

1.1.2. Vigilante groups and other communal defence forces

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Hundreds of vigilante groups have been set up by local communities to combat crime across the country.[70] They notably operate in remote under-policed areas,[71] protecting farms and conducting patrols.[72]

Some groups, especially those sponsored by state administrations, have clear-cut structures at state, zone, LGA and community levels, as well as well-defined operational procedures. However, many other vigilante groups, particularly smaller ones, operated under no specific guidelines,[73] and were loosely organised.[74] Most groups indeed acted with little external oversight, with the nature of relations between vigilantes and state entities like the NPF, the NAF and the NSCDC described as ranging from cordiality and collaboration to suspiciousness and outright hostility.[75] The quality of recruitment practices also differed widely among groups[76] and many vigilantes were poorly trained.[77]

As of 2025, the highly structured Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), originally from Benue, was described by Nigeria's Guardian newspaper as the country's most powerful vigilante group.[78] As of December 2023, the group was estimated to have around 13 000 members, including at least 4 000 equipped with firearms (e.g., Dane guns, rifles, and shotguns). Other major groups include the Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA), the Kesh Kesh vigilante group, and the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), operating primarily in the North-East.[79] While there has been some evidence of success in fulfilling their tasks, including in eliminating bandits[80] and rescuing victims of kidnapping,[81] vigilantes also suffered heavy losses in bandit attacks.[82] As the majority of groups operated with limited internal accountability,[83] members of vigilante groups have also been accused of excesses[84] such as torture and killing of innocent individuals they suspected of banditry.[85] Some residents in states where vigilante groups are present were quoted as saying that actions by these groups were getting out of control.[86] In a notable incident, armed vigilantes in Edo State killed a group of 16 hunters in May 2025, allegedly mistaking them for kidnappers.[87]

In the South-West, the Western Security Network, codenamed 'Amotekun'[88] (Yoruba for 'Leopard'),[89] created in 2019 by the region's six state governors,[90] has been engaged in efforts to tackle banditry and herder-farmer conflicts,[91] conducting dozens of arrests of suspected criminals.[92] At the same time, Amotekun commanders in various southwestern states pointed to a number of obstacles facing their forces, such as lack of funding, personnel, advanced weaponry and operational vehicles.[93] Regional security networks in the South-East[94] included

the Eastern Security Network (ESN), created in 2020 by Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the pro-Biafran separatist movement Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), as IPOB's paramilitary wing,95 (see section on Pro-Biafran separatist groups in 1.1.3. Non-state armed actors) and Ebube Agu, established in 2021 by state governors.96

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