

**FROM “THERE WAS A COUNTRY” TO A “NATION UNDER SIEGE”:
EXPLAINING THE OXYGENATION OF INSECURITY
IN SOUTH EAST, NIGERIA***

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Abstract:

The South East of Nigeria has been plagued with skirmishes of neo-civil war between the people of the region and the government. The “new war” in the Southeast is softly prosecuted as a “siege” which is meant to achieve two basic objectives: genocide and economic asphyxiation; typical of what was obtained in the civil war era. Rooted in the sheer perceived malignment of the region mostly populated by the Ibos, the activities of the security forces set up to execute the objectives have been met with stiff resistance from the people through various groups including the Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) in a struggle for survival. The paper adopts a qualitative approach that draws data from secondary sources such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers and internet sources. It is concluded that prolonged injustice and marginalization occasioned separatist movements and fuel insecurity in South East Nigeria. The paper recommends the re-integration of the people into governance to combat alienation and exclusion. Government should also promote the de-sieging of the region and convoke a Sovereign National Conference that will involve critical stakeholders in the country to restore peace, engender social change and promote development in the region.

Keywords: Biafra, insecurity, marginalization, siege, South East.

* The ideas presented in the article reflect the authors’ view.

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Introduction

Apart from the ravaging insecurity in the Northern part of Nigeria, which has continued to claim the lives of citizens and security officers including immigrants, there is no other geo-political zone in the country more prone to insecurity than the South East. A once peaceful region, albeit with some pockets of criminal activities such as armed robbery and kidnapping, which are verisimilitude in all geopolitical zones of the country, has become a theatre of devastating violent crisis which has paralyzed economic activities and strangled peace required for meaningful development. The secessionist struggle of the Indigenous People of Biafra (hereafter IPOB), appears to have given way to the emergence of different violent groups such as unknown gunmen and a lesser extent, the Eastern Security Network (hereafter ESN) – a security wing of the IPOB that has been mostly fingered in the extant insecurity reality in the region. This is not to exclude the gruesome activities of marauding Fulani herdsmen who appear to have surrounded the bushes in most villages in the region, killing, kidnapping and maiming residents and destroying their farm yields and valuable properties, particularly in Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi States.

Historically, the region, which comprises five states – Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu and Abia – is known for its enterprising nature and as a hub of economic activities in the country, including Lagos and Kano. However, the devastating civil war which shook the very foundation of Nigeria's existence threatened its growth as most businessmen from the region had their properties and businesses scattered all over the country, while some were either confiscated by the federal government or the indigenes of the states where the property and businesses were located (Ezugwu, 2018). The misfortune of the civil war was that it wasn't about material benefits, but nationality and by extension, religion. The war was loosely interpreted by religious clerics as a conflict between minority Christian Biafra and majority Muslim-dominated Nigeria (Heerten & Moses, 2018).

However, the contemporary complex violence in the region appears to be echoing past experiences while the reality of the war resonates in the mind of an average Southeasterner. Common attributions to the violent crisis visible in the region have been

documented by various authors and the media, locally and internationally as the region becomes characterized by perennial marginalization, injustice, socio-political neglect, ethnicity, political extraversion, the trauma of a lost war, militant herdsman attack, distrust of government and politics of divide and rule (Babalola, 2019; Bird and Ottanelli, 2017; Ebonine, 2021; Ebonine and Akinyetun, 2021; Elumoye, 2021; Ezemenaka and Prouza, 2016; Ibeanu and Orji, 2016; Ojeleye, 2010; Oloyede, 2009).

This paper, while not differing from the submission of these authors, elevates **the polemics of insecurity in the region to a psychological standpoint**. In other words, the intensity of the insecurity in the region cannot be explicated from the viewpoints expressed by the aforementioned scholars on their own. It should be viewed from the prism of neo-civil war intent and the interpretation thereof, arising from the deliberate sieging of the region by the federal government of Nigeria. Thus, as the paper argues, the various attributions to insecurity in the region are oxygenating forces, fuelling the interpretation of intentional sieging as a declaration of another war. Militarization of the region is akin to the 1967 civil war where the Nigerian forces invaded the region, raped, looted, killed and rendered many homeless. The extant number of military personnel and their activities in the region, which are synonymous with the manifestations of sieging, can be loosely interpreted as strategies by the federal government to actualize a two-pronged mission – genocide and economic asphyxiation. Since the region survives through commerce, suffocating their source of livelihood would be the first mission of weakening them while massive killings will likely propel their annihilation. Against this backdrop, what is regarded as insecurity in South East Nigeria is the struggle for the survival of a people who are conscious of the extent of their alienation and marginalization; similar to the civil war era. To this end, the paper adopts a qualitative approach that relies on data sourced from secondary sources such as textbooks, peer-reviewed articles, newspapers and internet sources to present a coherent discourse.

This paper is structured into nine sections. The introduction is followed by conceptual and analytical frameworks. Section three traces the history of ethnic division in Nigeria. The fourth section focuses on the

Colonial South East while the fifth section presents the discourse on the Biafran war. Section six is an attempt at a nuanced analysis of a taste of genocide and economic suffocation during Biafra war and the years that followed. This is followed by the seventh section which discusses the post-military South East as a region under siege. This is immediately followed by a section on insecurity in the South East while the conclusion of the study is presented in the ninth section.

“There was a country” and siege: conceptual and analytical frameworks

“There was a country” is a phrase that appears to be interpreted with varying degrees of associated meanings by three different entities in Nigeria. The first is Chinua Achebe, a playwright of international repute, who chronicled his civil war experience with the phrase (Achebe, 2012). The second is the *Ibos*, who continuously regard the phrase as a flashback to a lost war and territory of Biafra to the Nigerian government. The third is the Nigerian state, including the Nigerian armed forces and past and present leaders of the country, that often bask in the euphoria of the meaning associated with the phrase as an extinction of a rebellious nation (*Ibos*) which wanted to “prodigally” stray from the Nigerian project. In all of these meanings, the intersecting point is the Nigerian Civil War and the downfall of Biafra. The concept is used in this paper to capture these three associated meanings as indicated which combined reinforces the present insecurity reality in the South East.

The concept of siege is fluid and has been attempted by various scholars, albeit without a universally acceptable definition. What exists mainly in the literature is a string of descriptions of a siege situation. The difficulty in uniformity of definition is reflected in the inability of International Humanitarian Law¹ to proffer one. Kraska (2009, p.1) defines siege warfare as “an operational strategy to facilitate capture of a fortified place such as a city, in such a way as to isolate it from relief in the form of supplies or additional defensive forces.” This is supported by Gillard (2019) that a siege may not conform to a specific condition, it may

¹ This refers to a set of rules that seeks, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict.

however be used to compel an enemy to surrender or to gain control of an area. Thus, a siege may be used to ensure the isolation and encirclement of a perceived enemy for bombardment or to prevent its escape. Harrington (2005) notes that sieges often involve operations against permanent structures through direct fire to achieve a breach and weaken the stronghold of the besieged. In most cases, the besieging force employs isolation, starvation and bombardment against the besieged.

Siege or siege warfare is an old form of warfare, described as an “archaic” or “medieval” form of warfare. However, the modern form of warfare has seen the resurgence of sieges, particularly in the cities. Despite the renewed introduction of sieges in modern warfare, the international community has not stopped condemning it since 2013 (Nijs, 2021). The condemnation stems from the lethality of modern weapons which could wipe inter generations within a few seconds. The amorphous and ambiguous concept of siege concept of siege has been described by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as a “military blockade of a city or fortified place to compel it to surrender, or a persistent or serious attack.” Beehner, Berti and Jackson (2017, p. 78) see a siege as “any attempt by an adversary to control access into and out of a town, neighbourhood, or another terrain of strategic significance to achieve a military or political objective”. Fox (2018, p. 2) avers that the motive of contemporary sieges may not necessarily be to erect a blockade. Instead, it could be more of an “isolation of an adversary through encirclement while maintaining sufficient firepower against the besieged to ensure steady pressure”. To that extent, it could be terrain-based, enemy-focused or a combination of the two, which largely depends on the goal of the besieger and the besieged: achieving a decision, whether politically or militarily or slowly to destroy the besieged.

The provisions of the Geneva Convention (GC) are quite apt in adumbrating the rights of non-combatants in line with international humanitarian law. Some of these rights include: (1) Diplomatic agents and citizens of neutral states have the right to leave, save when the fight is in progress, (2) parties to the conflict must agree to allow sick and wounded civilian population, including pregnant women to leave the besieged city, and (3) there must be an agreement to allow humanitarian assistants free access into the besieged city (see GCI, Art, 15; GCII, Art. 18;

GCIV, Art. 17). To further strengthen the rights of the civilian population, Additional Protocol (AP) to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts contains some prohibitive clauses. Specifically, APII, Art. 14 prohibits the use of “starvation” as a weapon against the civilian population and APII, 18 (2) provides for relief material and other humanitarian assistance to the civilian population.

Alluding to the above, Gillard (2019) opines that sieges must comply with the relevant rules of International Humanitarian Law: rules regulating the conduct of hostilities; the prohibition of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare; and rules on evacuations. In the first instance, the besieger must take caution not to bombard civilians, direct attacks against enemies alone, prohibit indiscriminate attacks and avoid injury to civilians. To ensure the latter, the besieger must verify its target, measure the incidental harm and issue warnings. The second rule expressly prohibits the [deliberate] starvation of civilians. In this regard, starvation is broadly interpreted to include the deprivation of essentials other than food and water. More so, sieging must not impede the passage of humanitarian relief materials meant for civilians. The third rule relates to the evacuation of civilians from besieged areas to limit their exposure to hostility and starvation.

These rules when analyzed in the context of the Nigerian civil war and the present sieging of the region provide useful insights. In the first analysis, the rule on bombardment was broken during the Biafran war, as the Nigerian troops repeatedly bombed cities indiscriminately without prejudice against civilians. As Omaka (2014) submits, the Nigerian government committed heinous crimes against minorities in Andoni, Rivers and the Efiks where over 500 and 2,000 people were killed respectively. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Air Force arbitrarily bombed civilians in minority areas during the war. In recent times, the conduct of military operations and the mounting of roadblocks have had a psychological effect on civilians. In addition to attacking civilians, starvation became a prominent strategy of the Nigerian government – thus breaking the second rule. In what was referred to as an epidemic of starvation, Omaka (2014) asserts that no fewer than 1,000,000 Biafrans died from starvation and related diseases. Meanwhile, in recent times the

issues of deprivation and marginalization of the Southeast continue unabated. The evacuation of civilians was not only prohibited during the war, but civilians were also forcefully displaced and many were caught in the crossfires. Meanwhile, the people of the region, in recent times, remain subject to hostility from armed men.

The loose nature of the concept of siege in contemporary times has made securitizing actors use the concept even in non-violence situations, further expanding the scope of its understanding. For instance, Lai Mohammad, the Nigerian Minister of Information calls the rising menace of misinformation and hate speech in Nigeria a “siege” (Adeboye, 2017). It thus raises this fundamental question: Can a nation be under siege even without provocation from either side? Can sheer hatred of a people from a particular section of a country with concomitant violent attacks be termed siege? The Nigerian Senate allege that Nigeria is “under siege” following incessant attacks by bandits and terrorist groups (Umoru, 2021). If the use of the concept fits into these situations, then it is possible that the besieger can besiege a location, nation or even a state without provocation from the besieged. Once this is the case, the objective of the besieger becomes questionable even within the consideration of the International Humanitarian Law, particularly as it concerns the South East and the Northern-dominated federal government post-civil war.

The history of ethnic division in Nigeria

The “artificial construction” (Bacho and Abdul-Kadir, 2007) or in the words of Obafemi Awolowo, a “mere geographical expression”, (Awolowo, 1947) called Nigeria was made up of autonomous villages, kingdoms and empires that co-existed in peace amid well-structured and rigid checks and balances in the three regions (North, West and East) that existed (Ebonine, 2021). The incursion and subsequent subjugation of Lagos in 1861 by the British and the mandate of administering colonies following the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 changed the political and economic landscape of what would later be known as Nigeria. The Jihad War led by Uthman Dan Fodio had before the advent of colonialism conquered and dominated Hausa caliphates following established trade routes, crossing the Sahara Desert and connecting Northern Nigeria to

Muslim North Africa, the Middle East, and Southern Europe, and eventually leading to the spread of Islam among the majority Hausa population between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries (Bird and Ottanelli, 2017; Oloruntoba, 2022).

The provenance of ethnic discord began to brew when the direction of trade routes and commerce changed in “favour” of the South (which comprised the East and West) as the Europeans in their commercial interest of slave trading faced Atlantic Coast while overlooking the Mediterranean coast even after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 as slave trading gave way for legitimate trading in palm oil and other resources mostly found in the Niger Delta Basin. The Royal Niger Company 1886 would help protect the commercial interest of the British in the newly found business centre until they suspend activities in 1900 (Achebe, 2012; Baxter, 2014). The adoption of the indirect rule system by Lord Lugard and the subsequent lumping of over 200 ethnic groups with diverse cultural, religious, educational, social and political leanings, in 1914, meant that the country was in for a total collapse. Regionalizing the country based on ethnicity further laid bare the animosity that was intrinsically imploding among the people. The British furthered ethnicity when it encouraged the Northern elites to jettison the acceptance of the Portuguese-led missionary schools that brought with its western education and which other regions embraced, save for the conservative North (Ebonine, 2022).

From 1922, following the introduction of party politics in Nigeria by the British, the political parties formed took ethnic and regional complexion. The Northern People’s Congress (NPC) led by Ahmadu Bello dominated the North, and the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) held sway in the East as Nnamdi Azikiwe steered the party while the Obafemi Awolowo-led Action Group (AG) dominated the west. However, the footprints of educational adroitness and sagacity were conspicuous in the activities of the parties led by Awolowo and Azikiwe, both boasting of intimidating academic records against their Grade II counterpart in Ahmadu Bello. Certainly, the seed of what would later result in the civil war was sown and grew faster in this period as the North continued to play catch up to the two other regions, particularly the NCNC which was seen by both NPC and AG as being too assertive and

demanding. Unfortunately, this ethnic divide that started before the colonial period still defines the socio-political landscape of post-military Nigeria and threatens its continued existence as a unified whole that incubates over 200 ethnic groupings.

The colonial South East

What is today known as South East Nigeria began following the regionalization of politics by the British. Sir Bourdillon has been credited with designating Lugardian protectorates as regions in 1939 before the outbreak of WWII. This designation was later upheld and formed the bedrock of Authur Richard's administration. The British intention of regionalization of Nigeria into North, West and East must have been to bring the government further nearer to the grassroots given the extent to which the people criticised the previous governments of Lugard and Clifford. However, the economic interest of the colonialists often beclouded whatever ingenuity their policies could have been during the period. The Ibo's resistance to the British presence in the coastal areas following the peak of the slave trade has well been documented by historians. As Dike (1959) posits, the Ibos migrated to the coasts partly for the slave trade and partly due to insufficient land for agriculture. During this period, they had massive trade contacts with the Europeans which appeared to have shaped their entrepreneurial skills till today. By the twentieth century, trade had become a source of pleasure for Ibos and markets were seen as "the breadth of life" (Green, 1947, p. 37).

By the 1930s and 1950s when the British realized that the people had fed up with their administration following the mountain of pressures from the educated elites, the British started a gradual devolution of power to the indigenes. The Ibos appeared to have grabbed the capitalist mode of production of the British and appeared ready to supplant the few foreign Indian merchants such as K. Chelleram and Sons, J. T. Chanrai and Co., Bhojson, Indian Emporium, and Inlaks in addition to British merchants at the time (Kilby, 1975). At the time, hunger for imported goods had been on a constant increase that in 1946, imports stood at £20 million, £62 million in 1950, £114 million by 1954 and £166 million in 1958 (Olutayo, 1999). This trend became appealing to Nigerian

entrepreneurs including those of Ibo extraction in that by 1965, about 200 entrepreneurs had emerged (Olutayo, 1999).

A significant reality during the period as earlier mentioned was a mass migration of the Ibos outside their territory. Given the triplet realities of the scarcity of lands, early contacts with the British capitalist system and no traditional cities except Enugu, Onitsha, Umuahia, Port Harcourt, and Aba, Ibos embraced migration. In 1921, there were 3,000 Ibos in the North. By 1931, the number had risen to about 12,000 and by 1952, the number had risen to 130,000. In fact, in the Lagos metropolis, they constituted more than half of the total non-indigenes there (Anber, 1967). The common struggle of the Ibos for survival during the period meant that they cultivated the “communal civic spirit” where they were domiciled. This communal spirit manifested in a well-structured apprenticeship that guaranteed economic progress. Verily also, the communal associations that followed the communal spirit meant that the Ibos were able to send their wards to school and numerically occupied strategic positions in the public service. Evidentially, by 1952, there were 115 Ibo students as opposed to 118 Yoruba students at the University College, Ibadan. By 1959, there were more pupils and teachers in the Eastern region than elsewhere. Even in the military, the Ibo occupied the highest echelon. Of the 431 senior posts in the Nigerian Railway Corporation in 1964, the Ibo are alleged to have occupied 270; 73 of the 104 senior posts in the Nigerian Ports Authority; and three-quarters of Nigeria’s foreign service; and they were heads of the universities at Ibadan and Lagos (Olutayo, 1999).

Economically, the communal associations had assisted the Ibo in building credit associations such that they had 68,220 individuals in credit associations, as compared to 5,776 for the west and 2,407 for the north (Olutayo, 1999). The credit associations were operating side by side with the apprentice system. The apprentice system was a system of trade indoctrination in which young apprentices mostly between the ages of 8 and 12 are enrolled in a particular trade, taught and guided by their master for a period of 5 and 10 years. After this, the master settled him and allowed him to set up his own business elsewhere as a free master required to train and raise another apprentice. Apparently, the cycle of Ibo dominance during the period revolved around this system.

The Biafran war

There have been different recorded accounts of the Nigerian Civil War. Given such different accounts, it is expected, just as it has turned out to be, areas of convergence and divergence; contentious points from not only writers but also the two sides of the federal government and the Biafran people. However, one undeniable fact remains that the war, just as Oloyede (2009) puts it, was just “politics of ethnic difference”. Regrettably, any civil war that assumes ethnic colouration is bound to be complex, combusting and debilitating, given that parties to the war tend to fight for ethnic superiority and predominance. This was exactly the case with the civil war of 1967. Many scholars have often fingered the superiority feud between Yakubu Gowon (The Nigerian Head of State) and Odumegwu Ojukwu (the leader of the Biafran Nation) as the smokescreen to the Civil War. This paper maintains that, although supremacy question did arise between the two gallant personalities as Ojukwu as well as other Northern military officers, chiefly including Muritala Mohammed questioned the ability of Gowon to lead even as a junior military officer (Bird and Ottanelli, 2017), the civil war undercurrent revolved around the protection of ethnic enclaves each of the two individuals was meant to represent. It was a glaring question of ethnic prevalence.

By the attainment of independence in 1960, Ibos had attained the level of business and educational sophistication needed to grab the chances that the newly-independent Nigeria presented to them. To be sure, by the mid-1960s, they had taken the rest region by storm by dominating every sphere of the country. Consequently, the *Ibos* became the envy of the people from other regions as the British government turned to the people of the East to provide the needed leadership capability as the country approached independence (Bird and Ottanelli, 2017). The envy grew in the same proportion as the resentment. Ibos began adjusting to the new reality of life – sheer hatred – until Kaduna Nzeogwu’s pogrom and the subsequent headship of General Yakubu on January 15, 1966, appeared to be the last straw that broke the camel’s back. The coup was highly regarded as an Ibo coup given the calibre of personalities that fell victims to it which included but were not limited to Tafawa Balewa (Prime Minister), Sir Ahmadu Bello (Premier of the North),

Samuel Akintola (Premier of the West) and OkotieEboh (Minister of Finance). More so, the sheer unwillingness of AguiyiIronsi to prosecute the masterminds of the coup including Kaduna Nzeogwu further fuelled the suspicion even as the government hurriedly adopted the Unification Decree that centralized administration including the civil service.

Yakubu Gowon's ascension to power on July 29, 1966, after overthrowing the government of Ironsi was meant to be for revenge. Consequently, violence that ensued, directed at mainly Ibos, led to looting, destruction of property, and the killing and massacre of several thousands of Ibos living in the Muslim North (Bird and Ottanelli, 2017). It was on record that a group of soldiers opened fire on innocent Ibos trying to board a plane at Kano even when the group was warned against acting. Amid this tension, the Gowon-led administration inchoately created 12 states, under which the East was broken up into three separate states, only one of which was Igbo-dominated which effectively cut off the Ibos from the oil-producing areas of the region and diluted the influence of an administratively unified East (Gould, 2012). The aggregation of all these resulted in the declaration of the state of Biafra by Odumegwu Ojukwu and the secession that followed afterwards.

The civil war that lasted for almost three years left so many injuries in the memories of the survivors in the entire country, particularly the Ibos whose loved ones were brazenly massacred by the dominant Nigerian forces. Nigeria as a corporate whole has recovered and the Biafran project, until recently, appears interred. To the Northern-led federal government and some extent the people of other regions of the country, the war was a sign of victory over a dominating, assertive and expanding region.

A bitter taste of genocide and economic suffocation

Unpacking the Genocide Question. Attempting to answer the genocide question of the Nigerian-Biafran war remains a justified academic exercise. If anything, the devotion paid to it by Wole Soyinka in *The Man Died* written in 1971 and Chinua Achebe in *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* written in 2013 is symptomatic of its resurgence. To be sure, the Biafran propaganda pushed to the fore a genocide-by-famine plot which has in recent times attracted attention in

genocide studies (Heerten & Moses, 2018). The Biafran propaganda sought to make a comparison with the Holocaust, referencing Auschwitz – a known site of mass annihilation in Germany, and likening themselves to African Jews. Meanwhile, the claims of genocide were alluded to by public opinion in Tanzania and Senegal. The war suffered from the “politics of naming” – having been branded a Civil War by the government and genocide by Biafrans (Heerten & Moses, 2018, p. 5). The Biafran claims of genocide are driven by ethnic resentment at Igbo success, Igbophobia, fierce north and the Nigerian construction of an “Igbo problem”.

Heerte & Moses (2018) identified two phases of the genocide: the 1966 massacres and the war. The July 1966 pogrom expressed Northerners’ hate against the Easterners and their desire to annihilate them. The war was an attempt to exterminate the Ibos, especially in connivance with the British government for neo-colonial stakes.

During the war, there were recorded manifestations of genocide, particularly in Asaba and Calabar against the federal government with the British government aiding and abetting its commission. In Asaba, there was a shoot-on-sight order including those from Anioma (Bird and Ottanelli, 2017). *New York Times* writer Alfred Friendly gave an account that in Warri, 400–500 Igbos were killed by “civilian mobs,” with a similar number slaughtered in Sapele (Friendly, 1967, p. 1, 3). Similarly, the experience of Jack Shepherd of *Look Magazine* estimated in the Mid-West alone including Asaba, that over 8,000 Ibos were massacred – mostly of whom were civilians (Shepherd, 1968, p. 74). In Calabar, the atrocity was even bloodier. It was reported that the Nigerian forces “shot at least 1,000 and about 2,000 Ibos, most of them unarmed civilians”. In one of the accounts by *The Times of London* on August 2, 1968, “the Nigerian forces opened fire and murdered 14 nurses and patients in the wards” (Achebe, 2012, p. 137). The intentionality of the Nigerian forces to commit genocide was remarkable in the words of Colonel Adekunle when he said that “[Biafran aid is] “misguided humanitarian rubbish ... If children must die first, then that is too bad, just too bad” (Campbell, 1987). Similarly, the reports of Dr Mensah of Ghana revealed, “finally I am of the opinion that in many of the cases cited to my hatred of the Biafrans (*mainly Igbos*) and a wish to exterminate them was a foremost

motivational factor” (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1991). The use of starvation as a tactic ran throughout the war, one which Campbell (1987) estimated that about two million people died from starvation as the Nigerian government prevented food supplies to the region.

The horrors of savagery such as beheading, massacre, mutilation, eye gouging and other cruel acts circulated in the pamphlets were used by Biafra to spread its propaganda. This was interpreted as a pogrom or genocide. Just like the Hitler genocide against European Jews forced the creation of Isreal, the Nigerian genocide against the people of Eastern Nigeria necessitated Biafra (Heerten, 2017). In what was dispelled and downplayed as mere propaganda by Whitehall officials working at the behest of the British Government, the narratives of famine, starving children, humanitarian crisis and genocide purported by the media were dislodged. For example, as the Biafran propaganda brandishes the rhetoric of genocide, the Nigerian government also employed the services of international PR agencies to counter the claims of Biafra. The government tilted towards OAU and secured the support of member states, the Commonwealth and the United Nations. The government also invited international observers from Sweden, the United Kingdom, Poland and Canada into the country and reported from 1968-1970. The team in its report denied the genocide story in the country. The pro-Biafran sympathizers then changed their stance and labelled what was happening in Biafra “genoslaughter”, “hegemonocide” or “cultural genocide”.

According to Omaka (2014b), the injustice meted out against Biafrans took place in both the Northern region and Biafra minority homelands including Ibibio, Ijaw, Efik and Ogoja where the use of torture, molestation, humiliation, persecution and intimidation were popular. For instance, atrocities were committed in the Ikun clan (in present-day Cross River State) and against Ibibio men at Umahi for collaborating with Nigerian soldiers. Also, some men of Ibiobio origin were beaten to death at Umahia while about four hundred men were taken from Asang town in Enyong to an unknown destination. Meanwhile, in Ikot Ekpenyong (in present-day Akwa Ibom State), Idoro and Ikot Okpot, Biafran soldiers also shot many villagers. More so, the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighter (BOFF) – a paramilitary and special operations group – was used

to target minorities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States for undermining the Biafran government. Similar events were reported among minorities of Ogu, Onne and New Calabar in Rivers. These inhumane treatments were reportedly committed against minorities who agitated for separate states against the Biafran dream. Despite the propaganda of genocide brandished by Biafra and the international debate it garnered, the twentieth-century genocide studies conspicuously omitted the claims of genocide. Resultantly, scholarship has been refocused on the genocidal experiences recorded during the war for proper canonization in genocide studies (Heerten & Moses, 2014).

Meanwhile, much attention is not paid to the post-war actualities in the literature. Samuel Daly draws attention to the implications of the war for crime and insecurity in the region in the years that followed. As Daly (2020) argues, crime and insecurity became endemic in the post-war Eastern states. Cases of looting, victimization, law-breaking, dispute and enduring bitterness. The courts were overwhelmed with criminal cases while disputes over abandoned properties increased exponentially when tenants who held houses and businesses in trust or simply occupied abandoned properties refused to release them. In most cases, the courts sided with the squatters suggesting acts of retribution against the homeowners. Due to the proliferation of arms, an upsurge in theft and armed robbery became pervasive while revenge against “treasonable” friends was common. It was a general ambience of repression and paranoia as the reintegrated Igbo Nigerians greeted their harassment by civilians with aggression. To address these shenanigans, the state arrogated more powers of ensuring law and orderliness to itself thereby blurring the lines between guaranteeing public order and promoting police brutality. This transcended into subsequent civil life and shaped police-community relations in the decades that followed. As Daly (2020, p. 161) puts it “the siege mentality outlasted Biafra’s defeat”.

What became clear was that the preexisting bitterness of inequality became profound after the war given Nigeria’s pseudo-federal structure. Tensions between the East Central State and the minority groups became rife with the rhetoric of Igbo domination.

Economic Suffocation

Economically, the people's businesses were shattered and destroyed; the same as those that were into farming before the war. The orphans and widows joined the pool of unemployed youths and men after the Christian Missionaries had left. The federal government could only re-absorb 34,000 Ibos out of over one million into the civil service (Obi-Ani, 2009). The Federal Military Government made some unfavourable decrees meant to worsen the woes of the helpless people. The Public Officers (Special Provisions Decree no. 46 of 1970) summarily dismissed or retired Ibo officers that participated in the war. The Banking Obligation (Eastern States Decree) was a decree issued to all banks in the East to pay all account owners a flat rate of 20 pounds irrespective of the amount deposited in the banks before the war. The Indigenization Decree of 1972 was meant to give Nigerians a chance to partake in the country's productive enterprises and excluded the people from the East.

Unsurprisingly, the Ibos quickly recovered from the war and the economy began booming by the mid-1970s. Their industry and re-inventions coupled with the policy of import substitution meant that the economy re-invigorated. This was also echoed by Brautigam (1997) that despite the economic recession in the 1980s, the South East region was experiencing an economic boom amid mounting unfavourable state policies. More so, the "emergence of Nnewi, Onitsha, Aba and Enugu as veritable industrial centres was the product of the capacity for innovation and adaptation and extant social capital which produced low transaction costs" (Ukiwo, 2012, p. 4). Forrest (1995, p. 177) on his part argues that the quick recovery of the Ibo was rooted in the apprenticeship which promoted courage, perseverance and determination in the face of unfavourable incidents.

Post-military South East: a region under siege

Detractors can argue that sieging of the region if at all there is anything of such, is a function of the activities of the unknown gunmen, the Indigenous People's Republic of Biafra (IPOB) and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) which they argue have assumed the nature of

terrorism. However, the encirclement of the region had started way before the rise of these groups and their emergence as a result of the encirclement and the activities therefrom. The proscription of IPOB in 2017 (Asadu, 2017) was just a coy to further tighten the siege by militarizing the region. In more recent times, the narrative has changed. The siege takes the form of a heavy proliferation of military and paramilitary forces mounting check-points on every two kilometres of the five South Eastern states even when it is glaring that the region had been largely peaceful before the siege. Equally, some evidential run-ins can assist to elucidate this point.

In the year 2020 alone, investigations show that there were over 300 checkpoints in the South East. In the major cities of Aba to Umuahia to Owerri, Enugu to Abakaliki, Awka to Onitsha to Nnewi, the story is baffling. From Aba to Enugu, which is a distance of 150 km, there are no fewer than 12 army checkpoints and 16 police check-points. From Acho Nwakanma junction to Obikabia junction, a distance of 5 km, there are over 7 police checkpoints. Between Awka and Onitsha through the expressway, which is a distance of about 40 km, there are checkpoints at Amansea (Police), Aroma junction (Police), Umuopku (Road Safety), Umuopku (Police), Enugwu Agidi (Police), Dunukofia (Police), Awkuzu (Police) Awkuzu (Road Safety), NkweleEzunaka (Police), Borromew roundabout (Police) and Bridge Head (Police /Road Safety/Army). Along the old Enugu-Onitsha road, there are checkpoints at Amansea (Army), Mobile Police junction (Police), Zik's Avenue (Road Safety), Enugu Ukwu (Police) and Ugwunwasike (Police). On the Onitsha-Owerri road axis, there are also checkpoints at Oba, Ozubulu, Okija, Ihiala, Uli and Amorka (Vanguard, 2020).

In Enugu, as the report further reveals, there are heavy checkpoints mounted by both army and police along the Enugu-Abakaliki highway, Enugu-Aba and Enugu-Awka as well as those along Nsukka road and between Nsukka and Benue State boundaries. Similarly, there are checkpoints mounted by men of the Air Force at Penoks Bus stop and Emene, near the Akanu Ibiam International airport. The Orié Market day, the ever-busy day, seven police checkpoints are mounted between Ibagwa-Nike and OriéUgwuogo, a distance of 10 km. Between the same Ugwuogo and Opi junction in Nsukka Local Government Area, there are

another eight checkpoints including a military checkpoint that all collect tolls from motorists heading to the Ugwuogo Market. Still on the same Ugwuogo Market are the other four checkpoints that take care of commuters emanating from either NkwoNeke or other rural markets in Isi-Uzo Local Government Area. This runs throughout the major cities of the five states in the region.

The first objective: economic asphyxiation

The economy determines the survival of a state and its people. One would think of what life would look like had the economy not been in place. Put differently, once the economic activities of a people are suffocated, the people perish. This appears to be the case with Ibos against the rest in Nigeria. The marginalization indices such as poor financial allocation, poor health care facilities, bad roads, poor quality of education, poor representation in political appointments and stereotyping are all modern tactics of economic asphyxiation by the state. A known legal practitioner, Olisa Agbakoba from the South East understood this which made him sue the federal government for neglect of the region in the allocation of federal projects, non-maintenance of federal roads and bridges, non-development of oil and gas resources, abandonment of the Enugu colliery, poor development of ports and airports and over-policing that all negatively affect the investment in the region (Ukiwo, 2012). In more recent times, it appears that the state is in a confrontation with the people to achieve its objective once and for all. The siege is meant to confrontationally crumble the economy through the various activities of the military mostly through extortion. Evidence of this reality abounds.

In a research carried out by Ogundipe (2018), it was reported that the security forces through sieging extorted over N100 billion from commuters in the region in three years as they mounted their checkpoints. This act referred to as the “culture of checkpoint corruption” has blue and white-collar dimensions. The blue-collar dimension describes the direct extortion of motorists by the police, army and other paramilitary outfits, while the white-collar element captures direction extortion by civilian touts and proxies. These various extortion practices have continued in flagrant defiance of the ban on the mounting of

roadblocks. It is reported that a sum of N100 billion (i.e. \$550 million at the time of writing this paper) was generated from this model. The breakdown shows that the Nigerian Police Force pocketed N78.02 billion, the Army, Navy and Air Force in collection extracted N6 billion and the paramilitary (Customs, Road Safety, NAFDAC and NDLEA) privatized N16 billion. By implication, this amount is equivalent to the annual budget of some states in Nigeria such as Ekiti State. Moreover, one would imagine the effect of the investment of such an amount on the economy of the region whose overall budget for 2021 and 2022 stood at N890, 688 billion and N1,003 trillion respectively (Ndujihe, 2021). A breakdown of the extortion by states in the region is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Official Statistics of Security Forces Extortions by State in South East Nigeria, August 2015 and August 2016 (Ogundipe, 2018)

State	Number of roadblocks	Estimate per roadblock (Daily) (N)	Daily estimate (N)	Monthly Estimate	Yearly Estimate
Anambra	250	40,000	10 million	300 million	3.6 billion
Abia	200	40,000	8 million	240 million	2.88 billion
Imo	150	30,000	4.5 million	135 million	1.62 billion
Enugu	100	25,000	2.5 million	75 million	900 million
Ebonyi	50	25,000	1.25 million	37.5 million	450 million

Table 2: Official Statistics of Security Forces Extortions by State in South East Nigeria, August 2016 and August 2017 (Ogundipe, 2018)

Anambra	500	40,000	20 million	600 million	7.2 billion
Abia	400	40,000	16 million	480 million	5.76 billion
Imo	200	30,000	6 million	180 million	2.16 billion
Enugu	200	25,000	5 million	150 million	1.8 million
Ebonyi	150	25,000	3.75 million	112.5 million	1.35 million

Table 3: Official Statistics of Security Forces Extortions by State in South East Nigeria, August 2017 and December 2018 (Ogundipe, 2018)

Anambra	800	40,000	32 million	960 million	15.36 billion
Abia	700	40,000	28 million	840 million	13.44 billion
Imo	500	30,000	15 million	450 million	7.2 billion
Enugu	400	25,000	10 million	300 million	4.8 billion
Ebonyi	400	25,000	10 million	300 million	4.8 billion

The first of this report from the intersociety in 2011 revealed that between 2009 and 2011 when the benchmark for the “toll fee” was N20 denomination as against today’s N50 denomination, the police officers made N53.4 billion in three years across the country. Out of this figure, South East had the lion’s share of N32.2 billion, South-South with N8.2 billion, South West with N 8.2 billion, North Central with N2.1 billion, North East with N1.2 billion and North West with N1.2 billion (Ogundipe, 2018).

Away from the economic impact of extortion, the industries in the region have been heavily hit. Thus, while some have moved out of the region, a few remaining ones are under-performing (AIEC, 2006) joining those that had long gone moribund such as Nkalagu Cement industry, Aba Textile Mills; Standard Shoe Factory Owerri; Niger gas; Niger steel Company; Glass Industry; Imo Rubber Nigeria Limited; Resin and Paints Industry; Avutu Poultry; Paper Packaging Industry and Modern Ceramics (Oforum, 2020). This view was equally expressed in the South East Summit in 2011, “the region has become de-industrialised. At the last count over 30 state-owned and private investments located in the region have gone under” (South East Summit 2011, p. 2). Indeed, this phenomenon cannot be attributed solely to sieging as there are other inducing factors such as low patronage, unfavourable foreign exchange, multiple taxations, unstable electricity, bad roads and other unfavourable technical and structural components. However, the insecurity-laden environment appeared to have caused more than those aforementioned indices. Following this, the poverty level has increased such that apart from the North, South East poverty rate has been

overwhelming with Abia State standing at 30.67 per cent; Anambra State at 14.78; Ebonyi State, at 79.76; Enugu State at 58.13; and Imo State at 28.86 per cent (NBS, 2020).

Regrettably, the activities of some criminal elements in the ranks and files of IPOB who appear to be colluding with the security forces in the region in the continued enforcement of compulsory sit-at-home every Monday further paralyze the economy and hastens the actualization of the objective.

The second objective: genocide

Genocide is simply a criminal resolution to erase a given group from existence. The sieging of the South East region based on the grand objective of seeing the Ibos off from the rest is meant to be finally put to rest through genocide. Thus, while economic asphyxiation as earlier argued is meant to be a *salami-slicing* strategy designed to incrementally but softly achieve ethnic extinction, the genocide appears to be a hard power strategy designed to finish off from where economic asphyxiation stops. Genocide is an international crime that has met serious and stiff vituperations from both national and international quarters. As earlier indicated, it was a very serious strategy employed by the Nigerian government during the civil war. The present reality shows that the Nigerian government has renewed the tactic through sieging.

Reports of extra-judicial killings are mind-blowing even as it is believed that the daily casualties are either not reported or under-reported. Amnesty International (AI, 2016) reported that innocent IPOB civilians were massacred in August 2015. Precisely on May 30, 2016, following the commemoration of Biafran Independence Day, the fearful-looking military opened fire on innocent civilians and killed at least 60 of them and took them to Barracks in various locations of Asaba and Onitsha. A day before, the military conducted house-to-house and church-to-church raids on IPOB members and killed them (AI, 2016). Similarly, on August 5, 2021, AI (2021) reported that the military killed about 115 innocent civilians in the South East (AI, 2021). The report of Intersociety in which the military was accused of killing over 1,000 civilians between October 2020 and December 2021 was on record (Sahara Reporters, 2022).

The menace of arms importation to the region meant to further actualize this objective is alarming. A Borno State Police Command arrested 28-year-old Clement Asuk who was transporting 126 anti-aircraft bullets, 222 of 7.62 mm of life ammunition, 517 of 7.62 mm by 51 life ammunition, 7.62 mm by 39 life ammunition, two empty magazines of Ak47, four rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), one hand grenade, and one anti-aircraft ammunition belt said to be used to fight IPOB from Maiduguri (Aruna, 2022). This is one of the many cases of arms race in the region. In a related development, the police intercepted about 753 live ammunition in Ebonyi State just as a truck laden with sophisticated weapons fell in Anambra State (Ayitogo, 2021). Arrests were said to have been made but prosecution of culprits has not been heard, further fuelling suspicion of genocide against the people of the South East region.

Insecurity in the South East: political objective vs. struggle for survival

The interpretation of these two objectives and the reaction towards them underlies the insecurity in the region. One known reaction is the vehemence of the IPOB to maintain their separatist agitations, the result of which has led to the arrest and trial of the IPOB leader, MaziNnamdiKanu (MNK). In fact, before IPOB's emergence, different separatist movements had risen in the region including the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in 1999 led by Ralph Uwazuruike, a lawyer (Ebonine, 2021). Though largely non-violent group, the recent observation of sit-at-home every Monday across all South Eastern States to commemorate the fallen Biafran heroes who died during the civil war has often turned bloody. Though the group has since announced a stop to its continued observance, it appears that some radical and criminal elements have hijacked the process to unleash mayhem on both the people and the security forces; taking advantage of the situation to achieve their parochial interests. Notwithstanding the activities of IPOB, Eastern Security Network and the unknown gunmen, it appears that their activities are in response to these mendacious government objectives. This perhaps explains the nature of their attacks,

visibly against security forces, government-owned property and those that are seen to be in support of the government's activities in the region.

It has been reported that more than 20 police stations were attacked in different parts of the region in the first five months of 2021 (Ojewale and Onuoha, 2022). In those attacks, personnel were killed, their operational vehicles burnt and stations vandalized. It was believed that attacks on prisons were meant to free inmates believed to be unjustifiably incarcerated by the security forces. In what looked like a move made by the Biafran people during the civil war where "Ogbunigwe" (locally made guns) were manufactured, the police alleged that they have discovered where explosives used in attacking police formations are made and some arrests were made (Al Jazeera, 2022) Beyond casualties, properties believed to belong to the state or federal government are also attacked. For instance, Enugu Electricity Distribution Company (EEDC) at UkwuNwasike, Ogidi, Idemili North Local Government Area was attacked and about 32 vehicles with other property were set ablaze. More so, the local government secretariat at Ogidi was partly burnt and the Magistrate Court was razed down all on May 16, 2022 (Onu, 2022). Earlier, following the preparation for the governorship election in Anambra State, the office of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was burnt. Notable persons have also become victims of attacks in recent times.

While this paper does not intend to lend its weight to the gruesome attacks and murder of innocent civilians including kidnapping and extortion by unknown gunmen, it is however imperative to know that these series of activities are the psychological resonance of perceived territorial acquisition by the government perpetuated by the security agents. As a result, the palpable fear in the region is the drum of war akin to the prelude to the civil war. Moreover, the events that occur in other parts of the country, particularly in the North wherein the Ibos and their businesses are attacked even when they were no part of the incidents further oxygenate the struggle back home. For instance, the recent burning of Deborah Emmanuel, a 200-level student in the Department of Early Childhood Education, Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto State, by a mob over alleged blasphemy took another arsonist angle against the Ibos who had no hands in the whole incident.

Their shops and goods were vandalized and looted by the angry mob (Suleiman, 2022). This clearly shows the height of hatred against a particular section of the country who appear to be victims of any catastrophe arising in any part of the country. Against this backdrop, the insecurity in the South East will continue until there is a genuine solution to the seemingly fragmented state.

Conclusion: de-sieging the South East for a lasting solution

The premise of this paper lies in the perceived injustice meted on a group of people whose memories of the past war are still alive. The paper argues that accentuated by differences in economic conditions, language and ethnic identity, the religious divisions between the groups in Nigeria have deepened hostility. The narratives of marginalization continue to fuel secessionism in Nigeria and the prevailing insecurity in South East Nigeria, this paper exhumes the events of the civil war which are very similar to the sieging of the region which is intrinsically meant to achieve two inter-related objectives: economic asphyxiation and genocide. The Ibos, as argued, are seen by others within the state as a problem that should be solved once and for all given their doggedness, enterprise and inventiveness. The interpretation of this resolution is what is described as “insecurity” in the region, which the paper simply describes as a “struggle for survival”. The birth of IPOB, ESN and unknown gunmen are just wings fighting for survival, albeit some criminal elements who are perceived to be working for their selfish interests are taking the opportunity of the “neo-civil war”.

The present agitations can be adequately appreciated given Ojukwu’s speech in his post-war interview: “It’s in the court of the Nigerians, it depends on how they play the ball back. If they play it in a friendly way then there would be no need for resistance. If of course, they play it back viciously then I am sure that our people will consider again whether this forced unity is worthwhile ... we must learn to be patient.” (*School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1970, p. 20)

Given the above, it would appear Ojukwu’s speech finds resonance in Carl Schmitt and Arthur Aughey’s friend-and-enemy philosophy. That is, the sieging of the Southeast is reminiscent of a vicious enemy to be crushed – the result of which is acute resistance

putting to test the worthiness of Nigeria's unity. It appears the people are out of patience and would rather treat the government as its enemy.

Against this backdrop, the paper recommends de-sieging as the only strategy to restore the peace previously enjoyed by all in the region. This strategy will be physical, genuine, reflective and introspective. De-sieging here is not synonymous with the total withdrawal of security forces. It is simply a remorseful and genuine stoppage of extortions and associated genocide. Once this is achieved, the number of security checkpoints will gradually fizzle away as they are mounted to achieve mendacious objectives. Further, de-sieging will connote proper reintegration of the people of the region into the governance system of the country. By this, narratives of marginalization, stereotyping and alienation will be interred through the genuine convocation of stakeholders' meetings that would comprise the federal and state governments, IPOB representatives, traditional rulers, women's organizations, youth groups, security forces and civil society organizations in the region. There is no doubting the fact that Ibos still live in the trauma of the loss of the civil war exacerbated by the failed promises of reconciliation, reintegration and rehabilitation. Consequently, any government that genuinely approaches the people and restores them to the position that they occupied pre-war would save the country from total collapse.

Summarily, the paper asserts that de-sieging here would take the shape of a three-concentric circle remedial, bottom-top approach. First, there should be a stop to unnecessary extortions and killings of the people in the region with the withdrawal of some military operatives and their checkpoints to allow free movement. This move will not only save the lives of the people in the region but also the lives of the security operatives who are receiving daily retaliatory deaths. More so, this would send a good signal that the government is serious about genuine reconciliation. Second, the government would convoke a genuine sovereign regional conference (SRC) where the people will be allowed to express their feelings which they were not allowed to express since the post-civil war. The government will not sit as an umpire but as a party that is willing to compromise for the sake of lasting peace. It is believed that there would be a political solution to the case of MNK which is also

a factor in the insecurity of the region. Thus, adequate compensation for victims of the civil war and siege, critical infrastructural intervention such as rehabilitation of schools, hospitals, roads and markets; creation of an additional state to bring the number of states in the region to six as it is with other regions; Ibo presidency and absorption of Ibos in the critical positions of governance is germane at this stage. Finally, a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) will be convoked by the government which will comprise critical stakeholders from each of the regions of the country to discuss the continued existence of Nigeria and the way forward. It should be a people's conference not hijacked by the government.

No genuine Nigerian seriously desires the disintegration of Nigeria. It is the level of ethnicity, the politicization of diversity of the state, corruption, dominance of a group in the governance system of the country, insecurity, insincerity of government, alienation, poverty, unemployment, lack of respect for human rights and zero-sum attitudes of politicians that spur people to aspire to secede. It is believed that once these things are discussed in SNC and addressed by the government, the unity of the state is assured. In addition, the paper recognizes that these things need time to address. Nigerians have always been patient with the government and will continue to be so long the government is sincere with genuine reconciliation of diverse groupings which should be seen as a blessing to the country given the abundance of human resources embedded in these groupings.

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