

JOINT STATEMENT

THE URGENT NEED TO ADDRESS FARMERS-PASTORALISTS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

By

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We are concerned about the rising conflicts over livelihood in our country, especially the incidents and associated fatalities between pastoralists and sedentary farming communities. Over the past decade, the intensity, frequency and geographical scope of these incidents have risen sharply and rapidly. Thousands have been killed; many more have been displaced; properties, crops and livestock worth billions of naira destroyed.

These conflicts affect Nigerians and the survival of our communities. Sedentary farmers work hard to feed themselves and our communities and country. Pastoralists help to meet the dairy and protein needs of our country. Pastoralists are also farmers. Both pastoralists and sedentary farmers provide essential sustenance to our country. Both groups are vital not merely for our continued co-existence as a united country but also for ensuring food security, economic and now our political stability. These continuing conflicts now sadly provide fodder to those who do not wish Nigeria well. This is what makes addressing them so urgent.

As Nigerians, we share in the grief of families and communities affected by these fatalities. We are appalled by the killings and destruction and we condemn them unreservedly as crimes under our law and against our people. We believe these killings are avoidable and we believe government has a responsibility to do more to ensure that they are avoided.

It is important to put these conflicts in context, form a clear diagnosis of what is happening and invite all persons of goodwill in a joint search for urgent solutions to them.

It is no accident that these conflicts between pastoralists and sedentary farmers are intensifying around Nigeria's Savannah belt with its borders from the southern parts of Kaduna state to the north; Enugu north in the south; parts of Ondo State to the west and parts of Taraba State to the east. Benue, Kogi, Nassarawa, and Plateau States are also captured within this widening geography of the livelihood conflicts. Such criminality and livelihood conflicts affecting pastoralists and sedentary farming communities have also led to loss of lives and properties in the many other parts of Nigeria from Abia in the South to Zamfara in the north.

These deepening conflicts reflect a failure to address underlying causes of the conflict due to climate change, livelihood adaptations; forced migration due to other conflicts and inappropriate agricultural policies whose livelihood consequences were not always thought through. For instance, the Fadama projects tended to encourage farming along valleys and wetlands in many Northern states to the detriment of livestock breeders who were deprived of access to traditional watering points and dry season grazing in the valleys.

The causes of the conflicts are traceable to three broad but related factors. First, over the past half century, many natural sources of water in much of Nigeria's Sahelian Belt dried up, forcing pastoralists to move south in search of grazing and water for their herds. The Lake Chad, for instance, shrank by over 90% from 25,000 square kilometres to less than 2,500 square kilometres in a period of less than 50 years, displacing over 60 million herds and affecting nearly 30 million people, many of them pastoralists. As they moved, pastoralists took with them into the Savannah and tropical rain forest zones their identities of faith, language, ethnicity, production methods and land use patterns peculiar to Sudan-Sahel belt. Natural tensions inherent in this contact were bound to escalate in the absence of reliable mechanisms of mediation.

Second, the post-independence government in especially the former Northern Region designated over 415 grazing reserves now spread across the 19 Northern states. However, most of the designated reserves were appropriated by corrupt means by political and private interests, thereby creating dearth of land for pasture and grazing, that they were created to address. This must be redressed urgently and the reserves must be recovered.

Thirdly, as the conflicts rose and fatalities mounted, government especially at the federal government had posited that it is working "silently" to resolve it. Due to this 'silent' manner, many communities perceive that there is a deafening indifference to the conflict, the growing fatalities and the dangers that these pose to our country, our communities and people. As a result, affected communities of both sedentary farmers and pastoralists have increasingly resorted to self-help, vigilantism and violence. What we need is a more robust approach that carries both farming and pastoralist communities along, re-assuring of them of protection of their lives and livelihoods.

These killings and conflicts can be ended. Doing so will require the urgent attention of government at the federal and state levels as well as from communities all over Nigeria. Government must provide a long term policy framework for urgently addressing food security and climate change in Nigeria as a challenge for livelihood and human survival.

There is need to evolve a comprehensive livestock development program so that we avoid the policy summersaults that we have witnessed. Elements of this must address access to water, grazing, agricultural extension services, and access to markets, inputs, education and skills for farmers and pastoralists alike. This will

require an inter-ministerial team, drawing expertise from the Federal Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, Water Resources, Education, Environment, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Defence, Interior and State Governors. Farming community leaders, Pastoralists community leaders, women and youth groups should also be involved. Government should also involve the ECOWAS commission, Cameroon and Chad to address the issue of international transhumance of Pastoralists and their herds either for pasture or commerce, and the need for proper monitoring and regulating.

The criminal justice system must also deal effectively with these crimes against communities of farmers and pastoralists wherever reported. For this purpose, the federal Ministry of Justice could set up a special task force to work with the affected states, the Nigeria Police Force and the Department of State Services (DSS) in locating and bringing to book all persons implicated in these conflicts. More robust public communication will be needed. Impunity for these crimes against our livelihood and coexistence must end.

Cross-community responsibility and dialogue will be required and the assistance of the media will be critical. Some of the reporting of these incidents has contributed to escalating tensions among the communities rather than dousing them. It is important to recall here that pastoralism is not a monopoly of any community or single ethnic group in Nigeria. Anyone can indeed own, keep or farm livestock. As a livelihood tendency, over 16 ethnic groups in Nigeria are identified with pastoralism; tens of millions of Nigerians are engaged in both sedentary and migrant farming.

We call on all leaders and members of farming and pastoralist communities to exercise restraint and not to take the laws into their hands as violence benefits no one. We call on government to urgently take immediate steps address the underlying issues of the conflicts to curb the associated violence and provide relief materials to all victims. All communities and indeed all Nigerians need to be reassured that their safety and security is valued by the government. We also call on the media to assist in dousing tensions. We also call on political elites seeking to take advantage of these conflicts and to think of a greater, united and prosperous Nigeria rather than narrow self interests.

Nigeria needs both farmers and pastoralists for its food security, economic stability and ecological balance. Government cannot continue to abdicate its voice and role in ending these conflicts. Doing so makes it seem complicit in the fatalities that result. That is an impression that neither government nor Nigeria can afford.

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