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UNKNOWN GUNMEN (UGM) ATTACKS AND DECLINING BUSINESSES IN OWERRI, IMO STATE, NIGERIA: PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

In Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, recurrent assaults by unidentified assailants have led to significant fatalities, property destruction, and a pervasive climate of dread and uncertainty. This essay analyzes the psychological consequences of violence on individuals, organizations, and society as a whole, despite its immediate effects often being economic and physical. It highlights the enduring social disruptions, deterioration of mental health, and erosion of trust. This study is qualitative, utilizing secondary sources for data collection. The findings indicate that trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) inside the business setting resulted in anxiety, chronic fear, despair, and financial strain. The study concluded that the armed attacks in Owerri resulted in extensive psychological effects, ranging from individual trauma to societal disintegration, necessitating a comprehensive approach that includes community resilience development, security reform, mental health services, and economic rehabilitation. The letter recommended that the government promptly establish trauma recovery centers staffed with experienced counselors and provide community therapy sessions and mobile clinics in the affected regions.

Keywords: Social Fragmentation, Trauma, Mental Health, Unknown Gunmen.

Introduction

Recently, there has been a rise in violent assaults executed by unidentified assailants in Owerri, the capital of Imo State, Nigeria. These attacks, often aimed at marketplaces, public spaces, and commercial establishments, have incited widespread turmoil and apprehension. In addition to the evident destruction, there are considerable psychological consequences that affect not only the direct victims but also the broader community. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), marked by flashbacks, insomnia, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness, is prevalent among survivors of firearm assaults. Trauma is intensified by recurrent exposure to violence, especially in those with preexisting vulnerabilities (Igwe, 2011). Chronic anxiety, panic attacks, and in severe instances, agoraphobia (the fear of public spaces) are all intensified by persistent worries for personal safety. This affects an individual's ability to work, maintain relationships, and do daily activities (Kingsley et al., 2022).

Emotional distress is exacerbated by financial loss resulting from the closure or destruction of a business. Victims frequently experience suicidal ideation, sorrow, and sadness, especially in the absence of financial or social support systems (Okoye, 2021). Adolescents exposed to violence may display aggressive behaviors, manifest symptoms of trauma, and develop a distrust of authorities. Due to school closures and insufficient recreational options, youth may turn to drugs, cultism, or enlist in armed groups (Odoma and Akor, 2019).

Armed assaults in Owerri have resulted in extensive psychological consequences, including social fragmentation and individual distress. A multifaceted plan that integrates community resilience enhancement, economic recovery, security reform, and mental health services is essential to tackle these consequences. Insufficient action risks exacerbating instability and perpetuating cycles of violence in the region. This study focused on assessing the psychological effects of mysterious shooter attacks on struggling enterprises in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, to identify and propose feasible remedies to mitigate the impacts.

Statementofthe Problem

Concerns regarding public safety and economic stability have emerged due to the rise of unidentified gunmen's activities in certain regions of southeast Nigeria (Abada et al., 2021). The actions of unidentified shooters encompass several offenses, including vandalism, armed robbery, extortion, kidnapping, and disruption of business activities. These acts often target corporations and present significant threats to their operations, growth, and financial prosperity. The presence and actions of unidentified gunmen pose a significant threat to commercial enterprises, particularly in regions with dense business activity such as Owerri in Imo State, Nigeria. Primarily, it deters potential clients and investors from engaging with the organization by cultivating an atmosphere of apprehension and instability. This concern may result in decreased foot traffic, therefore diminishing sales and earnings. Tenza (2020) contends that the menace of violence disrupts normal business operations, leading to shutdowns, reduced output, and damage to property. This affects the company's financial stability and the emotional wellness of customers and entrepreneurs. Businesses may incur additional expenses for security measures to protect their assets, employees, and facilities, so further diminishing their profit margins. These expenses may encompass hiring security personnel, installing security apparatus, and implementing safety protocols. The negative perception of conducting business in areas with mysterious gunmen can harm a company's brand, hindering its ability to attract and retain clients and talented employees (Akpan, 2021).

The activities of unidentified gunmen significantly affect commercial organizations, influencing their operations, reputation, financial stability, and growth possibilities. While the immediate consequences of such incidents, such as property damage and financial losses, are evident, a comprehensive examination of their broader implications for corporate growth and sustainability is essential. The study examined the psychological impacts on individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. It highlights the enduring cultural disruptions, deterioration of mental health, and erosion of trust.

Review of related Literature

Concept of Unknown Gun Men (UGM)

The word "unknown gunmen," which has grown cliched in reporting on Nigeria's security situation, needs to be defined. According to Nwangwu (2022), "unknown gunmen" could mean people who carry out terrorist attacks or assassinations for political or ideological reasons. They may have "unknown" goals because their identities and affiliations are murky or hard to decipher. It is possible that the perpetrators of mass shootings are mysterious persons whose goals are not always evident. Undercover individuals may partake in pursuits that pique interest or inspire conjecture (Akinyetun et al., 2023). A religious and ethnic slant has been added to Nigeria's insecurity with the new designation of criminal factions from a certain region as UGM (Nda-Isaiah, 2021). Southerners frequently use the term "attacks by unidentified assailants" to characterize violent incidents on a regional level. The governor of Anambra State, Prof. Charles Soludo, clarified in a statement he made in 2022 that the so-called "unknown gunmen" were actually landlords and others who conspired to keep their identities hidden, rather than being completely nameless. Murder, arson, and kidnapping for ransom are more like profitable criminal operations than protests. The whereabouts of these perpetrators are known to us. Rather than being a peaceful protest, it is considered a crime (Sahara Reporters, 2022). According to the governor's statement, the UGM's operations include murder, kidnapping, and the destruction of both people and business assets.

Origin of unknown gunmen

Southeast Nigeria's history of Unknown Gunmen (UGM) is associated with the region's increasing insecurity, especially after 2020. The phrase "Unknown Gunmen" has gained widespread usage to refer to armed gangs that attack citizens, government buildings, security forces, and politicians. Numerous factors, including as criminal activity, political violence, and separatist agitation, have been connected to these attacks (Tenza, 2020).

1. **Biafra Agitation and IPOB's Role**

   The Eastern Security Network (ESN), the paramilitary division of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), was founded in late 2020 primarily to combat Fulani herdsmen and address insecurity. The government has accused ESN of being accountable for certain Unknown Gunmen attacks, a claim that IPOB has denied (Ikezue, 2023). The faction has been advocating for the secession of the Southeast from Nigeria under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu.

2. **Attacks on Security Forces and Government Institutions**

   Between late 2020 and 2021, multiple police stations, military checkpoints, and offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were assaulted and

incinerated. A significant number of security personnel were murdered, and armaments were appropriated, exacerbating the conflict.

3. **Anambra, Imo, and Enugu Hotspots**

The states most impacted by these assaults include Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Abia. In April 2021, Owerri, the capital of Imo State, had a notorious assault when armed assailants invaded the Imo State Police Command offices and liberated approximately 1,800 detainees from the Owerri Correctional Center.

4. **Targeting of Politicians and Traditional Rulers**

Certain assaults have been politically motivated, including unidentified assailants executing local politicians, traditional leaders, and government officials. For example, Dr. Chike Akunyili, spouse of the late Dora Akunyili (former NAFDAC director), was murdered in Anambra in 2021.

Recent Incidents (2024):

Attack on Military Checkpoint in Ebonyi State: On August 2, 2024, assailants targeted a military checkpoint on the Amangwu segment of the Amasiri-Owutu Federal route in the Edda Local Government Area. The assailants, utilizing motorcycles, conducted intermittent gunfire. Initial reports of losses were ambiguous; however, community sources confirmed that a soldier and one of the assailants were killed during the altercation (Chibizor, et al. 2024).

Killing of Vigilantes and a Teenager in Imo State: A local vigilante organization in the Njaba region was attacked on July 7, 2024, by assailants who have not been recognized. At Afor Umuaka, the vigilantes were ambushed while on a security patrol. A teenager was wounded by a stray bullet and three vigilantes were killed in the incident.

Attack on Enugu Market: In the Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State, the Nkwo Ibagwa market was gunned down on May 29, 2024. Numerous people were hurt, and property valued in the millions of naira was destroyed, by the attackers. Two commercial buses and two tricycles were also burned to the ground. A sit-in in observance of Biafra Heroes Day was allegedly the impetus for the attack (Chibizor, et.al 2024).

Unknown gunmen (UGM) attacksanddeclining businesses in Owerri, Imo State,

Nigeria

The expansion and profitability of businesses can be significantly affected by attacks from Unknown Gun Men (UGM), particularly in regions where such incidents are prevalent. These assaults create an atmosphere of dread and apprehension, diminishing consumer confidence and causing individuals to hesitate in conducting business. Businesses may experience a reduction in foot traffic, sales, and ultimately profitability as a consequence of this (Akinyetun et al., 2023). Moreover, UGM assaults often disrupt transportation networks and supply chains, hindering the timely delivery of goods and services. Businesses may need to seek more expensive transportation alternatives or safeguard their supply chains against future attacks, perhaps leading to increased operational costs. Furthermore, the unpredictability of UGM attacks may deter both international and domestic investment in the

affected regions. Investors may opt to allocate their capital elsewhere due to perceiving certain regions as high-risk environments. The long-term viability of enterprises in these sectors is further impeded by this deficiency in investment, which constrains economic growth and innovation (Chibizor et al., 2024). In summary, UGM attacks affect organizations not just via immediate physical damage but also through enduring financial repercussions that hinder growth and economic prosperity. To mitigate these repercussions and provide a safer environment for corporate growth and development, the implementation of appropriate security measures, community engagement, and government intervention is essential.

Psychological Implications on Individuals

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Individuals who survive gun violence frequently suffer from PTSD, characterized by flashbacks, insomnia, hypervigilance, and emotional detachment. Repeated exposure to violence exacerbates trauma, particularly in individuals with pre-existing vulnerabilities (Igwe, 2011).

Anxiety and Chronic Fear

Persistent uncertainty over safety engenders chronic anxiety, panic episodes, and, in severe instances, agoraphobia (fear of public spaces). This impacts daily functioning, interpersonal interactions, and occupational capacity (Kingsley et al., 2022).

Depression and Economic Stress

The loss of money resulting from business closure or destruction intensifies emotional distress. Numerous victims encounter sadness, despair, and suicide thoughts, particularly in the lack of social or financial support systems (Okoye, 2021).

Community and Societal-Level Effects:

Erosion of Social Trust

In the absence of identified culprits, fear and distrust proliferate within communities. Residents may attribute responsibility to opposing factions, governmental entities, or security organizations, exacerbating societal divisions.

Displacement and Community Disruption

The worry of future assaults propels migration from metropolitan regions. Families are uprooted, children abandon their education, and local networks disintegrate, undermining community cohesion (Elem, 2023).

Desensitization to Violence

Repeated occurrences may result in emotional desensitization, rendering violence commonplace. This diminishes empathy and cultivates a culture that devalues human life (Oforma, 2021).

Impact on the Business Environment:

Psychological Strain on Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs encounter unpredictability, apprehension regarding reinvestment, and potential financial devastation. The emotional impacts include sleep disorders, stress-related health issues, and withdrawal from economic activity (Mark and Obi, 2022).

Workplace Anxiety
Employees experience job insecurity and apprehension of potential attacks, resulting in diminished morale, increased absenteeism, and reduced productivity.

Implications for Youth and Children
Adolescents exposed to violence may exhibit aggressive behaviors, trauma-related symptoms, and a diminished trust in institutions. Due to school closures and restricted leisure activities, adolescents may resort to substance abuse, cult involvement, or enlistment in armed factions (Odoma and Akor, 2019).

Theoretical Review

Frustration/Aggression theory
According to Adeyefa and Olayinka (2023), the theory was first proposed in 1939 by John Dollard and colleagues and revised in 1962 by Berkowitz and Aubrey. According to Odoma and Akor (2019), the idea was put up to explain violent criminal behavior in connection to social unrest and disturbances as a way to satisfy urgent demands from necessary authorities. Aneto (2022) argues that aggression might emerge from frustration, which happens when an unpleasant barrier stands between a goal and a reaction. So, when people's attempts to achieve certain goals are hindered, it leads to dissatisfaction and, eventually, animosity. According to Igwe (2011), when problems with accomplishing goals aren't tackled from the source, the angry person ends up taking out their frustrations on someone else. A prosperous social, economic, and political environment is the responsibility of every administration. The truth is that you can't always find a setting like this. Thousands of Nigerian college grads each year find themselves dissatisfied with the job market because of the lack of paid employment options (Odoma and Akor, 2019). On top of everything else, many graduates face bleak prospects, which is sure to make them frustrated. Since Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999, a series of civil unrests have occurred, often including religious, communal, and ethnic disputes. These experiences shed light on the root reasons of these conflicts. A number of societal injustices committed by the Nigerian government were the source of IPOB's dissatisfaction. The Igbos' exclusion from the country's social, political, and economic life is largely to blame for this socioeconomic problem. Boko Haram, herders, Niger-Delta militants, Oduduwa groups, the recent EndSARs protests, and the ongoing IPOB sit-at-home order enforced by the Eastern Security Network (ESN) were the main causes of the nearly 2,000 deaths that occurred in Nigeria in 2020 and 2021, according to Faminu (2021). There is little question that these actions stem from pent-up anger and frustration. Since IPOB views the Nigerian government as the principal impediment to the attainment of Biafran independence, the relevance of Frustration/Aggression theory to this research is directly related. A lack of equal representation in several institutions, parastatals, and the presidential office is cited by the IPOB as the reason for their unhappiness with the Nigerian government. Because of his activities, which the Nigerian government views as harmful to the peaceful coexistence of the nation, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu was captured and imprisoned. The inability to secure Nnamdi Kanu's release has further infuriated IPOB members. The Southeastern part of Nigeria was consequently ordered to remain indoors. The underlying animosity and suppressed fury in Nigeria is the root cause of the country's chronic social instability. A number of social, political, and economic factors are working against the country's youth, including rising rates of poverty, police brutality, increased insecurity, and marginalization. Everyone from the youngest citizens to the oldest citizens has lost faith in the Nigerian government because they see it as an ineffective leadership. Prompt societal discontent often results in attacks on social infrastructure, a hostile business climate for both

domestic and international direct investment, and, ultimately, a steady decline in economic growth.

Empirical Review

Oforma (2021) analyzed the effects of UGM strikes on the economic development of southeastern Nigeria. This study assessed secondary data through qualitative methods. The study's findings indicate that economic activity and human security in southeast Nigeria have been profoundly affected by UGM attacks. The research suggests that human security and economic goals will remain unattainable unless this issue is adequately addressed. The report advised that the federal government promptly engage with the indigenous Biafran population to facilitate the region's recovery. Elem (2023) examined the social and economic effects of the UGM on the underprivileged population in South-East Nigeria, specifically in Ebonyi State, employing a quantitative study methodology. The UGM assaults have precipitated a deterioration in the economic conditions for the populace of South-East Nigeria, particularly in Ebonyi State. This has led to several effects, including heightened unemployment, increased instability, and elevated school dropout rates. ... to comprehend the impact of their assaults on the folks they claim to protect. The five governors of the southeastern states should rescind their position and initiate dialogues with various IPOB factions. Moreover, it is strongly advised that the governors initiate discussions with the federal government to obtain Nnamdi Kanu's release. Mark and Obi (2022) analyzed the detrimental effects of UGM strikes on Nigeria's economy inside the South-East geopolitical zone, particularly on the country's overall economic development. This study seeks to examine the effects of UGM assaults on the economy of Nigeria's South-East geopolitical zone. This inquiry utilizes secondary data sources such as news articles, database entries, and academic papers. The investigation's theoretical foundations were derived from relative deprivation theory. The economic volatility may arise from IPOB's current focus on the South East Region and other areas under its jurisdiction. Owoeye et al. (2022) analyzed the effects of the UGM attacks on the political economy of the South-East Region. The study examined many socio-political and economic dimensions of South-East Nigeria, encompassing government institutions, banking operations, transportation, market activities, commercial enterprises, and the educational system. The findings indicate that the UGM attacks have adversely affected the sociopolitical and economic activity in the South-East Region of Nigeria. The manifesto stipulates that Nigeria's federal government must establish an effective federal character system to allocate resources equitably throughout the six geographical zones. The Nigerian government must expedite decision-making over IPOB leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu's sit-at-home directive, implemented on Monday to compel the federal government to free him from detention. The manifesto advocated for a rotational transfer of power among Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, rather than framing the presidential position as a contest between Southern and Northern Nigeria. All of these components may be beneficial for the southeastern region of Nigeria.

Research Methods

This article exclusively utilized secondary sources to obtain information for its conclusions and recommendations due to its qualitative nature. This suggests that the study emerged from dialogues regarding theoretical research undertaken by scholars from many philosophical traditions. Data was gathered from books, journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers, and various internet resources. After doing a content analysis of the data from these sources, findings and recommendations were formulated.

Discussion of Findings

A study examining the impact of Unknown Gun Men's (UGM) activities on the growth and development of businesses in southeastern Nigeria reveals that numerous traders have fallen victim to UGM assaults throughout various areas of the region (Mark and Obi 2022). The study revealed that UGM operations adversely impact the growth of businesses in Onitsha, Owerri, Aba, Enugu, and Abakaliki by dissuading investors, inflicting property damage on corporations, and discouraging existing business owners from expanding their enterprises. The research revealed that sit-at-home orders have led to a reduction in operational days for UGM, hence diminishing the economic viability of businesses in the southeast (Elem, 2023). The study found that the Republic of Biafra's conferment of sovereignty is a method to diminish UGM's activities and their impact on southeastern firms. Oforma (2021). The findings of this analysis further indicate that UGM assaults were significantly associated with a decline in economic activity in Southeast Asia. The research indicated that commercial activity in the region was flourishing before to the UGM strikes. This assertion is corroborated by Kingsley et al. (2022), who argue that UGM attacks significantly impede commercial activities in the southeast by creating a widespread climate of fear that deters residents from engaging in commerce beyond their residences. All individuals recognize the significance of life and the need to avoid becoming targets of extremists or anonymous assaults for whatever cause, including financial motives. Okoye (2021) asserts that the UGM assaults have severely compromised the rights of Southeast inhabitants to engage in trade, business, and education, hence greatly hindering socioeconomic activity in the region. Osita et al. (2022) reported that the UGM strikes resulted in an estimated daily loss of $8 billion for the region, as stated by the Nnewi Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines, and Agriculture. This suggests that economic activity in the Southeast is expected to persist in its decline until corrective measures are implemented.

Conclusion

The psychological repercussions of armed assaults in Owerri are extensive, encompassing personal anguish and community disintegration. Addressing these implications necessitates a comprehensive strategy that integrates mental health services, security reform, economic rehabilitation, and the enhancement of community resilience. An inadequate response jeopardizes stability and sustains cycles of violence in the region.

Policy recommendations

1. Mental Health Services

- Establish trauma recovery centers with trained counselors.
- Provide mobile clinics and community therapy sessions in affected areas.

2. Community Engagement

- Empower local vigilante groups in collaboration with community policing frameworks.
- Promote dialogue forums to rebuild trust and address grievances.

3. Support for Victims and Businesses

- Provide grants or low-interest loans to rebuild destroyed businesses.
- Offer psychosocial support programs tied to economic recovery initiatives.

4. Government Transparency and Rule of Law

- Ensure transparent investigations and timely prosecution of perpetrators.
- Build public trust in security agencies through professionalism and community accountability.

5. Security Reforms

- The government should constitute joint security operations by way of coordinating efforts among the military, Police and local vigilantes to dismantle armed groups.
- To improve on the human security of citizens in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, the government should encourage inter agencies cooperation and work at synergy among security agencies through intelligence gathering and sharing. This by extension will enable the security agencies to be more proactive in their operations in order to stern the tide of the unknown gunmen and other hoodlums menace.

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