

## International

# Northwest Nigeria now facing 'brewing humanitarian crisis'

## Gangs of heavily armed criminals terrorize people in Sokoto

**SOKOTO, Nigeria:** Maryam Aliyu and her six children were lying next to each other fast asleep when gunmen broke into their home in northwest Nigeria.

"Suddenly I saw light all over me. I came out of the mosquito net and there were four men with AK-47s," the 25-year-old said. "They pointed their guns to my chest and ears and told me to hand over everything I had." Gangs of heavily armed criminals known locally as bandits have terrorized northwest and central states of Africa's most populous nation for years.

But violence has spiraled in recent months, forcing thousands of already vulnerable people like Aliyu to flee their homes in a situation that aid agencies fear risks becoming a humanitarian crisis. When gunmen attacked her village of Danjiro in Sokoto state's Goronyo district last month, Aliyu had only 400 naira (\$1), as was the case most days.

The men in balaclavas took her cash along with half a bag of rice. "They even stole the wrapper on which my children were sleeping," said Aliyu, tears rolling down her cheeks. Another resident, Fatima Sal'Hatu, said that "if they don't kidnap you, they molest you, they steal what you have." "They usually try to rape us," said the 35-year-old mother of five, who survived a separate attack in Goronyo. "We fled without anything, not even our shoes."

### Hunger and insecurity

Both women now live in a congested camp for the displaced about five kilometers (three miles) from their village. More than

1,600 people have arrived at the camp in recent weeks, according to UNICEF, in desperate need of food, protection, shelter and clothes. "We send the children to get firewood to sell and buy food, but if we don't sell any, we don't eat," said Sal'Hatu.

"We sometimes sleep without having had food that day."

Even water was unavailable, she said, until a non-profit organization repaired a well. "What we are watching in the northwest is a situation that will soon blow up in our faces," said Maulid Warfa, chief of UNICEF'S field office. Insecurity has worsened an already dire situation, Warfa said, for residents among the poorest in Nigeria and with the highest infant and maternal mortality rates.

Yet the region attracts much less attention than the country's northeast, where jihadist groups are fighting a 12-year conflict that has displaced two million people. There is a "tendency from the international community to rush" to where "the situation is more sexy," Warfa said.

"If donors and the international community are not interested in doing what needs to be done today, in a few years we will be dealing with a situation that a lot of people will regret," he said. "I am worried about this brewing humanitarian crisis." At a nutrition clinic supported by UNICEF in Sokoto North, outside the city, more than 50 women with small children waited to receive a small pack filled with nutrient paste designed for acute malnutrition.

Among them was Zara'u Dahiru, 22. Bandits raided her vil-



**SOKOTO, Nigeria:** Twenty five-year-old mother Maryam Aliyu narrates her ordeal with the bandits at Bini Primary health clinic, Wamako district of Sokoto, northwest Nigeria.—AFP

lage of Tudun Kosai in Tangaza district last month, killing her neighbor and abducting two others. "We hid in the crops and when day broke, we came here," she said. Dahiru and others fled to safety but now, far from their farmlands, eating has become a problem.—AFP

## Sixteen soldiers killed in central Mali attack

**BAMAKO:** Sixteen soldiers were killed and 10 wounded in an attack in central Mali on Wednesday, security and health officials in the war-torn Sahel state said. In a statement, Mali's army said the troops had been the target of a "complex IED attack"—referring to an improvised explosive device—and then came under heavy gunfire shortly before 11.30 am.

The army blamed the attack on suspected jihadists, and said that after pursuit, 15 of the assailants were killed and 20 motorcycles seized. According to the army, the provisional toll on its side was nine soldiers killed and 11 wounded. It also said three of its vehicles were destroyed. However, a health official working in central Mali said the death toll had risen to 16, with the bodies in the local morgue. A security source, who requested anonymity, also confirmed the higher toll.

Mali has been struggling to contain an Islamist insurgency that first erupted in the north in 2012 and has since claimed thousands of military and civilian lives. Despite the presence of thousands of French and UN troops, the conflict has engulfed central Mali and spread to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Central Mali has become one of the most violent hotspots of the Sahel-wide conflict, where ethnic killings and attacks on government forces are frequent. Laying roadside bombs-or IEDs-is a common tactic of jihadist groups in the region.—AFP

## EU says Facebook, YouTube remove less hate speech

**BRUSSELS:** The EU said yesterday that Facebook and YouTube took down less of the hate speech reported to them in 2021 than 2020 as pressure mounts to impose tighter regulation on social media platforms.

The EU's annual review of social media platforms that have signed up to its voluntary hate speech code — signatories also include Twitter, Instagram and TikTok — found that the overall removal rate had fallen below two-thirds. Signatory platforms removed an average of 62.5 percent of content reported by 35 anti-discrimination groups from 22 member states between March and April.

This is lower than the 71 percent average over the same six-week period in both 2019 and 2020. The code, which LinkedIn joined in June, is based on a voluntary approach, but the EU is currently preparing a wide-ranging regulation, known as the Digital Services Act, which would give the bloc beefed-up powers.

Once passed, social media companies would face hefty fines for turning a blind eye to illegal material, including hate speech, as well as impose greater transparency on how specific posts were displayed in user feeds.

The law is under discussion between the European Parliament and the Council of the bloc's 27 member states. EU officials said the plan to regulate was bolstered by the recent revelations of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen.

"We need to provide rules and make platforms more accountable, not rely on voluntary schemes alone," said European Com-



mission Vice President Vera Jourova, who is in charge of values and transparency, tweeted on Wednesday after speaking with Haugen. Haugen told US lawmakers Tuesday that Facebook fuels division, harms children and urgently needs to be regulated, drawing pledges Washington would take up long-delayed action.

The EU's annual review showed the removal of hate speech decreased on Facebook and YouTube and increased on Twitter and Instagram.

TikTok, which was evaluated for the first time, removed 80 percent of the content reported. Hate speech based on sexual orientation and xenophobia were the most frequently reported, the EU said. In total, some 4,500 reports were sent to platforms during the monitoring period this year, led by Facebook, followed by Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Jeuxvideo.com and Tik Tok.—AFP