



## Border Security and Changing Pattern of Nigeria-Benin Relations: An Overview

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**ABSTRACT** Nigeria-Benin relations are socio-economic and security related because of the economic viability, porous nature and security threat of the countries' borders. It is the most vital border across West African region through which socio-economic and cultural relations have been established since period before colonial masters. The colonial artificial border caused insecurity where the issue of border control led to some disagreements coupled with unilateral actions taken by Nigeria also led to an overt and sour change in the relations of the two countries. This paper examined importance and security challenges of Nigeria-Benin borders; and discussed the reasons for and changing nature of the Nigerian-Benin relations during 2003-2019. Qualitative content analysis was adopted to examine the changing pattern of Nigeria-Benin relations. Finally, the outcome of the paper recommends the review of the borderlines; creating youth employments and improving security services that rhyme with present situation to tackling Nigeria's insecurity.

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria in its foreign policy recognizes cordial relations with her neighbours as central to its peaceful existence (Obiozor 2013). Its official relations with Benin are given most priority as with other neighbouring states of Niger, Chad and Cameroun. This is further anchored by the belief that Nigeria's prosperity and security is intrinsically linked to its peaceful co-existence with her immediate neighbours (Obiozor 2013). Hence Nigeria, like any other country in the world, pursues what is called interrelated goals in her foreign policy.

A number of Nigerians had socio-economic relations with Beninese before colonial period. For instance, there was an appreciable contact between the Yoruba of South-western Nigeria and the Fon of the Republic of Benin; and con-

sequently, there was the spread of Yoruba and Fon languages across the two communities (Babatunde 2014). Prior to the creation of Nigeria-Benin colonial borders, the Yoruba and the Fon interrelated with one another and moved freely for economic activities and transactions across the two territories without restrictions (Yusuf 2016). However, the politics of colonial border creation continued to the post-colonial era with strong emphasis on the impact of guarded territorial borders as a critical security issue; and thus tended to affect the pre-colonial Nigerian-Beninese relationships (Babatunde 2014).

In spite of the artificial borders that for instance separated the Yoruba people of Nigeria from the Fon people of Benin as well as the recognition of borders as determinant of security, there has been the persistence of cultural and socio-economic affinities among the peoples (Yusuf 2016). Most of the Yoruba and Fon peoples in the two countries have similarities in sociological and anthropological characteristics. They speak each other's language, a number of them practice the same religion and other cultural traits irrespective of differences in national citizenship and ethnicity (Babatunde 2014). Moreover, the two countries' foreign policies with regard to each other were flexible in terms

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of their political boundaries. Therefore, it was easy for Nigerians and Beninese to cross the two countries' borders; and this accessibility had been a serious threat to the Nigeria's security (Yusuf 2016). Consequently, Nigeria became dynamic in her relations with Benin as relate to border issues and embarked on unilateral actions in 2003 (Babatunde 2014). It is against this backdrop that, the paper is set to examine the changing nature of Nigeria-Benin relations as relate to security issues along the countries' borders during 2003-2019.

### Objectives

- ◆ To examine the importance and security challenges of Nigeria-Benin borders
- ◆ To discuss the reasons for and the changing nature of the Nigeria-Benin relations during 2003- 2019.

### METHODOLOGY

In this paper, qualitative content analysis is utilized to analyse secondary sources on the Nigeria-Benin border insecurity and relations. Such sources included textbooks, journals, seminars and conference papers and dissertations. The study adopts content analysis approach to study, analyse and interpret the data obtained from the above mentioned sources in order to arrive at informed opinions and objective judgment.

### The Underlying Factors

There are number of underlying factors that are found to be of great importance to disclose. The factors cover the history of Nigeria-Benin diplomatic, socio-economic and security relations. This reveals the implications of land border for Nigeria's external relations and national security as well as the ways in which Nigeria muddled through, amidst challenges and difficulties associated with her location in West Africa (Adetula 2014). It is indicated there in the work that Nigeria uses her power and resources for regional security in West Africa. In spite of that, the relationship as a result of shared border between Nigeria and Benin and the criminal operations around the border area has caused a lot of insecurity in Nigeria. For instance, the high

rate of trafficking ammunitions around the border area as well as illicit drug trade has serious implications for Nigeria. Consequently, a number of policies were formulated by the Nigerian government on how best to manage the threats from Benin. Similarly, some policies and actions were bilaterally carried out by the Nigerian and Beninese Governments (Adetula 2014).

Nigeria was a British colony surrounded by erstwhile French colonies. Their difference in colonial orientation made Nigeria's neighbours have cultural, political, military and economic affiliations with France while Nigeria on the other hand had such ties with Britain. This remains number one factor responsible for the misunderstanding between the two countries long ago. Despite that, the citizens of the neighbouring countries, especially Beninese have been depending upon Nigerian economy for a very long time, coupled with encroachment on her territorial borders. In spite of this, the Nigerian Government struggled in putting much effort to ensure peaceful co-existence with Benin. However, Nigeria-Benin relation has been affected with series of border misunderstandings (Omeye 2006). Nigerians and Beninese movement across the two countries' borders without the necessary documents for the journey is also another factor. The movement of people had been free across the borders. They were free to visit their friends and even to attend some social functions while exercising illegal trading. In a nutshell, it was observed that the earnings of the low income of the people in those areas, who were mainly subsistent farmers, had led the youths to look forward for survival. They became influenced by indulging in illegal businesses (Adeyinka 2014). The most difficult thing that prompted hefty challenges to Nigerians had been the treatment they received from the Beninese who imposes taxes to those Nigerians passing through their borders. The border porosity led to the inflow of illegitimate goods that over the years constituted threats to the Nigerian security (Folarin et al. 2014). This continues to date, consequently causing sour relations between the countries.

It is realized that the market exchange between the two countries contributed seriously to the survival of criminal activities across the border. Nigeria-Benin land border is the most

crucial one across the sub-region because of the cultural and geographical landscape of the Beninese-Nigerian border. The current commercial and economic activities taking place around the strategic business places that connect the countries have become a great life-force. This caused the illegitimate cross-border trade and criminal activities including smuggling of SALW along Nigeria-Benin borders. These have been the major challenge to Nigeria's security (Blum 2014). The West African borders' security situations have been identified as a long-time problem that requires committed and collective active responsibilities by member states. The criminals used arms to facilitate and ensure their targeted interests which in turn to cause violence.

The free flow of arms across the West African States has ensured and caused a wound to the peaceful co-existence around the sub-region (Ola 2012). Nigeria suffers most by availability of arms used by insurgent groups and other violent groups while causing problems to both human and properties (Ola 2012).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Importance and the Threats of Nigeria-Benin Borders

Generally, borderlands are melting and security hot spots and Nigeria-Benin borders are no exceptions. The country's borderlands became arenas for both business and unwanted activities. Etymologically, Nigeria-Benin border region is known to be commercial centers that connected the two states (Sossou-Agbo 2011). The South-western Nigeria, with different commercial areas is known to be economic strategic place since the time of the colonial masters. The economic relation between strategic places of Port Norvo in Benin Republic and Lagos from Nigeria has made the relation of the countries strong (Sossou-Agbo 2011).

Economically Benin is dependent on illegal trade with Nigeria across the country's land border. Given Benin's transit position and its deliberate pursuit of an economic infiltration policy towards Nigeria, the foreign policy challenges for its leaders seem to determine when and how to safeguard Benin's autonomy by cushioning it from the consequences of economic malaise in Nigeria (Nwokedi 1991).

Overdependence on border trade as source of revenue, perhaps, explains why Benin was classified by the United Nations as one of the world's poorest nations (Nwokedi 1991). Worst was that since the classification, the foreign policy of Benin has been concerned mainly with overcoming its economic condition and its relations with Nigeria are highly directed to that effect. Similarly, the two countries had already established a kind of trade re-exportation where Benin receives goods from other countries and exporting to Nigeria. Although, the practice has been taking place cut across all countries that shares border with Nigeria but Benin has been sphere heading the activities because of the geographical location of the two countries (Sossou-Agbo 2011).

In spite of all bilateral and multilateral actions carried out in order to control transnational criminal activities across the Nigeria-Benin border, criminal activities continued unabated; and increased in multiple. Apart from trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) there exists illegal trade across the border that include arms smuggling, drug and human trafficking and other criminal activities like arm robbery and to some extent the area serves as hidden place for criminals (Adeola and Fayomi 2012). The artificial border line between the two countries and lack of purposeful leadership within both countries continues to facilitate the inflow of illegitimate goods to Nigeria. Also, the low income earnings among Beninese border communities, made many of them resort to illegal smuggling that threatens Nigeria's security (Adeyinka 2014). The persistency in the foregoing criminal activities across Nigeria-Benin border continued to be a serious threat to Nigerian economy and society, especially, from 2009 to date with the intensity of insecurity emanating firstly from Boko-Haram insurgency to the activities of Niger Delta militants (Sossou-Agbo 2011). Even before then, Nigerian Government began to hold Benin authority responsible for the continued criminal activities across their borders.

Nigerian leaders considered Benin Government as silent promoters of illegal cross-border trade through its lukewarm attitudes as well as lack of political will towards the control efforts of such activities (Sossou-Agbo 2011). With the increase of crime across border areas when some

Beninese villages became real markets for small arms and light weapons (Sossou-Agbo 2011), Nigeria began to think of embarking on unilateral action. Additionally, in 2000, two Nigerian customs officers were killed while trying to arrest some suspected Beninese smugglers (Bisi 2016).

Finally, in 2003, an international robbery across the countries' border led to multiple borders' shut down on Nigerian side; and this was the beginning of unilateral action by Nigerian Government (Adetula 2014). However, it is pertinent to note that, the border criminal activities did not affect Nigeria only but also Benin. For example, there was more than one attack on different banks at Dantokpa market in Cotonou in 2008 by Nigerian criminals that entered the country unexplored. Apart from the recorded casualties, huge amount of CFA was stolen (Adetula 2014).

#### **Continuity and Change in the Relations**

A number of bilateral and multilateral actions were carried out by Nigerian and Beninese Governments as well as ECOWAS in order to curtail the incessant security threats across Nigeria-Benin border. Nigeria remained persistent and insistent on cooperative measures with Benin until 2003 when the former viewed the latter as uncommitted (Adetula 2014). This was the beginning of change in Nigeria-Benin relations from friendly bilateral to hostile unilateral actions. For example, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, 2003, Nigeria for the first time closed her land borders with Benin over cross-border crimes. Few days after, the Republic of Benin and Nigeria signed an agreement that encouraged the latter to open her borders after the former pledged to cooperate actively with Nigerian authorities in the control of border crimes (Adetula 2014). Consequent upon the closure of the Nigerian border in 2003, Benin experienced serious fuel hike which led to high price of fuel in the country. In the meantime, Benin Government decided to remove a petrol subsidy that had been enjoyed by citizens since 2000 in order to have economic control (Chambers et al. 2012). In the cause of that, the state allowed the operation of illegal fuel selling to determine the price. Since the removal of subsidy the price was not only determined by illegal market but ensured an avenue for illegal employ-

ment to local people; offered high profits to Nigerian and Benin businessmen as well as politicians who had vested interest in the trade (Chambers et al. 2012).

Meanwhile, the Nigeria-Benin Joint effort of 2003 to reform informal border trade failed with increase in criminal activities that were serious threats to Nigeria's security. Consequently, Nigeria closed its border again (ibid). Nevertheless, Nigeria-Benin bilateral affiliations continue to be bonded by certain resolutions agreed to, under Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Such resolutions include a \$67.5 billion Nigeria-Benin agreement for generating electricity not only in Nigeria and Benin, but Dakar, Senegal, Togo and Ghana. The agreement was reached during the 26<sup>th</sup> ordinary ECOWAS Summit in 2003 (Olatuyi 2003). It was the very year that marked the beginning of harsh unilateral actions by Nigeria in her relations with the Republic of Benin. But the country went ahead and signed an agreement involving billions of Naira that was going to be mainly financed by its resources.

Despite their divergent approach to each other, Nigeria-Benin bilateral cooperation ensued. For example the two countries signed "Death Kneel" on piracy, a pact that will minimize if not stamp out the activities of robbers who are giving owners of trader large boat sleepless nights and ruining the country's economies. The agreement was endorsed by Presidents Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of Nigeria and BoniYayi of Benin in 2011 (Oditia 2011). Also, Nigeria partnered Benin to rehabilitate Badagry-Seme road. As disclosed by BoniYayi, the President of Benin Republic in 2012, the two countries decided to reconstruct the road in order to boost transportation system between them (Ugwu 2012). However, the partnership for the rehabilitation of Badagry-Seme road did not materialize; and Nigeria-Benin relations continued to be of equity and par. So unlike the countries' relations between 1970 and 2000 that was of respect and mutual support as to tackling the security problems they faced at the time; now the relations hold a pattern of equality and reciprocated respect. The case of Dokubo-Asari, a Nigerian who was arrested by the Benin Republic Gendarmes around the Lubeleyi roundabout on the 27<sup>th</sup> November, 2013 fuelled the poor relations.

However, despite the series joint effort of the two sister states, smuggling of illegitimate items continues to happen across the border while the level of insecurity in Nigeria has increased. The unilateral decision by the Nigerian government has continued unnoticed soon after the signing of the free trade across Africa to make African economic attractive and of great importance so as to compete with global economic challenges (Alake 2019). The Government of Nigeria took a unilateral decision to close its borders in August, 2019 following the reason to control influx of goods like rice and tomatoes that believed to be expired items to Nigerians. The decision has affected not only countries bordering with Nigeria but also States from where such countries receiving imported goods for transfer to Nigeria (Nigeria-Benin Border Closure 2019). This indicates that Nigeria has been shouldering and boosting economy of Benin as a result of the economic happening across the border which gradually led to illicit smuggling of arms. It is reported that 80 percent of imports received by Benin are transferred to Nigeria (Alake 2019). According to custom spokesman, "That date is not the terminal date for the border closure, it is end of the first phase, and the border will remain closed until set objectives are achieved" (Alake 2019).

The scenario with Nigeria-Benin border is beyond the limit and effort of signing bilateral relation but rather to controlling the influence from external forces passing through Benin for economic survival of other countries. Moreover, disparities of administrative orientation of the two countries also fuel the problem causing insecurity across the border as nowadays the border remains the chief source of illicit drugs, small arms and light weapons. It is observed that the Nigerian government embarked on this decision to control not only importing rice and tomatoes but also an avenue to control menace of arms smuggling which requires not to be disclosed to general public for security reason.

### CONCLUSION

The criminal activities across the Nigeria-Benin border did not only affect Nigerian society by avoiding its measures and making its institution imbalance, but put Nigerians at risk

because they are the ones who face increasing insecurity resulting from smuggling of small arms and light weapons. Human security is an important and new focus on security as a whole in international relations and it cannot be ignored. Thus, Nigerian Government reacted harshly by closures of her border, to what it perceived as lack of commitment from Benin in the control of border crimes. However, it is also clear that the two nations needed and supported each other economy-wise, although there were cases of border closure, it is in those times the importance of their relationship was visible. The Nigerian government was of the belief that the introduction of Joint Border Post which was introduced and established to be managed by Nigeria and Benin, can serve as remedy to such problems, however it did not yield positive changes rather there was an escalation of insecurity across the border. This motivates and influences the Nigerian government to embark on unilateral decision for the closure of the border in August 2019, which in turn ushered economic problem with Republic of Benin and the countries from where it imports goods. It is observed that the effort of Nigeria to join hand with Benin in order to arrest the menace and the intervention of Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) to mediate between the two sister States have not resulted positive changes which remains the reason for unilateral action by Nigeria.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

To end the problem of artificial border, it has to do with collective responsibility from both Nigeria and Benin, irrespective of their political orientations by colonizers. The borderline needs to be revised to determine well defined border lines, so as to avoid illegal encroachments; programs should be initiated to ensure the reduction of poverty among citizens of the countries and border communities so as to manage the challenge of unemployment. This can be achieved only when there is purposeful leadership cut across the connected counties; additional number of security personnel should be employed as well as equipping them with training and arms that rhyme with present situation in order to tackling the menace of arms smug-



gling across the border and its implications against Nigerian security.

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