For example, Adesoji (2011) observe that insurgent groups consist mainly of youths from Northern Nigeria and refugees from neighbouring countries such as Chad and the Niger Republic. They take advantage of poverty, political corruption, and deprivation in the North and other socio-economic negativities of Nigeria to recruit and arm their members to carry out their guerrilla warfare, nefarious and criminal acts of killing, bombing, arson, etc., which are usually on public institutions such as churches, markets, schools, mosques, police stations, military barracks, etc. (Ejiofor, 2022).

In the Southeast, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which is the armed wing of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), operate under the mantra of securing the forest and remote areas of the southeast zone from the Fulani herdsmen who are persistently killing innocent people in the region. According to Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the IPOB, the unveiling of the Eastern Security Network is an answer to "insecurity and Fulani terrorism" in the region (Esho, 2022). He further added that it is intended to protect farmlands and forests in the area from criminals, kidnappers, and other potential threats; therefore, ESN is a vigilante group. According to the IPOB, it is similar to Amotekun in the Southwest and the Miyetti Allah Security outfit in the Northern extraction (Odili, 2021). The formation of this non-formal security outfit on December 12, 2020, further heightened tensions between Nigeria's security services (especially the military and the police) and members of the IPOB. Thousands of youths in the region, drawn by the marginalisation mantra of the IPOB and the deteriorating economic and security situation in the area, became sympathetic with the network and its available tools. The situation enabled the ESN to draw loyalists and supporters (Nwagbo, Ayogu&Chukwujekwu, 2016).

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The government's inability to establish a strong security architecture in the remote and forest areas of the zone and protect the citizens made even those who never wanted to support them, silently and unwillingly, give their consent either by open consent or silence to avoid being tagged enemies of a good course (Lamp, 2018). Forests, valleys, large erosion sites, and villages in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states have been taken over by the group and other criminal elements described as Unknown Gunmen. Security facilities and personnel are targeted (Nwagbo, Ofoke&Ezeamu, 2025). Many have lost their lives to their activities. Matters worsened due to the unregulated arms market in Nigeria. Individuals easily acquire arms without checks. To gauge their level of influence and the extent of the zone's ungovernability, the group declared every Monday a sit-at-home day to protest the Nigerian government's detention of their leader. This has seriously affected the economic growth of the zone, once known as Nigeria's and West Africa's economic stronghold. Businesses are closing down, and others are relocating to cities such as Port Harcourt, Lagos, Asaba, and Abuja (Nwagbo, Ofoke, Ezeamu, 2025). It was observed that the zone loses about #1 billion weekly to sit-at-home (Azeez, 2022; Punch News, 26th March, 2022; Okojie, 2023; Nwagbo, Ofoke, Ezeamu, 2025). The influence of business, social, and political closures across the entire southeast over the years shows how ungovernable many areas in the zone are. Security apparatus is not available in the remote areas and unoccupied spaces. The security system is weak in the suburban and urban areas due to a lack of adequate intelligence, funding, logistics and state-of-the-art equipment.

Furthermore, insecurity orchestrated by incessant clashes between herdsmen and indigenous communities is one of the most contemporary examples of insecurity in ungoverned spaces, which has been on a daily increase since 2015. Okibe (2022) contended that the persistent attacks and killings of rural farmers by herdsmen have apparently led to the displacement of farmers and destruction of farm produce; hence, have resulted in farmers living in fear, loss of farmlands and properties and total loss of interest in the government. In some situations, bold communities have formed their own security outfit to defend themselves (Statista, 2022). The most recent of the herdsmen and bandits killing in the remote areas is the attacks on Benue, Plateau, Kaduna and Enugu states (Punch Newspaper, 17th July 2025). Global Upfront Newspaper (Thursday, May 22, 2025) added that "communities in ten States of Anambra, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Rivers, Delta, Edo, Benue and Kogi that are presently or previously threatened or occupied by armed and Government backed Jihadist Fulani Herdsmen have risen to 800-1000 as of today, May 22, 2025". The incessant attacks of villagers and killings by the Fulani herdsmen without any arrest of the perpetrators reflect ethno-religious tensions, political instability, weak governance, corruption and marginalisation, which are evidence of power vacuums and lack of state control over remote areas of the country.

Government efforts to Control Ungoverned Spaces in Nigeria

The federal government has made determined efforts to limit the acquisition, occupation, expansion, and domination of spaces by insurgents and bandits in Nigeria's water, land, and forest areas. These strategies include both soft and hard approaches (kinetics and non-kinetics) (Ugwueze& Onuoha, 2020). In 2011, the anti-terrorism law was enacted, making insurgency a felony. This law was revised in 2013. In 2014, a National Counter-terrorism Strategy was developed to establish a more

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comprehensive military approach to ending terrorism and reclaiming territories occupied by criminal elements. The Policy and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism was introduced in 2017. The policy aimed to engage extremist religious groups to tone down radicalisation doctrines and practices that promote insurgency under the guise of faith (Chukwuma, 2022).

Also, the military has been involved in managing internal security in several parts of Nigeria particularly in areas where the police are overstretched. In critical regions, military bases were established to ensure the force's proximity to rural areas and flashpoints. Further actions have been taken against activities in the ungoverned zones through various operations. These include Operation Lafia Dole, Operation Hadin Kai (OPHK), Special Operation Forces, Operation Python Dance I & II, Operation Sharan Daji, Operation Awatse, Operation Shirin Harbi, Operations Harbin Kunama I & II, Operation Whirl Stroke, Operation Safe Haven, Operation Crocodile Smile I & II, Operation Dokaji, and many other emergency and short-term operations, particularly in Borno state, such as Ruwan Wuta I, II, III & IV, Deep Punch I & II, Chikin Gudu, Last Hold, Crackdown, Rescue Final, Karya Gwuiwa, Hard Knock in Lake Chad, Sambisa, Marte, Damboa, Bama, and Southern Borno. The governments of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, within a resolution to end insurgency and organised activities within the Lake Chad Basin, formed the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in 2014. Many rescues, repels, and neutralisations have been achieved through these operations. However, it has become a heavy burden on the military due to its prolonged nature, complex environment, and political influences. The morale of the soldiers continues to decline because of casualties, poor pay, neglect, inadequate equipment and logistics, ethno-religious ideological alignment with the bandits, terrorists, herdsmen, etc., corruption, and political compromises. Nextier-SPD (May, 2025) report reveals that this has "brought growing fatigue within the military ranks, deteriorating civil-military relations, and increasingly sophisticated insurgent tactics". The Nigerian government has entered into several security agreements and partnerships with countries like the US, Britain, France, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Interior, ND; US Department of State, January 20, 2025; Ministry of Defence, April 25, 2025; VON, November 24, 2025, Daily Trust, January 28, 2026). These agreements and partnerships are in the areas of fight against terrorism, maritime security, military training, state of art equipment and logistics, intelligence support.

Additionally, the government has consistently recruited personnel for the military, police, Civil Defence, Customs, Immigration, and Road Safety, with the aim of securing every part of Nigeria. Nigeria's population exceeds 250 million, with around 230,000 security personnel tasked with covering a landmass of about 1 million square kilometres. This task has become herculean and practically impossible for the forces, considering the manpower, equipment, and complexities of the security challenges involved. The manpower shortage prompted the presidency to announce the creation of Forest Guard Security, with about 130,000 initial personnel. Their goal was to secure roughly 1,129 forest reserves in Nigeria, which bandits, insurgents, herdsmen, and other criminal groups exploit to cause chaos (Global Upfront Newspaper, 23rd May, 2025). The lack of sufficient manpower to protect Nigerians and Nigeria from

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terrorists, bandits, and other criminals has resulted in a persistent call for decentralisation of power through amendments of the constitution to establish a state police system. This move could facilitate better police funding, improved oversight of officers, a deeper understanding of the specific crimes in each state, improved intelligence, prompt response and the potential to apprehend offenders. It would also enable the recruitment of locals familiar with the terrain into the police force. However, the refusal to enact this decentralisation has led to an overwhelming burden being placed on the central security forces. The ongoing insecurity across various parts of the country has prompted many state governors to establish local security systems to protect the citizens. These formations are still subject to central police control to comply with the constitution. The police determine the level of training they receive, the types of operations they undertake, and the security equipment they are authorised to carry. Some of these groups have helped to control insecurity in their areas, but many factors still significantly impede their effectiveness. Examples of these local security systems include Amokotun in Southwest and Ebubeagu in the Southeast, primarily operational in Ebonyi, Imo, and Enugu states. Anambra State has had various names over the years, though all have served the same purpose, such as the Anambra Vigilante Group (AVG), Udo Aga-Chi, Community-Based Vigilante and others. In many northern states, local security groups have been formed to curtail the menace of the terrorists and bandits. This reflects Hobbies' state of nature and fragile state system.

Insufficient military and police personnel are further aggravated by inadequate equipment to combat insecurity. Some of the equipment used by the security forces is outdated and cannot achieve optimal results. Some of the terrorist groups have more modern equipment than the military. There are cases where terrorists have used drones to monitor and attack military bases, but the military has not shown such complex engagement. Global Upfront Newspaper reports that the Sector 2 Commander of the Nigerian Army said about 400 Elon Musk Starlink devices used by terrorists to enhance their operations in the northeast were intercepted (May 12, 2026). This sophistication and supplies give them the boldness to engage the military in contesting for ungoverned spaces in Nigeria. For years now, the Nigerian state has been unable to end insecurity due to a lack of the necessary military logistics. Zulum also lamented that the lack of adequate equipment for the military to tackle terrorism holistically has been a major setback to the fight against terrorism, regretting that the insurgents now have a superior technological advantage (Global Upfront Newspaper, 21 May 2025). Adequate intelligence is needed to discover sources of arms, drones, training, funding and other logistics supplies to these bandits, terrorists, and herdsmen.

The persistence of insurgency in ungoverned spaces and the federal government's continued efforts to combat it have led to significant declines in human, economic, and material resources, as well as a decline in the government's image. The effort to combat insurgency and banditry in almost every state of the federation has led to overstretched military forces. Many well-trained soldiers have lost their lives in the fight, and many others are wounded and hospitalised. Often, the military is the bandits' first target. Many facilities and bases have been attacked, soldiers on operations ambushed and killed. The obvious implication of this is low morale

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among the officers to continue the fight. Odeniyi and Otuchikere, (26th June, 2025) once reported that "since the start of the year, dozens of fortified military bases have come under attacks, with insurgents killing and injuring personnel". Also, more than 100 soldiers were killed between November 2024 and April 2025 (Global Upfront, 14th May 2025). The families of the soldiers who died in the cause of defending the nation often complain of neglect by the military authority and government. It affects the level of commitment of military personnel in the fight against insurgency, due to fear for the well-being of their family members if anything were to happen to them. Some have already resigned from the force in protest of poor welfare, corruption, and the political class's compromise. There are several accusations of connivance by the political class who are sympathetic to the bandits and insurgents, as a result of religious, ethnic and zonal affiliation. This has made the bandits unrepentant and resolute. Gov. Zulum lamented that politicians and soldiers are among Boko Haram/ISWAP informants and collaborators. This sabotage continues to frustrate government efforts to comprehensively address insecurity in the Northeast (Global Upfront Newspaper, 21 May 2025). Brig Gen George Edmin (retd.) bemoaned that the support the terrorists received from some citizens was fueling insecurity and attacks on military bases (Odeniyi&Otuchikere, 26th June, 2025). Some political elite have insisted on rehabilitation and reintegration of the repentant terrorists as a way to handle terrorism and unemployment. There has been allegation that some of these rehabilitated terrorists are recruitment into security forces especially the army and have become informants of the terrorists. This justifies incessant and accurate attacks on the military personnel, military base and equipment.

Findings

The study revealed that ungoverned spaces are a major factor driving increased insecurity in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. These areas lack government presence. While authorities focus their security resources on urban centres, it is often challenging for security personnel to respond swiftly to emergencies in remote regions. Criminal groups have exploited these vulnerable areas to conduct illegal activities, such as smuggling firearms, drug and human trafficking, herdsmen attacks on villagers, kidnapping, robbery, mining of natural resources and other various forms of banditry. Additionally, the security infrastructure, especially the military, is overwhelmed by security challenges across many parts of Nigeria, rendering them less effective at tackling the unique issues in ungoverned zones controlled by bandits and terrorist groups. There is a significant lack of advanced technological integration to combat threats in these areas, resulting in the loss of security personnel and military equipment. Security structure is overcentralised, so local intelligence and timely intervention are not utilised. Finally, morale among security personnel is often low due to inadequate welfare packages given the hazards they face in discharging their duties.

Conclusion

Nigeria, as a nation, since 4th Republic has been experiencing an unprecedented rise in insecurity. The country is highly vulnerable to various threats due to the presence of ungoverned spaces and fragile security institutions and structures. Most Nigerian borders, particularly around Lake Chad, the Sambisa Forest, creeks, valleys, and other remote areas and hinterlands, have proven to

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be ungoverned regions that serve as breeding grounds for insecurity. Extremists and criminal groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAPS, bandits, herdsmen, and the successionist groups operate from these forested areas. Many rural residents are susceptible to various forms of criminality and attack because of the absence of government presence and the poor or non-existent socioeconomic institutions and infrastructure in those regions. Since the government has not adequately prioritised security in these areas, combating insecurity has become more difficult, thereby enabling criminal elements to strengthen their foothold in these areas.

Recommendations

To combat insecurity in ungoverned spaces, Nigeria's security structure needs to be decentralised so that states can engage local people who understand their unique security needs, terrain, and have local knowledge of their areas. This will also allow a broader security presence across states and enable immediate intervention during emergencies. Such measures will help eliminate ungoverned spaces, while the federal government provides support where and when needed and concentrates on other national security priorities. Additionally, deploying security technology, such as state-of-the-art military equipment, drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or UAVs), and satellite coverage, is necessary in ungoverned areas. Drones and other artificial intelligence-guided operations will aid in early detection, monitoring, and response, with minimal or no human casualties. Consequently, they can be highly effective and reliable in monitoring and swiftly reporting security threats to the government. There is an urgent need to address mass poverty, youth unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure, and marginalisation, as these issues push youths towards joining criminal groups and basis for agitation which trigger security crisis. The institutions of the state need to be reformed to improve the ability to try and punish the sponsors and perpetrators of these acts of terror in Nigeria without recourse to ethnic, religious and political affiliations. Finally, the welfare of security personnel should be prioritised to motivate them enough to face the hazards of their duties as they serve their fatherland.

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