



## Nigeria's Hidden War: Ethnic, Religious, or Resource-Driven?

**Christian genocide? Not quite. Criminal gangs are killing more Muslims than Christians, while illicit mining and armed groups turn northern Nigeria into a battlefield for resources and power.**

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### From Insurgency to Systemic Violence

In the West, politicians, activists, and media outlets often describe the violence in northern and central Nigeria as a genocide against Christians. For instance, the Christian Refugee Relief Fund (also known as “Christians at Risk”) claims on its website that “Christians are facing genocide because of their faith” in Nigeria.

U.S. President Donald Trump even suggested military action in response to these claims. While he appears concerned about Christians in Nigeria, he has largely ignored the plight of Christian and Muslim Palestinians, who are facing an actual genocide in Gaza. Could resources, rather than religion, be his true motivation?



Screenshot AP headline: “Trump threatens Nigeria with potential military action and escalates claim of Christian persecution.”

Yet on the ground, more Muslims are being killed by criminal gangs than Christians. The numbers don’t align with the narrative — so what’s really going on?

In this [interview](#), David Hundeyin, a Nigerian investigative journalist and broadcaster, situates today’s violence within a long trajectory that began with Boko Haram’s insurgency in 2009. What started as a religiously framed rebellion has evolved into a pattern of mass, indiscriminate attacks and large-scale displacement.

By around 2014–2015, the conflict had broadened: attacks became less about capturing symbolic targets and more about clearing entire communities from strategic areas.

Independent data confirm the human toll. Nigeria now has one of the world’s largest populations of internally displaced people (IDPs) — over 3.5 million by 2025, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

## Religion and Ethnicity: Incomplete Explanations

While Boko Haram and its splinters — ISWAP and Ansaru — justify violence in Islamic terms, Muslim civilians make up a large share of the victims.

Research supports this: many of the worst-affected areas are overwhelmingly Muslim, showing that religion alone cannot explain the pattern of killings.

This complexity has led both domestic and international media to increasingly rely on generic labels such as “bandits” or “unknown gunmen,” which blur the lines between jihadists, criminal networks, and resource-driven militias.

## The Resource–Conflict Nexus

Hundeyin refers to statements by Hamza al-Mustapha, a retired high-ranking Nigerian military officer, who emphasizes that the violence is less motivated by religion or ethnicity and is instead closely linked to the geographic distribution of natural resources—particularly lithium, gold, and other strategic minerals.

Recent research supports this connection:

- ENACT (2020) and Osawe & Uwa (2023) find that illegal mining and unregulated extraction are concentrated in the same northwestern and central states that have seen dramatic spikes in violence.
- In Zamfara State, unlicensed gold mining has been directly tied to rural banditry and mass killings.
- According to Vanguard Nigeria (2025), over 80% of mining operations in some northern states are illegal.
- Broader African studies (Provenzano & Bull, 2021; Boulat, 2024) show that regions near new mineral exploitation sites face heightened risks of conflict and forced displacement.

In this reading, violence becomes a tool of dispossession: communities are forcibly removed, labeled unsafe, and replaced by informal or criminal mining operations. The displaced swell the ranks of Nigeria’s IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), while extracted minerals enter opaque global supply chains.

## The Proliferation of Armed Actors

Nigeria's conflict landscape now includes over a dozen armed groups — from Boko Haram and ISWAP to local “bandit” gangs and transnational jihadist networks such as AQIM and JNIM.

This proliferation, noted in both the interview and Global Initiative (2024) reports, has blurred the line between ideological insurgency and profit-driven militias. Many groups finance themselves through kidnapping, cattle rustling, and illicit mining, effectively merging jihadist and criminal economies.

## The Role of the State and External Actors

The interview suggests that Nigeria's ability to contain these insurgencies has been deliberately weakened over the years:

- In 2014, under President Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria employed the South African private military company Executive Outcomes, which reportedly made progress against Boko Haram. The contract was terminated after Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 election victory.
- Around the same time, arms deals were suspended or restricted under U.S. pressure via the Leahy Law, citing human-rights concerns.

Although not all of these details can be independently verified, it is widely acknowledged that Nigeria's armed forces face chronic procurement delays, corruption, and inadequate equipment.

Scholars such as Hussain (2024) point to deeper structural issues: decades of over-centralized control of resource revenues and political patronage have left the military entangled in rent-seeking networks, undermining any coherent security strategy.

## The Human and Economic Cost

The overlapping crises of insurgency, criminal economies, and state fragility have created profound humanitarian and ecological consequences:

- More than 8 million people require humanitarian assistance in northeastern Nigeria.

- Illicit mining contaminates soil and water, exemplified by recurring lead-poisoning outbreaks in Zamfara State.
- Forced displacement undermines local agriculture, worsening food insecurity and driving migration.

Together, these realities reinforce David Hundeyin's argument that violence now functions as an instrument of extraction and dispossession, not merely ideology.

## Interpreting the Pattern

Synthesizing Hundeyin's interview and wider research reveals a multi-layered conflict system:

1. Ideological insurgency (Boko Haram, ISWAP) provides cover and logistics for criminal economies.
2. Illicit resource extraction finances armed groups and incentivizes displacement.
3. Weak governance and foreign interference perpetuate the security vacuum.
4. Communities caught in between experience social, political, and demographic erasure.

The violence in northern and central Nigeria thus appears less as a religious war and more as a resource war disguised by sectarian rhetoric.

## Policy and Research Implications

- Strengthen mineral-sector governance and transparency under the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI).
- Empower local governments and community mining cooperatives to reduce incentives for armed capture.
- Enhance border and airspace surveillance, targeting unregistered airstrips and transponder-off flights flagged by the Nigeria Civil Aviation Authority.
- Rebuild military capacity through accountable procurement and regional collaboration.
- Recognize and support displaced populations not only as victims of terrorism but also of resource-driven dispossession.

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