



Nigeria's **Security** Crisis and the Politics of Budgeting

Spending More, Securing Less

About BudgIT

BudgIT is a civic organisation that uses creative technology to simplify public information, stimulating a community of active citizens and enabling their right to demand accountability, institutional reforms, efficient service delivery and an equitable society.

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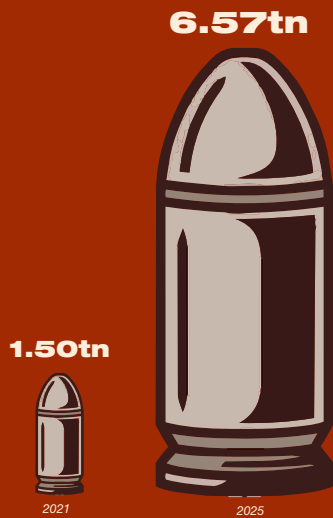
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Insights



The growth in Nigeria's security and defence budget over the past five years is hard to miss. From N1.50 trillion in 2021, allocations have climbed to N6.57 trillion in 2025 — a more than fourfold increase in four years.

Source: Budget Foundation — Security Budget Breakdowns (2022–2025);
Budget — Budget Surge, Security Plunge (2025) | Unit: NGN

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When public money disappears into a system with no functioning audit trail, it tends not to come back.

The states where insecurity is worst are often the ones with the thinnest police presence.

Nigeria currently has roughly 120 police officers per 100,000 people, against a commonly cited international benchmark of around 311 officers per 100,000 a gap that reflects chronic under-recruitment and uneven deployment across the federation.

Executive Summary

Nigeria is living through one of the worst internal security crises in its post-independence history. Armed insurgency in the North-East, banditry in the North-West, farmer-herder violence in the Middle Belt, separatist militancy in the South-East, piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, and kidnapping across the federation have turned insecurity into a defining national problem. Yet despite record allocations to the security sector, public safety has continued to worsen.

This paper examines the structure, trends, and accountability gaps in Nigeria's security spending, drawing on budget data from BudgIT Foundation and official federal budget documents. The picture that emerges is difficult to explain away: Nigeria is spending more on security than at any point in its history, but ordinary citizens face more violence, more displacement, and more economic disruption than they did a decade ago.

In 2025, Nigeria budgeted approximately N6.57 trillion for security and defence. This was one of the largest sectoral allocations in the federal budget and a sharp jump from the N3.85 trillion set aside in 2024. The money is being committed. The problem is what happens to it afterwards. Personnel costs swallow nearly sixty per cent of the total. Defence procurement operates largely beyond public view. Security agencies work in silos. The National Assembly exercises limited oversight. And a growing share of spending bypasses the appropriation process entirely, through emergency releases and off-budget interventions that leave little paper trail.

Nigeria's security crisis is not, at its core, a funding problem anymore. It is a governance problem.



Introduction: Security as a Development Question

1.

Security is the basic condition on which everything else depends. A country cannot attract investment, run its schools, grow its food, or hold democratic elections in any meaningful way if violence is the background noise of daily life. This is not a theoretical point. It is the situation Nigeria has found itself in, and it has grown worse with each passing year.

Over the past decade, the country's security environment has broken down in ways that would have seemed extreme even against Nigeria's already turbulent history. Boko Haram and its offshoots remain active in the North-East after more than fifteen years of sustained insurgency, the group launched its armed campaign in 2009 and has not been decisively defeated since. Banditry has spread across the North-West at a scale

and speed that has overwhelmed local security structures.

Kidnapping-for-ransom, once largely confined to the Niger Delta, is now a nationwide industry. Farmer-herder conflicts have left a trail of deaths and burnt communities across the Middle Belt. Oil theft and piracy persist in the Niger Delta. Separatist agitation in the South-East has produced its own cycle of violence and reprisals.

The human cost is enormous. Millions have been displaced. Schools have shut down in conflict zones, in some cases for years at a stretch. Agricultural land has been abandoned as farmers flee or are killed. Food prices have spiked, investment has dried up, and entire rural economies have collapsed.

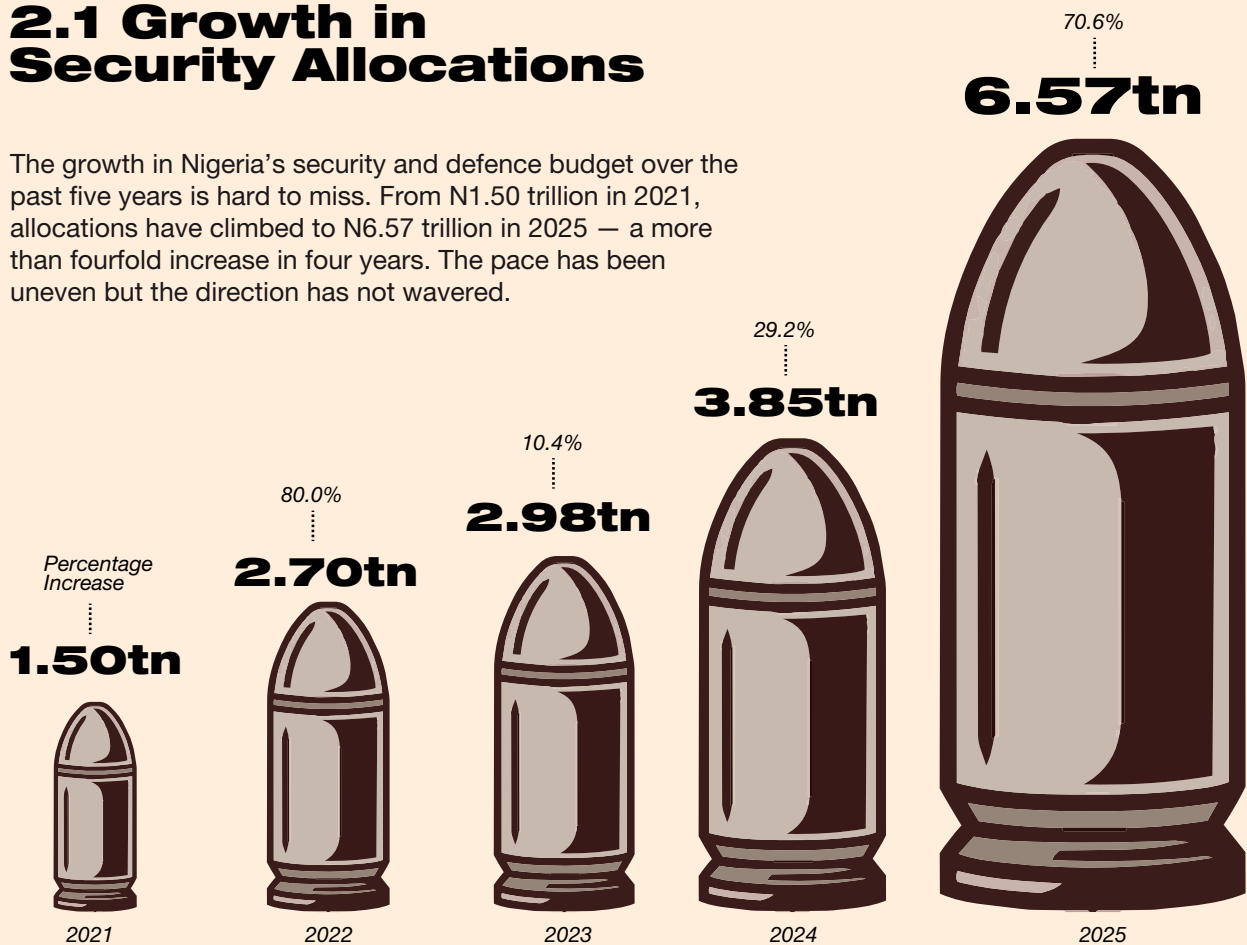
The government's answer, consistently, has been to spend more on security. But the spending has not stopped the bleeding, and this paper attempts to explain why.

Nigeria's Security Budget: A Rapid Expansion

2.

2.1 Growth in Security Allocations

The growth in Nigeria's security and defence budget over the past five years is hard to miss. From N1.50 trillion in 2021, allocations have climbed to N6.57 trillion in 2025 — a more than fourfold increase in four years. The pace has been uneven but the direction has not wavered.



Source: BudgIT Foundation — Security Budget Breakdowns (2022–2025); BudgIT — Budget Surge, Security Plunge (2025) | Unit: NGN

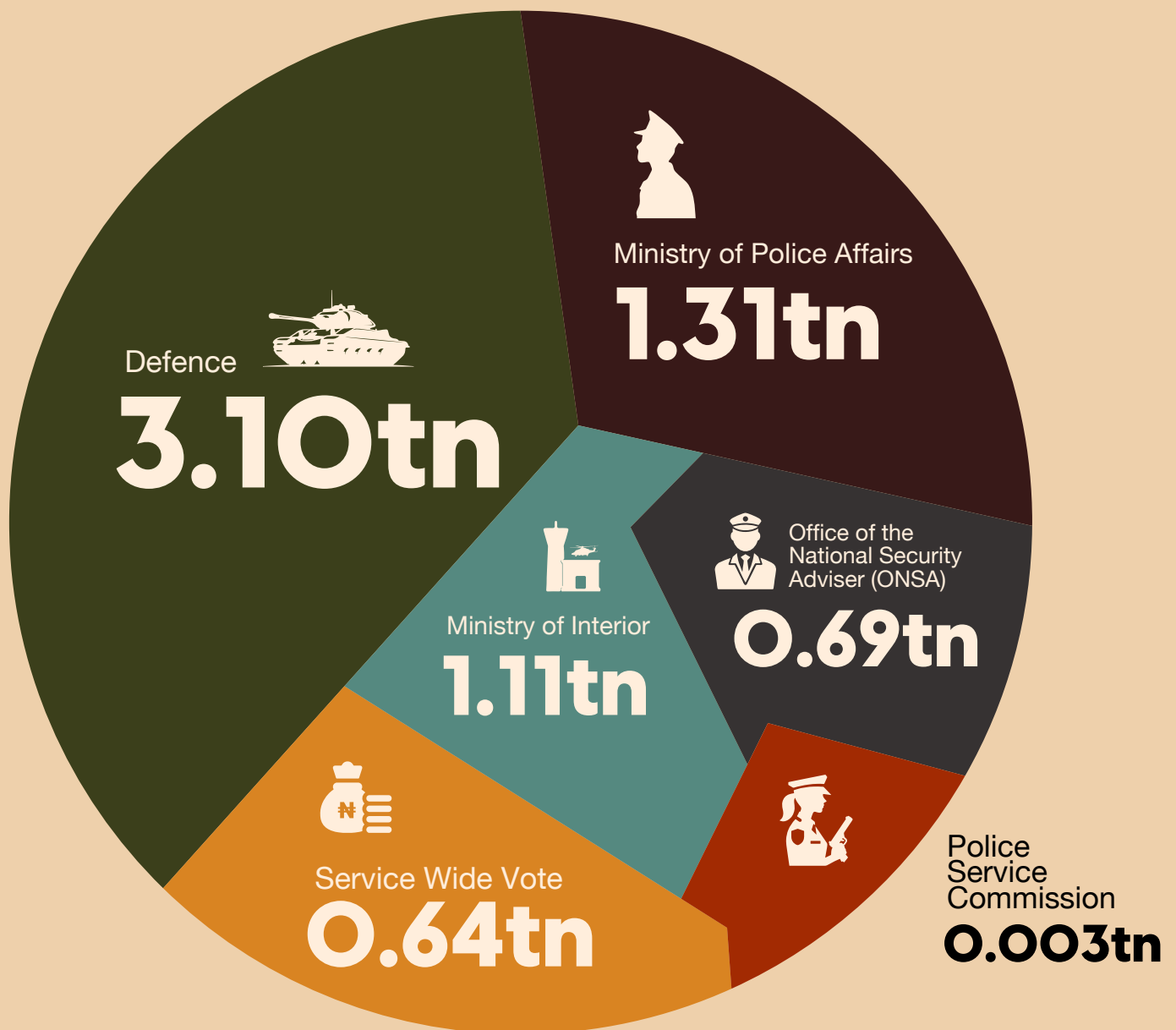
In total, Nigeria committed roughly N17.36 trillion to security and defence between 2021 and 2025, according to BudgIT's own accounting. That is a staggering sum, and it crowds out spending in areas like health, education, and infrastructure that also bear on the country's long-term stability. What is troubling is that across this same period, insecurity spread geographically rather than receding. New theatres of violence opened up even as old ones persisted. The money went in; the results did not follow.

Breakdown of the 2025 Security Budget

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3.1 Sectoral Allocation Structure

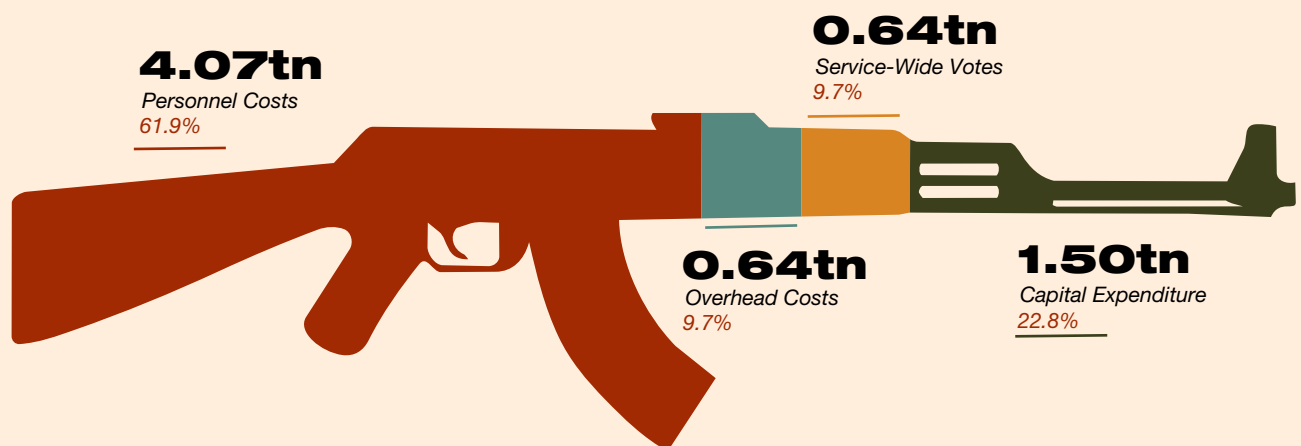
The N6.57 trillion budgeted for security and defence in 2025 is spread across several agencies, though the distribution is far from even.



The Ministry of Defence accounts for nearly half the total on its own. That level of concentration reflects a security strategy built primarily around the military. There are legitimate reasons for this: armed groups in multiple regions require a military response. But military force alone has not resolved any of Nigeria's major security crises, and the budget structure does not suggest a serious pivot towards the policing, intelligence, and community-level approaches that security experts increasingly point to as the missing pieces.

3.2 Recurrent Versus Capital Spending

The more revealing breakdown is between what Nigeria spends on keeping its security institutions running versus what it spends on making them more capable. The figures are stark.



Source: BudgIT Foundation — 2025 Security and Defence Budget Breakdown | Unit: NGN

Personnel costs consume N4.07 trillion, or roughly 62 per cent of the total. Capital expenditure, which covers equipment, infrastructure, and technology, receives N1.50 trillion — about a fifth of the budget. What this means in practice is that Nigeria is paying a very large wage bill for security services while underinvesting in the tools and systems those services need to be effective. Equipment ages. Surveillance capacity remains thin. Intelligence systems are poorly funded. The security forces are large but not particularly well-equipped, and the budget reflects a preference for maintaining headcount over building capability.

The Accountability Problem

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4.1 Rising Budgets, Declining Security Outcomes

The most basic question that should follow any security budget is whether it is working. In Nigeria's case, the honest answer is no, at least not by any measure that matters to the average citizen.

Despite record allocations in each of the past four budget cycles, kidnappings continue from one end of the country to the other. Rural communities in the North-West live under the effective authority of bandit groups, not the Nigerian state. Schools are still being attacked. Mass abductions still happen. State presence in large parts of the country remains nominal.

BudgIT has described this as a "security accountability crisis," and the phrase captures the situation well.

The problem is not that Nigeria has refused to spend on security. It is that the spending has not been translated into outcomes.

There is a gap between what the budget says and what happens on the ground, and that gap has widened even as the allocations have grown.

4.2 The ONSA Spending Anomaly

One of the more alarming findings from BudgIT's analysis concerns the Office of the National Security Adviser.

By mid-2024, ONSA had reportedly spent 277.28 per cent of its capital budget appropriation — receiving N201.09 billion against a budgeted N72.52 billion.

At first glance, high budget utilisation sounds like efficiency. But the question is not whether the money was spent. It is whether it was spent well, on what, through what process, and with whose authorisation. None of those questions have been answered publicly. There is no transparent procurement record, no published list of projects, and no account of what outcomes the additional 155 billion was meant to achieve. This is not a minor administrative irregularity. It is a window into a broader culture of opacity that runs through much of Nigeria's security spending.

Security Spending and the Political Economy of Secrecy

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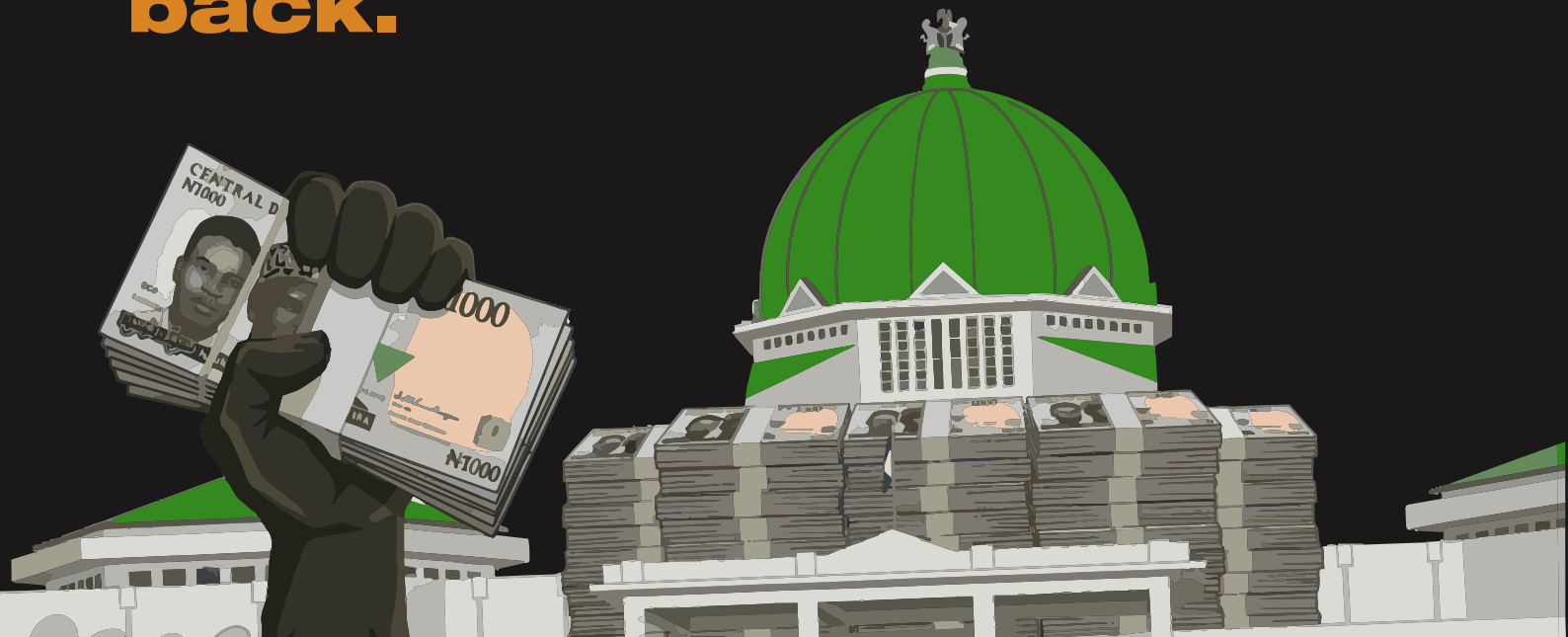
Some degree of confidentiality in security budgets is normal and defensible. Publicising procurement plans for military hardware or the locations of intelligence operations would be genuinely counterproductive. Nigeria is not unique in having parts of its security budget that are not fully in the public domain.

What is particular to Nigeria is the way secrecy has expanded well beyond what operational necessity requires, to the point where it functions as a general-purpose shield against scrutiny. Defence procurement lacks the transparency frameworks that public finance governance ordinarily demands. The Auditor-General's office has limited ability to examine security expenditures in practice. Emergency procurement rules, which exist for situations that genuinely cannot wait, are used as a routine workaround for competitive bidding. Off-budget

spending, which is money released outside the appropriations approved by the National Assembly, adds volume to the security budget that cannot be tracked through normal oversight mechanisms. And the legislature, which should be the primary check on executive spending, has largely accepted its diminished role in this area without much resistance.

The result is a sector where the conditions for waste, inflation, and outright theft are unusually favourable. Procurement contracts are inflated. Goods procured on paper may not exist in reality. Political connections shape who gets contracts and on what terms. None of this is provable in every individual case, but the structural conditions for it are all present, and the absence of accountability makes it impossible to rule out.

When public money disappears into a system with no functioning audit trail, it tends not to come back.



Underinvestment in Intelligence and Preventive Security

6.

Nigeria's approach to security has been, for most of its recent history, heavily reactive. The standard response to a new threat is to deploy troops and wait for the situation to stabilise. When it does not, more troops follow. This logic is visible in the budget: personnel and weapons procurement dominate, while the slower and less visible work of threat prevention is chronically short-changed.

The institutional capabilities that matter most for preventing violence before it breaks out (intelligence networks, community policing structures, early warning systems, border surveillance, conflict mediation, and cybersecurity) receive a fraction of what the military and paramilitary payroll consumes. This is a strategic choice, even if it is rarely stated as one. It reflects a political preference for visible, forceful responses over less visible but more durable investments.

The cost of this choice is significant. The armed groups that operate across Nigeria today are not standing armies that can be defeated in a conventional engagement and then demobilised. They are adaptive, embedded in local communities, and capable of reconstituting themselves after military pressure eases. Disrupting them requires intelligence: the ability to know who is who, where resources come from, and where the next attack is being planned. It requires community trust, so that people who know something are willing to say something.

It requires the kind of persistent, granular, low-profile work that does not generate headlines but does prevent violence. Nigeria's budget does not reflect that understanding.



The Economic Cost of Insecurity



The financial damage that insecurity inflicts on the Nigerian economy is not a secondary concern. It is central to why the security situation keeps getting harder to manage.

Violence destroys productive capacity, and a less productive economy has less to spend on security, which in turn makes the violence harder to contain. It is a cycle, and Nigeria has been caught in it for years.

Agriculture is one of the clearest illustrations. Northern Nigeria contains some of the country's most fertile land, but banditry, terror attacks, and farmer-herder conflicts have made large parts of it inaccessible or simply too dangerous to work. Farmers who have been displaced, or who cannot reach their fields without risk of being kidnapped or killed, stop farming. The consequences flow downstream: reduced harvests, higher food prices, and a contribution to the inflation that has battered Nigerian households over the past several years.

Beyond food production, the security crisis has made Nigeria a harder environment for business. Foreign investors price political risk into their decisions, and Nigeria's risk profile has not improved. Logistics costs are higher because goods moving through certain corridors require additional security. Insurance premiums have risen. Some businesses have scaled back or relocated. Schools in affected areas have closed, in some cases for extended periods, which means that the children growing up in those communities are falling further behind and will enter adulthood with fewer options — a vulnerability that criminal and extremist networks know how to exploit. The country is spending enormous sums trying to suppress a crisis that it is simultaneously making worse by failing to address its economic roots.

Regional Security Imbalances

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Nigeria's security spending is managed primarily from Abuja, but its security problems are local. The violence in Zamfara is not the same as the violence in Borno, which is different again from the tensions in the South-East or the criminality in the Niger Delta. Each situation has its own actors, its own history, and its own dynamics. A security strategy built around centralised military deployments will always struggle to address threats that are rooted in specific communities and local grievances.

The consequences of this mismatch show up in several ways. The states where insecurity is worst are often the ones with the thinnest police presence. Nigeria currently has roughly 120 police officers per 100,000 people, against a commonly cited international benchmark of around 311 officers per 100,000 a gap that reflects chronic under-recruitment and uneven deployment across the federation. Where the police are present, they are often poorly equipped and poorly paid. Response times are slow.

Rural areas go largely unpatrolled. And because community policing structures are weak or nonexistent in most states, the intelligence that would allow security forces to act preventively rarely reaches anyone who can use it.

The centre is well-funded. The edges, where most of the violence actually happens, are not.

Security Sector Reform: What Needs to Change

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9.1 Improve Transparency and Oversight

The starting point for any serious reform is that security spending must be visible. That does not mean publicising sensitive operational details. It means that the National Assembly should receive quarterly reports on how security funds are being spent, that audit summaries should be available in a form that citizens and civil society can engage with, and that major procurement decisions should go through a framework that can be independently reviewed. The current situation, in which the security sector is effectively exempt from the accountability standards that apply everywhere else in the budget, is indefensible. Security confidentiality and fiscal accountability are not the same thing, and Nigeria has been treating them as if they are.

9.2 Rebalance Spending Priorities

Nigeria needs to move money from the recurrent budget into capital investment, and it needs to do so with a clear sense of what it is trying to build. Paying a large security workforce is not a substitute for equipping that workforce with the technology, intelligence, and infrastructure it needs to be effective. Priority areas should include surveillance systems for conflict-prone regions, intelligence infrastructure at state and federal levels, cybersecurity capacity, and border monitoring. These are not glamorous budget lines, but they are the investments that have the most direct bearing on whether the security forces can actually get ahead of threats rather than perpetually responding to them after the fact.

9.3 Strengthen Community Policing

Much of what Nigeria needs from its security architecture cannot be delivered from Abuja or even from state capitals. It has to be built at the local level, through structures that communities trust and participate in. That means formal, funded community policing programmes with clear mandates and accountable leadership. It means bringing traditional institutions and local leaders into the security system as genuine partners, not as window dressing. It means creating reporting channels that are safe and responsive, so that people who have information about criminal activity have somewhere to take it. Several states have begun experimenting with community security models with some success. The lesson from those experiments should inform national policy, not sit on a shelf.

Security Sector Reform: What Needs to Change

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9.4 Reform Procurement Systems

The ONSA anomaly is not an argument for spending less on security. It is an argument for knowing where the money goes. Security procurement should be subject to independent technical audits, and the results of those audits should be available to the National Assembly. Where full public disclosure is not possible for operational reasons, appropriately cleared oversight bodies should have access. The emergency procurement mechanism needs to be tightened significantly not eliminated, but restricted to genuine emergencies with post-hoc reporting requirements. Every naira that is spent through a process no one can examine is a naira that may or may not have served any public purpose.

9.5 Invest in Human Security

There is no version of a secure Nigeria that does not involve addressing the conditions that drive people into criminal and extremist networks. Chronic poverty, unemployment, exclusion from land, and the absence of any realistic path to a decent life are not excuses for violence, but they are explanations for it. Communities that have nothing to lose are easier to recruit. Young men with no economic prospects and a deep grievance against the state are the primary raw material for every armed group operating in the country today.

This means that education, employment, rural development, and social protection are security investments, even if they never appear in the defence budget. A school that reopens in Borno, a rural electrification project in Zamfara, a credible land mediation process in the Middle Belt, these are not soft alternatives to security. They are part of what security requires. Any reform agenda that ignores this dimension will produce the same results Nigeria has been getting: more spending, more troops, and more violence.

10.

Conclusion

Nigeria spends more on security today than at any previous point in its democratic history. It also has more widespread insecurity than at any previous point in that same history. That is not a coincidence or a paradox that defies explanation. It is the predictable outcome of spending a great deal of money through systems that are not designed to produce results.

The evidence from BudgIT's budget analyses points consistently in the same direction. The money is there. What is missing is the accountability that would ensure it is spent on the right things, the institutional coherence that would ensure agencies work together rather than in parallel, the capital investment that would give security forces modern tools, and the strategic vision that would shift the country from reacting to violence towards preventing it.

Without those changes, the trajectory is clear enough. Security budgets will keep rising. The security situation will keep deteriorating. And at some point the fiscal cost of this arrangement will become unsustainable, at which point Nigeria will face a genuine crisis rather than just a worsening one.

The time to make these changes is before that happens. Nigeria's security spending needs to become accountable, coherent, and strategically directed. That transition will not be easy or fast, but it is the only path to a situation where the money being spent actually makes people safer.

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