

# Nigeria: Preventing Tomorrow's War

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That the increasing incidences of violent conflicts across Nigeria have become a major national Albatross – that poses the greatest challenge to the peace, stability, security, development and growth of the country – is a fact that can no longer be overemphasized. Today, violence has become a national culture in Nigeria as most people prefer confrontational conflict handling styles for settling individual or group disputes, rather than the peaceful, non-combative methods.

The militarization of private and public life and the existence of hundreds, if not thousands, of heavily armed groups that are employed to enforce private decisions – including political decisions – have not helped matters. From religious fundamentalist groups rising up against the state and its institutions, ethnic militias adopting arcane methods of their own in questioning the legitimacy of the Nigeria State, an increasing number of kidnapping and assassination cartels, over ambitious politicians who prefer settling political scores extra-judicially, increase in youth restiveness, to other potentially destabilizing acts of violence, Nigeria has become a theatre of war; a boiling point from where peace has taken flight. While some of the violent groups in Nigeria are established and maintained by powerful individuals, others are mercenaries who are available for hire to the highest bidder.

It is not like violent conflicts are recent developments in Nigeria. In fact, the country has a long history of violent conflagrations; a foggy past littered with ugly altercations that could have been prevented from burgeoning into the raging infernos they ultimately became; woeful records of avoidable internecine and intractable imbroglios – one major Civil War (1967-1970) and (approximately 38) sundry other low intensity insurgencies (CRESNET, 2001:1), political, ethnic, religious et al – that have stalled the country's development and growth; sad markers of the country's evolution. But the truth is that most of these conflicts could have been avoided had constructive preventive steps been taken to avoid them. The wisdom in the dictum that “prevention is better than cure” has obviously been ignored by some of the major stakeholders in the Nigerian project in warding off the emergence and subsequent acceleration of violent conflicts across the country, especially in contemporary times.

The defunct Niger Delta Crisis and the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria are two classic examples of conflicts that escalated because of the application of the wrong conflict handling styles at their latent stages. The Niger Delta Crisis – a resource based conflict – could have been prevented from escalating had the Federal Government of Nigeria – a regional power in Africa – been more proactive by listening to the grievances expressed by the Delta people, and positively responded by hashing out effective programs to address their fears, rather than the combative posture it initially assumed: a posture that resulted in the escalation of the conflict.

A more recent case of the slow response and wrong application of conflict handling styles by the authorities and other stakeholder organizations to conflicts at their latent stages is the Boko Haram Insurgency. Boko Haram started off as an Islamic sect with extreme ideologies which were openly

espoused by its adherents. Nobody took this group serious until 2009, when the violent confrontation between it and state's security forces resulted in the arrest and killing of some of the sect's members, including its leader, Mallam Muhammad Yusuf, who purportedly died while in police custody – a development that ultimately accelerated the tempo of the conflict as the group declared war on the Nigerian State, its citizens, institutions and personnel; a scenario that could have been avoided had proactive conflict prevention strategies been adopted to address all the issues raised by the Bokites, ab initio.

The outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War and the various ethno-religious conflicts that have reared their heads across the country in the course of its checkered history are also instructive examples of how the wrong application of conflict handling methods in stemming the evolution of the culture of violence in Nigeria resulted in the worst case scenarios that were the outcome of these fracas; a shameful culture that has sadly become a permanent feature of national life today. These and several other shortfalls have increased the urgency for the creation of timely, efficient, and effective conflict prevention strategies to ensure that potentially destructive conflicts are checkmated and transformed into productive (or positive) peace.

Today, the increased interest in conflict prevention, together with rapid changes in the Nigeria's security environment, demands that renewed attention be paid to practical questions about how to design and implement effective conflict preventive strategies – beyond the continual calls to “act early”, instill a “culture of prevention”, and, above all, mobilize political will”. The obvious state of emergency, as defined by the current state of insecurity in the country, calls for the immediate crafting and adoption of comprehensive national security stratagems – with greater emphasis on prevention – rather than the largely reactive and ineffective approaches currently being employed to stem the frightening increase in the state of insecurity in the country.

In his masterpiece titled “An Agenda For Peace”, one time United Nations Secretary General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali, (1992:13) gave a blueprint of a security system that has the capacity of warding off the emergence of violent conflicts or preventing them from escalating. He called this approach Preventive Diplomacy or (Pre-Conflict) Peace-Building – a strategy for dousing tensions before they escalate into full-blown violence (or, actions directed at checking violent conflicts if they erupt, by addressing their structural/background causes). This approach requires measures geared towards building confidence viz: Early Warning based on intelligence gathering, informal and formal fact-finding, improved police and judicial systems, monitoring of human rights, electoral reforms, demilitarization, small arms control, institutional reforms, socio-economic development and peace education.

Consequent to the carnages of all the various preventable wars that have been fought in Nigeria over the years, the Nigerian people, its leaders, security chiefs and other stakeholders can no longer afford to continue relying on the current cockeyed reactive security arrangement that obviously has no answer to the mushrooming security challenges the country has had to grapple with in recent times. Thus, a wholesale adoption of Boutros Ghali's strategy, suffices as the most iron-caste solution to the mounting security situation facing the Nigerian State and its people; a proactive approach that takes the structural/background factors responsible for most violent conflicts into cognizance; a long-term research-oriented strategy that is meant to monitor the potential causes of violent conflicts in Nigeria, with a view to developing comprehensive profiles of these potential

conflicts and taking steps to stop them from manifesting at all, or from escalating when they occur; an arrangement that monitors conflict indicators that may have political, economical, social, or security implications, with a view to predicting conflict triggers and trends.

Again, a comprehensive Peace Education, information and advocacy curriculum – which should be directed towards creating public awareness about issues of peace and conflict – all geared towards changing attitudes and behavior, in order to achieve greater cooperation and peaceful problem-solving among Nigerians of all hues – should be one of the major pillars of this initiative; an approach that should focus on multipl

e themes across the multiple regions of the country, with emphasis on improving institutional capacity, media and information flow, youth identity and security, all geared towards generating general awareness about the (actual and) potential causes of violent conflicts, and to help explore practical strategies towards checking them; an interactive approach making use of methods such as seminars, workshops, adult literacy programs, family education, publications, fact-finding, and local peace building and peacemaking methods, such as informal socio-cultural activities, to reach its target audience.

Accepted that violent conflicts are facts that cannot be wished away, preventing them from occurring is obviously wiser than allowing them to crop up. The preventable consequences of violent conflicts in Nigeria over the years viz: loss of lives, destruction of properties, displacement of persons, disease migration, increase in violent crimes, increased political and social animosities, trauma, poverty, underdevelopment et al – makes the adoption of a preventive peace building mechanism the only watertight solution to this evil fiend. Despite the non-existence of an exclusive solution to the problems of war in Nigeria, as in any country for that matter, prevention remains the most effective cure for this malignant cancer eating off the very soul of the country. Nigeria must continue developing its potential to respond to conflict and promote peace. God save Nigeria!