Counterinsurgency Operations in Southeastern Nigeria: Challenges and Strategies for Restoring Peace, Security, and Development in the Region

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Abstract

Counterinsurgency operations conducted by the combined team of security agencies in southeastern Nigeria to checkmate the activities of IPOB insurgency have not yielded adequate results as peace and security still elude the region. Casualties from both government and the insurgent group coupled with innocent civilians have increasingly drawn the concern of scholars and security experts. The study tried to unmask the reasons why the operations have failed to curtail the activities of the aggrieved youths. This research is guided by the strain and Inkblot strategy theories. A descriptive design using qualitative technique interviewed 24 respondents comprising ten active participating security personnel, 8 community leaders, 3 security experts and 3 observers for data collection. Data were content analyzed. Research revealed that the continued marginalization, the militarization of the region, right abuses, paucity of intelligence from civilians, and bad governance by both the federal and state governments are some of the challenges of the

counterinsurgency operations. Study recommends that the federal government must adopt the policy of full inclusion of Igbo professionals in governance; governments should provide good governance; encourage better military-civil relations, end rights abuses, generate employment for the youths; and the military must be motivated with modern equipment to restore peace, security, and development in the Southeast region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency Operations; Insurgency; IPOB; South-East

Introduction

Counterinsurgency operations all over the world are aimed at using military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions to defeat insurgency, (National Defence, Canada 2008). Each operation must be provided with adequate resources in both human and material resources, complemented with intel to achieve maximum success. And every government ensures that these materials are provided to avoid being humiliated. However, weak governance provides fertile ground for insurgencies to. According to Michael (2014:80), 'usually, the government can respond to unlawfulness swiftly and effectively, but when the state is substantially weakened and cannot provide adequate protection to its population, insurgents can assert an alternative authority.' Insurgency in southeast Nigeria has been the product of deliberate marginalization of the region by the Federal government and poor response to the basic development needs of the people. Since the end of the civil war in Nigeria, in January, 1970, a culture of 'let us impoverish this region to induce internal brain drain from the southeast to other regions of the country' and the continued neglect of infrastructure, both federal and state built to stimulate development, have increased the high incidence of drift by youths outside the region. In addition to the challenges are the apparent disregard for appointment by merit, and even the Federal character principle which successive leaders flagrantly disregard. 2015 to 2023, marked the peak of discrimination against the South East under President Mohammadu Buhari who hated the Igbo with a passion by his actions and utterances. Rights abuses by the military and its sister agencies, in a bid to quell a peaceful protest by youths transformed a harmless Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) into a violent group. Ijioma, et al 2023), highlighted the atrocious acts of the operations 'Python Dance'

and its reinforced mission, 'Operation Udoka', which militarized the region and the activities of non-state actors dominate the history of the landscape. As Ugorji (2017) asserts, the activities of both state and non-state actors have disrupted the educational system, intensified criminality, and imposed an unquantifiable economic predicament on the region. This precarious situation has not only discouraged foreign investors, but stifled the development-oriented spirit and effort of the region.

The Eastern Security Network (ESN), a militant wing of the IPOB, has been lurked in fierce control of the region with the military. Unfortunately, it has resulted in several deaths, destruction of communities by Nigeria soldiers on counterinsurgency, and abuse of rights of citizens through military and police intimidation of youths and civil population. Ebere (2023), argued that the entire southeast region and all Igbo-speaking areas that identify with the course of freedom have been locked down. Personnel of the counterinsurgency operations have engaged on 'stop and search,' with unnecessary checkpoints extorting citizens instead of ensuring security. People are dehumanized, and any attempt to resist them is classified as threatening the Nigerian state. Several people have been killed for asking for their rights to be respected. And resistance to this apparent degradation of human beings gave rise to a new group, the unknown gunmen. This phenomenon complicated the situation with the political defiant strategy, the sit-at-home policy (Ijioma and Ibeh, 2024).

The counterinsurgency operations have not been able to achieve much in restoring the region to peace and security, and development by stopping the Monday sit-at-home defiance. The research therefore examines the reasons for its failure to achieve real success due to incessant security breaches. It further assessed the impact of the counterinsurgency operations on the region, and made recommendations on the strategies to strengthen its effort to restore peace and security, reposition the region for development because the economy of the Southeast is critical to the economic development of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Insurgencies exist among countries where a section or some sections are denied access to goals. Some of these goals and values include economic, political, religious, ideological, identity, etc. Counterinsurgency depends on the sustained capability enhancement which requires training, professional awareness of the participants, development packages and strategic planning. Counter insurgency operations must be backed with the accurate and full knowledge of the environment to operate, the operational resources in terms of the sophistication of the military and weapons, technological awareness, and the psychological state of the personnel. Commitment of the personnel and the ability to support the operation with backup force is crucial. Motivation is key to success without which some officers might sabotage the operations as has been happening in northern Nigeria in the operation against Boko Haram and other terrorists in northwestern Nigeria. The counterinsurgency operation in southeastern Nigeria initiated by the then President Mohammadu Buhari to tackle insurgency in the region has become protracted as a result of several shortcomings. It is in this regard that this research investigated the challenges of the counterinsurgency in Southeast Nigeria and tries to proffer strategies to reinforce the operation in order to restore peace and development in the region.

Research questions

1. What were the activities that led to the setting up the counterinsurgency operations?
2. What were their operational modes and the factors that have made the operations ineffective?
3. In what ways could the operations be transformed to restore peace and development?

Conceptual Framework

Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB/ESN)

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its militant branch, the Eastern Security Network (ESN) are a splinter group of MASSOB, formed to protest the perceived marginalization of the entire Igbo area. This group was led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, in 2012, (Ijioma and Ibeh, 2023:97) and it has been agitating for freedom to opt out

of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, since the people believe that the southeast region and other Igbo groups forced into other states outside their main Igbo ethnic bloc, have not been fully integrated and accommodated in the scheme of things since the end of the civil war. The organization has accused subsequent governments of not implementing the so-called national integration and reconciliation which it preached immediately after the civil war. The leaders of the region have accused successive central governments of shortchanging the Igbo race and this has multiplied the rate of unemployment and frustration among the youths.

Against these perceived grievances, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu mounted pressure from both inside and outside the country through his media operation and in retaliation, the Federal Government applied brutal force on the protesters, which transformed a once peaceful organization into a militant group which adopted violence to protect the region from the violence wreak by the counterinsurgency operation and perceived Fulani herders, who are bent on forceful appropriation of indigenous Igbo lands through the destruction of farmlands and its crops; incessant rape of women on their farmlands, and mass murder of citizens in the wee hours of the night. The IPOB group always retaliated anytime the counterinsurgency operations kill their members or destroy communities assumed to be protecting the IPOB/ESN members, (Kalu, et al., 2023:84). Since 2017, the counterinsurgency operations have intensified their activities, but they have yielded not much result as their personnel, and civilians are murdered by unknown gun men who are suspected to have infiltrated the IPOB/ESN. This situation has been made worse by the arrest and incarceration of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, and his subsequent charge to court. These are issues that have rubbished all effort made by the counterinsurgency operation.

Insurgency/Terrorism

Insurgency is an organized movement that tries to overthrow a constituted government through subversion, and armed conflict (COP, 2008). It is a protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control. Political power is the central issue in an insurgency. Each insurgency has its strategic objectives, its operational environment, available resources, operational method, and tactics such as mass

mobilization, and youth mobilization through political action. The goal of all insurgencies is to mobilize both human and material resources to form an alternative to the state. Successful mobilization provides active and passive support for the insurgency's programmes; operations, and goals. The elements of insurgency are leadership; combatants (main forces, regional forces, local forces); cadre (local political leaders that are also called the militants); and mass base (the bulk of the membership).

Insurgency is a set of irregular activities and threats to a secured and stable environment, and it could be explained from the point of view of a set of behaviour that attempts to affect, prevent change through the illegal use, or threat of violence, conducted ideologically or criminally motivated non-regular forces, groups or individuals, as a challenge to authority (Army Terminology Panel (ATP) 2007), cited in U.S COP (2004). It has the elements of violence, or at least the threat of violence, subversion, intimidation of the broad population mass, particularly the vulnerable, using propaganda to achieve a political objective.

Insurgency is a competition of wills. It is not a war between states; the established authority could be a local authority, a temporary military authority or government of third party. Finally, insurgents seek political change like in all wars. The sort of change here could be government collapse or struggle for self-determination as the IPOB has been agitating and struggling for regional autonomy or the release of political prisoners which includes Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, and other IPOB members incarcerated by the Federal Government since 2017.

The Unknown gunmen is a sophisticated armed group that infiltrated the IPOB and its main objective seems to be the strict observance of the sit-at-home political defiance strategy. Mbah (2024:2) avers that the unknown gunmen are an anonymous group that shoot, kill, and dispossess their victims of firearms. They operate in daylight using sophisticated weapons only a well-armed government security can confront and subdue. They usually come out to enforce the sit-at-home and leave dreadful marks on the communities, people, and soldiers on checkpoints. This phenomenon came into the taxonomy of criminality and insurgency when the police and correctional services headquarters were attacked, and several prisoners

set free. Since then, they operate freely, killing security operatives and committing arson on government infrastructure. Judging from their activities, they are more of political problems than military which has made the military operations ineffective. The most dangerous aspect of the challenge is that they enjoy popular support of the civilian population, although they maim and kill civilians they suspect provide intel to the counterinsurgency operation. As a result, the counterinsurgency has become more complex because civilians hardly co-operate with the security forces because of the prevalence of rights abuses by the personnel of the operations, (Ebere, 2023).

Terrorism is the calculated use of violence to instill fear and achieve political objectives. It involves a group using violence to intimidate a population or government, often targeting civilians to spread fear and compel change. This method aims to create a climate of fear, leading to desired political outcomes. The US State, through the FBI (2025) defined terrorism both as international and domestic violence. International terrorism involves violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations state (sponsored). However, domestic terrorism involves acts to further ideological goals stemming from domestic influences such as those of a political, religious, social, racial, or environmental nature. According to the FBI, many factors have contributed to the evolution of the terrorism threat on both the international and domestic fronts. It has evolved from large-group conspiracies toward lone-offender attacks and they have expanded through the internet and social media through messaging platforms and online images, videos, and publications.

Counter Insurgency/Anti-Terrorism operations

Counterinsurgencies consider the re-establishing of legitimate authority over the area controlled by insurgents, and this requires patients or perseverance; a restoration of popular support for the government, the ability to perform functions and conduct operations that are outside the normal scope of their training, and coordinate government departments and agencies, non-governmental, and foreign agencies.

If the operation is going to be protracted, there must be collaboration of the military with other agencies to achieve the long-term result. The UN blends the military with a comprehensive civilian effort to contain insurgency and address the core reasons for such. This strategy aims at defeating the non-state actor responsible for insecurity. The US Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009) states that there are five guides to counterinsurgency: political function which provides the framework of political reconciliation, and reform of governance by ensuring good governance that benefits all. Unfortunately, happenings in Nigeria have not promoted unity and equity but have instead encouraged agitations for self-determination by aggrieved groups. The economic function seeks to provide essential services and stimulates long-term economic growth that would generate confidence in governance and reduce frustration among the youths. However, frustration is at the root of insurgency in the Southeast.

The next function is the security of the country. Security involves a combined military, paramilitary, and civilian efforts at creating a conducive atmosphere for total human development. This is supported by a strong legal framework with a well-defined structure of the administration of criminal justice system. The judiciary must be free from interference because no economy grows where there is insecurity. Moreover, a corrupt judicial system breeds injustice, human rights abuses, and frustration. Information is vital to every counterinsurgency operation: intelligence is central to both government and the operations. And government must resolve the root causes of insurgency through non-kinetic approaches, that is, positive policies, provision of infrastructure, employment, and the capacity to make living condition adequate and affordable. On the contrary, the kinetic becomes inevitable to impose authority over the land space. But peacebuilding strategies are at the centre of counterinsurgency operations. There must be continuous monitoring, evaluation, and assessment of the effort made so far. Unfortunately, the operational modes of the counterinsurgency in the Southeast are frost with inadequacies and deliberate effort to provoke the civilian population. The grievances are rather reinforced by the militarization of the region which tend hinder the success of the operations (Ijioma, 2024).

Empirical Studies

Hassan (2018) investigated The Nigerian military in domestic counterinsurgency operations: A study in range of military operations, 1960-2017, revealed that the country has actively intervened in domestic conflict ranging from insurgency, terrorism, riots, militancy, criminality, banditry, and others. He argued that all these operations were determined by the intensity of violence, while their effectiveness have been determined by the duration and intensity of each. The study identified the basic challenges faced such as failure to train and prepare the personnel for the assignment. The constraint faced ranged from changing from conventional military roles to unconventional ones such as using the minimum force and police enforcement duties. The study identified the militarization of the civil polity as a major outcome and the study recommends military professionalism as key to success. In counterinsurgency operations (2004), the United States Army examined the concepts of insurgency, the command and control of counterinsurgency environment, rules of engagement and the counterinsurgency operations. It emphasized the key role of intelligence, psychological operations and military police support, the health considerations, movement security, and civil disturbances. Finally, it laid out the use of non-lethal weapons. Also, the Canadian Defence Headquarters (2008) in Counterinsurgency operations examined the concept of counterinsurgency operations, the conduct of the operations, the role of politics and political leaders, the transition to conflict and duration, the context, limitations of insurgency, philosophy of the counterinsurgency, its strategic objectives, security and control task, cultural information, and the role of intelligence in counterinsurgency. It concluded by identifying the challenges of counterinsurgency. Some of the challenges are highlighted in the case of the Southeast. Current research fills the gap in the following papers by providing challenges peculiar to Southeast region and the strategies to strengthen the operations.

Theoretical Framework

The research is guided by the General strain and Inkblot strategy theories. The general strain theory initially developed by Merton views crime as being caused by strain, the difference between one's aspiration and the actual means of achieving it (Merton, 1938). Merton argued that when individuals are unable to realize their

goals through legitimate means, they resort to illegitimate or illegal means to achieve it or attract the attention of government. Agnew proposed that various forms of strain force people to experience unpalatable experiences resulting in negative emotional states such as anger, depression, and fear (Agnew, 1992). To Agnew, crimes occur when persons sought criminal means to cope with their pent-up emotions and this explains the deliberate deprivation experiences of the South-East region. The experiences that generated the civil war, 1967 – 1970, were elevated to an unprecedented height by the government of General Mohammadu Buhari, 2015 – 2023. Unemployment, poor governance, corruption, and insecurity generated youth protest in the South-East and in bid to suppress the non-violent protest, operations 'python dance' and 'Udoka', radicalized the youths through violent rights' abuses and in reaction, IPOB and Unknown gunmen, attack and kill security personnel and destroy government infrastructure, (Ijioma, et al 2023).

The Inkblot theory is a military strategy for subduing a large hostile region with a relatively small military force. The occupying force starts by establishing small safe areas dispersed over the region. The push from different points, extending its control and making the areas larger until eventually joining up, leaving only pockets of resistance. The name of this strategy refers to the ways ink spots spread on a piece of blotting paper or tissue, starting as tiny, scattered points but spreading to cover most, or all the paper. Historically the inkblot strategy is associated with the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam war. In recent time, the NATO campaign in Afghanistan and the American-led campaign against Iraq are examples. Some parts of the South-East region have been occupied by counterinsurgency operations spreading across Anambra and Imo states; Anambra and across the River Niger; Abia and Ebonyi; and Abia and Enugu states. All these operations have not achieved significant success because of continuous but isolated attacks resulting in many casualties in terms of security personnel and government infrastructure.

Methodology

The research adopts a descriptive design with specific application of the qualitative technique for data collection. 10 active and participating security personnel (2 from each of the five states in the region: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo)

combined with 8 community leaders, 3 observers and 3 security experts were interviewed as key witnesses and stakeholders, for data collection. 13 of the participants involved face-to-face interaction while the remaining 11 was through online interview using WhatsApp. This technique was adopted due to the sensitive nature of the topic and due to the safety and cost of movement. The interview was conducted discretely although with some resistance due to the pervading suspicion that the interviewer could be an undercover agent to extract intelligence. In a particular occasion, the researcher was temporarily detained and later released with stern warning not to disclose vital information. Despite all these difficulties, the field work was an intellectually worthwhile experience. Some of the interview questions were: Were there some perceived marginalization that ignited the defiance of IPOB? How can you evaluate the counterinsurgency operations in the South East region since its inception? Are there unresolved issues that have made the counterinsurgency operation unsuccessful in restoring peace and security in the region? As community leaders very close to the people, what better approach should be adopted by the operations and subnational governments to secure the region and revive the indices of development in the South East? Data were content analyzed.

Result and Discussion

The activities that led to setting up the anti-terrorism operations

Conflict is always an outcome of inequality in the distribution of resources. In a plural society, most of the crises are outcomes of injustice because whoever occupies the seat of power at the centre or the component parts, influences and implements policies to suit his interest. It is against this premise that this research argues that the aggregation of the grievances of the defunct Eastern region against the central government culminated in its quest to opt out of the federation in 1967 and the same pattern of deliberate marginalization has continued. Since the end of the civil war, the configuration of the country does not in any way favour the current southeast as Federal Government policies always shortchange them, while the North and Southwest dominate activities at the centre.

Respondents have always referenced an unwritten agreement between the North and Southwest that nobody from the Southeast would be allowed to be president

of Nigeria because of the secession that led to the civil war, 1967-1970. This has been implemented to the latter. Prominent Igbo politicians have been denied the opportunity of holding critical positions in Nigeria, even where they are eminently qualified to do such. Political exclusion in top military, police, customs, and public service positions diminishes the potential showcasing their ability and creating opportunities for others to grow. This impedes Southeast region's growth and development in manpower in Federal Government. To further compound the situation is the quota system which prioritizes state of origin, thus limiting their access to the summit of these institutions.

It is also important to note that immediately after the war, the Federal government policy on the banking moratorium and banking obligations decree of paying £20 to Igbo people despite the amount they had their bank account, limited their access to economic opportunities and economic recovery. The intension was to limit their ability to compete with other ethnic groups but the spirit of survival has kept them going, in spite provocative actions taken against the people of the region. Ijioma, (2024), a security analyst, argued that:

> There is anti-Igbo rhetoric by the Nigerian state expressed by some political leaders and a significant section of the public. There is also a religious identity crisis which escalated during the administration of former President Buhari, who approved and supported Myetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association and the Fulani Herders. Moreover, in the past nine years, there has been brazen display of contempt and provocation of the Igbo through political exclusion at the Federal level, and the manipulation of elections leading to imposition of unpopular candidates into various elective positions in the Southeast states. These and many other unresolved issues made the region a fertile ground for insurgent activities such as MASSOB and IPOB.

These grievances escalated during Muhammadu Buhari's government and the protest from Igbo youths in the region and across the River Niger, including Rivers State, made Buhari to unleash military operations, 'the python dance' later reinforced with 'Operation Udoka,' against harmless youths, (Ijioma and Ibeh,

2023). This action radicalized the youths. The situation became more complex with the poor governance by Southeast governors coupled with unnecessary political interference. These resulted in the unwarranted murder of youths, while others were arrested, and incarcerated along with the leader of the IPOB, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu. Since then, the IPOB has been pitched against the Federal government-sponsored counterinsurgency operations.

The views expressed by respondents all point to a calculated attempt at degrading the people of the Southeast region, and possibly occupy their landscape to deter further resistance and development because existing infrastructure are left in depressed condition; unemployment is amplified by poor planning, and corruption. Another respondent argues that:

> Every Igbo community has its community development spirit which promotes development, and secures the society with vigilante security, but the Federal government failed to motivate them. The government disarmed them thereby making them vulnerable to the advancing Fulani herdsmen who are bent on mass murder, destruction of communities and occupation of land. There is deliberate neglect of all existing infrastructure and industries, which has resulted in unemployment and economic hardship. People are deprived of their means of survival and contribution to community development which is rooted in the culture of our people. The inability of government to checkmate all these grievances have fueled agitations which are no longer peaceful but violent.

A community leader argues that:

> Nobody conducts exam for himself and fails. The federal government should ask itself sincerely where it has been getting it wrong, unless their actions are deliberate because the marginalization of the southeast in infrastructure, appointment of qualified people into federal positions based on intellectual and mental capacity and the rising wave of unemployment among youths are not hidden. The question of marginalization has been

> upgraded since 2015 and the succeeding government is taking it to a higher level. And where the people are complaining and government fails to respond to their agitations, is an invitation to anarchy.

The climax of the grievances has been traced to the political killings and the activities of the unknown gunmen in southeast region. Although this was traced to the Supreme Court judgment that made Senator Hope Uzodinma, the Governor of Imo State in 2019 despite coming fourth in the governorship election, since then, the region has known no peace. The IPOB and the Eastern Security Network vowed to recover the region from impostors and their paymasters, and this has made security more complex (Ijioma, Durueke and Chinuruekpere, 2023:7). These were some of the critical grievances that escalated insurgency in the Southeast.

Appraising the operational modes of the counterinsurgency and the factors that have made the operations ineffective

In appraising the efficiency and effectiveness of the counterinsurgency operations, the views of several respondents were sought. A community leader succinctly puts it this way:

> The operations have no significant impact because some forces are involved. It is more of a lip service. A situation where you would send out people on an operation and sabotage it, amounts to pulling the rug under their feet. There is insincerity on the part of government because no government forces can be suppressed by non-state actors. For example, Ebubeagu, which was created to counter the non-state actors, turned to exacerbate the crisis. The operations were created to suppress the southeast than to carryout actual liberation from the insurgents. Therefore, government created confusion instead of a clear instruction to dealt with the insurgents.

This is vital information coming from a community leader who is conversant with the situation in his community and has interacted and communicated with other leaders from different parts of the region. As an academic also, he argues that

'when you see a project that is to succeed, the packaging, and available resources would show that the government is serious'. But this one, he insists failed from day one. He also reinforced his claim on the premise that any insurgency that government has no hand in would not last more than twenty hours as pronounced by the former military leader of Nigeria, Late General Sanni Abacha. Therefore, the sustenance of insurgency in the southeast is in way benefiting government and some powerful politicians in the country.

Hassan (2018) posits that the Nigerian military has actively intervened in domestic conflicts in Nigeria since 1960. And since then, the dynamics of conflicts in Nigeria has manifested as insurgency/terrorism, riots, militancy, criminality, banditry. In more recent time, kidnapping for ransom has dominating the history of insecurity in Nigeria. A respondent, Captain Lazarus Seba, (2024), real name withheld, argues that the operational modes of counterinsurgencies usually include regional focus. In line with this principle, the southeast region has been cordoned to prevent movement of insurgents and their supply chain. It is also imperative to recruit personnel from the region for easier access in the region, unfortunately majority of personnel in the operation are non-Igbo, thereby alienating the force from the people.

Another respondent affirms that the tactics which is paramount to the operation is the protection of the civilian population by prioritizing their safety; and government must ensure it addresses the grievances of the region under scrutiny, unfortunately, policies introduced by government tend to strengthen the resolve of the insurgents to sustain their resistance against the country. Respondents/key participants, are in fact of the view that inadequate resources for the operations is a core challenge; also the terrain is very complex, and dangerous, and without the complementary role of the indigenes, their effort would be futile. Therefore, the complementary role of civilian population is very crucial to the success of the operation.

Respondents further agreed that military operation being conducted on land, air and the creeks to a large extent target mainly vulnerable civilians. Fatalities have increased despite government's unwillingness to address the root causes of the

insurgency as new policies of government have given boost to the propaganda, and attacks mounted by the insurgents through the unknown gunmen whose momentum has increased and become more dangerous.

A community leader unequivocally affirms that:

> Igboland is an egalitarian environment where development is communally pursued. The people do not wait for government to develop its society, and there is this horizontal and vertical security structure that maintains peace and security, in order to protect society and enhance development. There is a peacebuilding structure that degrades insecurity through the age grade security system. And this requires a sincere activation. Government agreed to be paying these youths but later abandoned them. These boys in the bushes are not ghosts, they have worked for government in one way or the other; they are known to the government. The truth is that government is known for reneging on its promises and this local security system happens to be part of government 'abandoned projects'. You can see that government pretends to be fighting insecurity whereas their actions fuel it the more. How do you expect the counterinsurgency to succeed? Also, both federal and state governments have been alleged to have paid some non-state actors from nearby regions to keep creating insecurity in the region. In fact, a particular militia leader from the Niger delta openly described how his private army operated in Imo State and other areas. You can see that the government sabotaged the operation it set.

All blames are on government for creating challenges that hinder security in the region. It is believed that some of these boys must have been used by the politicians for election purposes and later abandoned them. How do we expect full government support for the success of the counterinsurgency operations in the Southeast region? Ebere (2023) and Ihekire (2024) corroborated the assertion that a private militia from the Niger delta was contracted to make sure insecurity persists

in the region prior to the 2023 general election. Government most times sabotages its own policies. But would government accept its failure regarding this issue?

While other respondents hold government responsible, another set of respondents argue that:

> There is presently poor governance structure in almost all the states that constitute the region. They have alienated the people the more by their actions of not protecting their people or condemning atrocities committed against citizens by invaders and security personnel in the Southeast. The state governments have collaborated with the Federal government to use the combined military and police force to intimidate citizens on streets, roads and to clamp down on innocent youths. Elections are rigged, thus denying citizens' their choice of leadership. Imo and Enugu electoral judicial impositions are antithetical to development of democracy, and create obstacles to the success of the operations because the outcomes heighten insecurity through aggrieved people.

Respondents unanimously agreed that the operation's personnel cannot cope with the difficult terrain of these ungoverned spaces controlled by the insurgents without the enlistment of locals. Izombe and Oguta, and Omuma area in Imo State, Ikwo/Abakaliki area in Ebonyi, Ekwulobia, Ihiala and areas bordering Arondizogu in Imo linking Okigwe with Ihitte Uboma, and Arocukwu/Ohiafia in Abia State, have ungoverned spaces controlled by the insurgents. As a result, there are constant breaches.

Ebere (2023) argued that in recent time, there has been fatalities in the region resulting from two bomb explosions in Orlu international market, 07/11/24; several youths were murdered by unknown assailants during Nwa Asa festival at Nibo Awka South, 20/10/24; burning down of National Open University Centre at Ihitte Uboma, 01/10/24; eight security personnel were gruesomely killed by armed men at Ehime Mbano, 20/09/24; Aboki Suya was killed at Ogbaku junction of Mbaitoli LGA by gun men, 17/09/24; Seven community leaders including a President

General, Hyginus Ohazuruike, were killed at Umucheke Okwe in Onuimo LGA, Imo State, 03/08/24; Four police officers were killed at Irete Owerri while on 'stop and search', and their rifles taken away, 29/07/24; earlier in 2024, soldiers on duty at Obinwga and the outskirt of Aba, and at Umuokpara check points in Abia State, were killed; soldiers fell to the bullets of unknown gunmen near Abakiliki in Ebonyi State. Ekwulobia axis in Anambra State has been severally attacked and prominent citizens killed by unknown gunmen. Also parts of Enugu and Ebonyi states have always been attacked by herdsmen and the counterinsurgency operations have not resisted them. In fact, all the ungoverned spaces in the five states are yet to be taken over by the personnel of the counterinsurgency operations, nor any meaningful effort made to degrade the insurgents.

All the respondents condemn the unwarranted militarization of the region by the counterinsurgency operations: military personnel with dangerous weapons intimidate civilians daily on major highways from the Niger Bridge at Onitsha to all the parts of the region. Many scholars have tried counting checkpoints where security personnel extort motorists instead of searching vehicles or venturing into the bushes to flush out the insurgents. The battle is mainly on the highways and not the ungoverned spaces. The security personnel mount road blocks every hundred or one hundred and fifty metres, but at Imo-Rivers boundary, it is 50 metres spacing. These gridlocks have provided kidnappers the opportunity to operate without resistance from the security personnel who hardly come to their rescue. People have argued that they collude with these criminals to perpetrate this high level of criminality. These are signs of land under occupation.

It is apparent that youths who appear flamboyant and are using exotic vehicles are forced to transfer huge sums of money without which they are branded IPOB members. All these have alienated the people from the counterinsurgent operations, whereas intelligence from the locals matter a lot to the operation.

A respondent affirmed that:

> The acts that alienated the local people has elevated intelligence leaks. Strategies are compromised exposing details of troop movements, and the refusal of civilians to supply intelligence to

> security personnel. There is also the possibility of existing insider threats, that is, individuals within government and the military collaborating with the insurgents to undermine the tactical operations of the counterinsurgency. With such threats, those benefiting from the sabotage hinder the supply chain, and some of the arms meant for the operations are diverted and sold to militias. Corruption has remained the bane of counterinsurgency operations in Nigeria.

Other operational failures include the inability of the forces to take physical control of operational bases, intercept communication, and enlist the services of local hunters. Michael (2014:82), argued that gaining the trust of the affected area is virtually important for the people to provide intelligence, therefore, failure to incorporate the civilian population has deliberately distanced the operations from the people. This is made worse by the unlawful arrest of citizens, illegal toll collection on the roads, torture, and death of youths for no justifiable reason. Presently, the notorious Tiger base in Owerri has been fingered as having wasted lives of several youths in Imo State; while the torture-base in Awkuzu, Anambra State has committed atrocities against humanity. Abolaji Rasaq, in his 'Nigeria is radicalizing the Igbo' says "there is something about persecution that does two things to a people: it either breaks them, or it makes them beasts of survival." The latter is the option that has reinforced the resolve of the Igbo youths, who see no reason why they should trust the security forces.

Ebere (2023) and Iheakire (2024) condemned the reactive approach of the security personnel who always maim and kill innocent civilians after the insurgents had attacked operational bases. A Respondent questioned the Federal government's refusal to grant amnesty to the leader and members of IPOB, as he believes that such peace gesture would resolve the crisis quickly. This action would enable security forces to identify the criminal elements that have prolonged insecurity in the region. Ebere (2023) further highlighted the failure of the elite and political office holders who do not give good leadership to the people. He accused them of being indifferent to the plight of the people and that is why they cannot call the military and the police to respect the rights of citizens. It is in this regard that

Hassan (2018:57) criticizes the militarization of civil space which alienates the civil society from the military and government, as the civil society are forced to become sympathetic to the cause of the insurgency. This is one dangerous dimension of the crisis. All respondents differently but collectively justified the claim that the operations lacked proper professionalism in their conduct.

Finally, a respondent revealed that:

> The state governors and our so-called representatives at the national and state assemblies have made our lives miserable; the urban and rural roads are in deplorable states including schools. There is no effort to alleviate the lives of the ordinary citizens as unemployment has reached the roof top, kidnapping, armed robbery, herdsmen attacks and destruction of farmlands have resulted in high cost of living. People have come to believe that only Biafra can bring good governance. This is a dangerous ideology. In this situation, how would you expect the people to cooperate with government to bring an end to the seeming insecurity?

Based on the arguments, study revealed that bad governance, corruption, poor planning, unemployment, and rights abuses, are the challenges of counterinsurgency in the region.

Against all these factors, the research proposes strategies toward strengthening the operation's efficiency to restore security, peace and development in the southeast. Peace and security are the basic ingredients of development in every society; these two ingredients must be generated through good governance and proactive peacebuilding process of inclusion for all ethnic groups.

Since security is key to peace and development, the Federal government of Nigeria must work with the state governments to de-militarize the Southeast region to earn the confidence of the people, so as to guarantee steady flow of intelligence to stamp out insurgency. Moreover, there should a political solution to Mazi Nnamdi Kanu case if insecurity is to be stamped out. Besides the above options, research advocates for the appointment of qualified southeasterners into strategic positions

positions to initiate a national healing process that would generate unity, national cohesion, and economic growth. Good governance is central to peace, security, and development, at both Federal and state levels. This is imperative. Also, political interference from outside the region must be stopped forthwith.

The community leaders are of the view that:

> Dialogue, meetings and conferences must be initiated to usher in genuine reconciliation. Without dialogue every effort made to engender peace and security, would be a waste. The kinetic approach is not the solution, although this cannot be ruled out where the boys refuse to come to the table.

A respondent argues that:

> The boys insist that state governments must show commitment by cooperating with one another to fashion an economic and infrastructural roadmap anchored on good governance to develop the region. Furthermore, the Federal government should allow the region to construct an access to the sea in order to connect to the outside world. They also demand for youth centred projects that would generate employment for the youths to cut off the source of recruitment for the insurgents.

Another respondent was emphatic in his argument that "the governors should stop sabotaging peace efforts by appealing to the central government to release Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and others incarcerated for years, abolish all unconstitutional security outfits created to fight insecurity whereas, it is to fight political opponents; and that governors in the region should utilize state funds to drive the engine of development."

Research further suggest that other measures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations must include the procurement of modern weapons to equip the force, adequate sensitization of the force personnel on the protection of rights of civilians, and to desist from attacking and destroying communities as a reactive action. In addition, all personnel must be profiled to

remove those ethnically biased against the region, and officers that flout the rules of engagement must be punished. A legal framework to implement all these must be put in place as a guiding instrument. The intelligence community should be trained on the essence of collaboration and adequate funds must be provided and must be used judiciously to achieve the objectives of the operation because the restoration of peace, security and development is critical at this moment in the Southeast, and Nigeria generally.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research examined the grievances that led to the emergence of an insurgent groups in the South-East, the operational modes of counterinsurgency and the reasons for the failure of the operation to restore peace and security. The study revealed that the region has been militarized, resulting in rights' abuses, poor and intel leaks, the shortchanging of qualified southeasterners in national appointments as keys issues that undermined the operations of the counterinsurgency mission. Against these issues, research recommends the release of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and other members incarcerated; the inclusion of qualified persons into positions of authority to drive national and regional development, a de-militarization of the region, adherence to good governance, and to create modern ranches as a panacea the activities of Fulani herders in the Southeast. Finally, proper equipment of the counterinsurgency missions and the adherence to the rules of professional engagement must be adhered to.

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Details of Interviewees

S/N	Name	Position	Area	Age
1.	Elkanem, Joseph	Security Personnel	Aba, Abia State	55
2.	Usman, Bello	Security Personnel	Owerrinta Abia	47
3.	Ali, Audu	Security Personnel	Mgbidi Ihiala, Anambra State	49
4.	Odetola, Laolu	Security Personnel	Ekeuloba, Anambra State	37
5.	Terhemba, Gabriel	Security Personnel	Afikpo, Ebonyi State	52
6.	Udo, Bassey.	Security Personnel	Ikwo, Ebonyi State	43
7.	Kekemeke, Bolaji	Security Personnel	Nkanu, Enugu State	37
8.	Turaki, Sanni	Security Personnel	Agwu, Enugu State	42
9.	Alkali, Zakariah	Security Personnel	Owerri Imo State	56
10.	Seba, Lazarus	Security Personnel	Agwa, Imo State	46
11.	Orjiakor, Aloysius	Civilian Observer	Obigbo, Rivers State	48
12.	Uyaeme, C.B	Civil Observer	Akwaete, Abia State	56
13.	Nwosu, Onyinyechi Rita	Retailer/Informal Observer	Arondizuogu, Imo/Anambra Axis	34

14.	Nwagba, Chigozie	Community Leader	Orlu, Imo	43
15.	Uwaeme, Nathan Ubawuike	Traditional Ruler	Umuahia, Abia State	62
16.	Uche, Elekwachi Udochu	Community Leader	Arochukwu/Ohafia, Abia	49
17.	Ezeokoye, Harrison	Community Leader	Ekwuloba/Igboukwu Axis, Anambra	64
18.	Nwankwo, Kingsley	Community Leader	Nkanu , Enugu State	43
19.	Nwaoriemmiri, Nkechi	Woman Leader	Oguta, Imo State	38
20.	Izim, Declan .O.	Traditional Ruler	Imo State	60
21.	Obasi, Gozie	Community Leader	Edda, Ebonyi State	51
22.	Kanu, Onyima	Environmental Security Expert	Abakaliki Ebonyi State	46
23.	Ijioma, Chukwuemeka .O	Security Analyst	Umunze, Anambra State	62
24.	Iheakiri, Norbert	Security Scholar	Oguta, Imo State	53