

**STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING CRIMES IN POST-CRIMINALITY ERA IN  
ABA, SOUTH EASTERN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The strategies for combating crimes in Aba between 1999 and 2010 involved a collaborative approach to curtail threats to lives and property. To achieve this, the research provided the theoretical and empirical understanding of trends and patterns of crimes, and the strategies to combat them. The: ecological and control theories guided the study. A descriptive design with emphasis on qualitative technique interviewed 15 key informants comprising all stakeholder's resident in Aba. Data were content analyzed. Findings revealed that the triggers of the incidences of crime were the state of inactivity of the Eastern Nigeria seaports, urban poverty and the affluent lifestyle of politicians. The research established also that the criminal groups were Ngwa Road Boys; PDP Boys (Omuma Road Branch); the Park Boys and the Down Below that perpetrated rape; armed robbery; kidnapping; territorial toll; and ritual killings. The research argued that some of the consequences of their activities were urban poverty, insecurity, and mass migration to Lagos and Abuja. However, the strategies for combating these crimes included the use of Bakassi Boys; the synergy between the Police and the Bakassi Boys; and informal intelligence gathering. The research recommends among others the reactivation of the Eastern seaports to boost businesses in Aba and a collaborative intelligence gathering.

**KEYWORDS:** Criminality; Good Governance; Security; Crime; Violence

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rising insecurity in Nigeria and specifically the events that characterised the history of Aba, the economic nerve centre of Abia State, from 1999 to 2010, exposed some of the rot in the Nigerian system. The Nigeria Police was unable to curb the frightening activities of criminals in the City for a long time and it was evident that the Police Force had suffered systemic neglect during military rule resulting in the absence of retraining and equipment the agency. Since 1999, successive democratic governments have felt safer with their armed thugs and this attitude has affected the morale of the police, despite the creation of the Nigerian Civil Defense Corps, to man government installations and infrastructure. This situation defined the state under which the police operated, thus, exposing its lapses in managing internal security.

The Nigerian civil war which lasted from 1967 to 1970, pauperised the majority of Igbo people, who lost their property and their means of livelihood; investments and money saved in their accounts were exchanged for `mere £20. Moreover, the psychological loss became a burden they have borne for years. However, the residents and the business class who returned to Aba, re-invented a survival spirit that quickened the reconstruction of the economy of Aba. Growth of private businesses and resuscitation of government enterprises attracted patronage from West, Central Africa; and western Nigeria for spare parts and imported textiles. But the return to democracy in 1999 destroyed all the gains made between 1970 and 1998.

The factors responsible for the, unfortunately, the situation was the neglect of the seaports in Eastern Nigeria and major cargoes preferred Apapa and Tin Can. This could have been due to the distance from Europe or an unwritten policy to whittle down the development of business in the region defeated during the civil war. This situation was made worse by the neglect of existing infrastructure in the city. The consequence was great: there were loss of jobs, widespread poverty, mass movement of youths to Lagos and Abuja, who were engaged in the clearing and forwarding business and also the loss of professionals to other cities (Anyaele; Ijioma and Onyeonu, (2017). In the absence of importation of goods, the existing

industries had no regular supply of raw materials and the economy ran into a serious crisis which made criminals turn Aba into a near-Somalia, with the city fragmented and ruled by gangs engaged in specialized territorial crimes. They grew in nature and dimension in the face of the ostentatious lifestyle of politicians.

According to Eme (2009) there has been a significant growth in Nigeria's economy but this has not reflected on the masses because the political class had short-changed the citizens by not creating a conducive environment for the development of all. There was not much effort to promote good governance at all levels. Resources were mismanaged and less attention was given to adequate manpower development and resources, whereas, the economy of any society sustains growth and development but when the economy is run down, society is threatened by a myriad of factors that breed insecurity.

Security is strategic to the existence of any nation; it forestalls the disintegration of orderliness, (Odeh and Umoh, 2015). It is in this direction, that Omede (2011) argues that security is a explains the ability of a state to counter threats to the core values and interests of its existence. The neglect of people's welfare creates insecurity, and criminality often becomes a normal way of life. It is against this that the research argues that the ineffective and efficient policing of in Aba, led to the clamour for the total overhaul of policing and crime control. It is common knowledge that the Nigerian police lack the manpower and resources to function effectively in the contemporary world.

Combating crime requires strategic intelligence, well-trained security officers with modern equipment to intimidate or counteract criminality. But in the absence of all these, vigilante security was recruited to complement the police in restoring peace and security. It is against this background that this research the trend and pattern of criminality and the strategies adopted in combating them. It also advances strategies to strengthen security in the city to resuscitate the ailing economy of Aba.

Aba is one of the thriving cities in Nigeria driven by private businesses, particularly, small and medium enterprises. This was supported by imported goods through Port-Harcourt

and Calabar ports which provided job opportunities for the youth. Goods produced in Aba attracted people from Central and West Africa and this encouraged massive production of goods. However, Apapa and Tin Can ports became more attractive to importers than Port-Harcourt and Calabar ports and the cost had been great. The reasons for this could be political and economic. Small and big businesses suffered. Many people lost their means of livelihood, infrastructure was neglected and crime of various dimensions dominated the history of Aba. It is against this background that this study investigated the strategies adopted in combating criminal activities in Aba.

In order to adequately interrogate our discuss, the underlisted questions were raised.

1. What are the factors that promoted crime in Aba between 1999 and 2010?
2. What criminal activities dominated the landscape of Aba?
3. How did these criminal activities affect lives, businesses and governance?
4. What are the strategies that restored peace and security to the city?

### **Study Area**

Aba is the dominant commercial city in Abia state and it is located between Umuahia in the North and Port-Harcourt in the South. Small and medium scale enterprises are the hallmark of its economy but neighbouring communities bring farm produce to Aba to boost the commercial nature of the city. Aba was one of the fastest-growing economies in the Eastern Region of Nigeria which attracted businessmen from West and Central Africa. Plastic, leather, clothing and entrepreneurship skills dominate business in the city. Other businesses such as banks and beverage industries have created opportunities for various classes of people in Aba. Port-Harcourt and Calabar seaports were strategic to its economy until they became redundant.

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Concept of Criminality**

Crime is an offence that goes beyond the personal and into the public sphere, breaking prohibitory rules or laws, to which legitimate punishments or sanctions are attached, and which requires the intervention of a public authority ... (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology,

2009). Crime is an unlawful deprivation of the right of any person/persons by another or a group and it is seen as an offence against the state which has the responsibility of protecting the lives and property of its citizens. It must be processed through an administrative system or enforcement agency. It is also an infringement that must be reported and recorded by a security agency and forms part of criminal statistics. This could result in a court case or not, depending on the gravity of the offence, (Adebayo, 2013). Dambazzau (1994) argues that crime is an act against the public interest because it creates disharmony in the state of things. Therefore, all effort is made to assuage the feelings of the victim and punishment in this direction is meant to deter the offender. Crime creates an atmosphere of insecurity. According to Adebayo (2013) crime is a threat to the economic, political and social security of a nation and it is a major factor associated with underdevelopment, because it scares foreign investors, degrades human beings, destroys human and social capital, the damaged relationship between citizens and the states, and consequently, undermines democratic principles and development.

Crime threatens the safety of lives and property because it creates fear, intimidation, restricts movement, creates groups of anti-social forces who might have been affected by economic, political and social factors arising from government policies. In recent times, cases of kidnapping and ritual murder have dominated the history of criminality in Nigeria because of the collapse of the economic and political system. Nigeria has almost lost its social and cultural values due to bad governance. Criminality is the state of being criminal and it includes hooliganism, kidnapping, murder, deception, imitation, theft, rape and many others.

### **Concept of Security**

McGraw (1988) argues that the security of a nation is based on two major factors: the maintenance and protection of the socio-economic order despite threat on one hand and the promotion of a preferred international order, which minimized the threat to core values and interests, as well as to the domestic order on the other hand. National security is vital to the existence of society due to the alarming and terrifying escalation of crimes. These have taken barbaric and lethal dimensions, and therefore, required drastic measures. Nwolise (2006)

argues that security is an all-encompassing holistic concept which implies that the territory must be secured by a network of armed forces; that the sovereignty of the state must be guaranteed by a democratic and patriotic government protected by the military, police and the people themselves. This concept of collaborative security ensures a comprehensive approach to peace and security.

Security is also seen from the point of view of protection of a country, persons and properties of the community against future threats, danger, mishaps and other forms of perils and it is the inability of a state to provide security for the citizenry that motivates the civil population to collaborate with the security agencies to find better approaches to tackling crime, (Krahmann, 2003).

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of this study ecological and control theories guided will be used to situate this study.

**Ecological Theory** analyses violence by examining the factors that motivate a rise in crime or violence in societies. The factors include environmental conditions, population growth, family structure, residential segregation, and government policies. These factors are outcomes of human vulnerability (Kennedy, 2008 and Akinwale and Aderinto, 2014). The ecological theory examines the consequences of discrimination, ignorance and unemployment. It believes that government policies have grave consequences on humans and in this study, the neglect of Port-Harcourt and Calabar seaports in Eastern Nigeria accounted for the upsurge in unemployment and to a large extent, widespread poverty. This factor crippled importation through these ports and the population engaged in export and import became unemployed. There was a mass movement to Lagos and Abuja and those who stayed back that could not survive the new state of things resort to crime.

**Control theory** argues that to prevent crime, citizens should sustain a certain moral standard governing various forms of acceptable or unacceptable behaviour. Social controls such as the family, peer group, workgroup, police and the role of the state are crucial. The role of the

police is very critical to this study. The state (through the police) ensures that in any potential criminal activity, the cost to the criminal outweighs any likely benefit. The theory argues that the state makes society stable by ensuring criminals are punished severely to deter them; the state should also increase the chances of a criminal being caught by having the desired number of police or security personnel to monitor and police society and to further ensure that people are encouraged to take “commonsense” measures to make crime more difficult (Hirsch 1969; Gottfredson and Hirsch 1990; and Samson and Laub, 1993).

### **Empirical Studies**

Several pieces of literature have established the strategies adopted in combating crime in urban centres and the role of the vigilante agencies. Gani (2017) investigated A Comparative study of crime between Malaysia and Nigeria and argued that urbanization has created numerous social problems among which is a crime that became a common phenomenon to all urban areas in both developed and developing nations. The research revealed that recent unimaginable levels of world urbanization coincide with the rise in urban crimes in many parts of the world, as the rate of unemployment had been on the increase coupled with increased poverty among the urban poor.

The study argued that the nature of crime is uniform but varies from one geographical region to another. In some areas, property crime is more common while in others, crime on a person (violent) is prevalent. In Sanni, Adewoyin, Bako and Akande (2018) Urban crime prevention and adaptation measures in Ilorin, Nigeria was studied, and they argued that the current high rate of crime in Nigeria, has been attributed to high population growth, rapid rate of urbanization and a correspondingly high rate of impoverishment among the population. They argued that the police are short of capacity and urban residents should adopt safety measures to prevent.

### **Research design and method of data collection**

The study adopted the descriptive design which utilised oral interviews to seek the views of respondents It also involved informal discussions. 15 respondents were interviewed for this

study and they comprised security personnel (both formal police and Bakassi vigilante); victims of these crimes; stakeholders, traditional rulers and landlords. Data were subjected to content analysis and cross-examination.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Data established that there was rapid growth in business in Aba patronized by both national and international buyers before the civil war, but the residents resuscitated their businesses without much assistance from the Federal government after the war. The small-scale enterprises enjoyed a boost by the regular importation of goods through the Port-Harcourt and Calabar ports which made raw materials and other manufactured goods available. Moreover, traders from West and Central Africa came to patronize goods produced in Aba. A respondent, Ogbonnaya Njoku, argued that the export and importation of goods generated wealth and employment opportunities through the textile, plastics, leather products, paper and printing, and fashion designing in wear.

All these complemented big businesses such as Nigerian breweries, Dunlop, Pepsi and Coca Cola plants, and Aba Paper Mills. Either by direct action or inaction of the Federal Government, importers moved their businesses to Lagos as the destination of their goods. This resulted in unemployment, urban poverty and promoted urban-rural syndrome, and lawlessness, (Onyema Eze, 2017). Unfortunately, bad governance escalated the sufferings of the citizens and many youths survived on sophisticated criminality. A respondent, Kalu Ebe, argued that the years of sophisticated criminality could be described as a period of terror. He posits that the civilian government degraded the lives of the people; life became difficult, the social nightlife was hindered. He blamed politicians who armed youths to win elections and later abandoned them as the immediate cause of the high incidence of criminality in Aba.

A respondent, Augustine Eze, blamed the regime of Governor Orji Uzor Kalu for tolerating impunity which escalated to all sorts of intimidation and humiliation from several groups who created territories for themselves such as Ngwa Road Boys, PDP group, Ogbor

Hill Group known as Down Below (Water Side Precisely), Mafias known as Umu-Maf, and Park Boys.

**Ngwa Road Boys:** These boys operated at Ahia Ohuru, Ngwa road by East and by Mosque, Obohia road, and Iheorji. Their activities included theft, rape and abduction, armed robbery, killing and cutting of human parts. These lawless activities were possible due to the deplorable roads.

**PDP Boys (Omuma Road Branch):** Their area of jurisdiction included Ama-Ukwu, Eziukwu Aba, Omuma Road, Agbaraeve, Omuma by Powerline, Cemetery areas like the cemetery market, Ibeagbulam, Achia-Anu, St, Eugene, Ama Ogbonna, etc. These were who indulged in banditry, intimidating people, raping women, armed robbery and imposition of taxes on people doing business at Achia Anu, Cemetery market and Railway market. They also attacked members of St. Peter's Catholic Church, Eziukwu Aba during morning masses and attach the church after every harvest and bazaar.

**The Park Boys:** These were brought up in different parks in Aba. They intimidated commuters, snatched their belongings and those who challenged them had their hands chopped off. Moreover, commuters could be loaded into vehicles and taken to unknown destinations without a trace.

**The Down Below Group:** This gang operated at Ogbor-Hill (Waterside). They were professional assassins made up of boys and girls who lived in ghettos called York, terrorizing people. They also engaged in armed robbery, kidnapping, and territorial toll collection.

Data revealed that the nature of crime ranged from territorial toll collection, armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, ritual killing for spare human parts and intimidation of citizens. Respondents agreed that some of the leaders of the groups were Jango, Kwango, Egbelu, Ekenwe-Ohia, for Obohia and Ngwa road groups and Umuassimuo for all Ahia Ohuru. Then there was the king of kidnapers, Osisikankwu, who operated at banks, kidnapped top government officials and high-profile people in Aba and Umuahia.

Augustine Eze argued that kidnapping was conducted in the presence of security personnel without any intervention. The following routes: Aba-Owerri, Aba-Umuahia and Aba-Ikot-Ekpenne roads became insecure. Armed robbers terrorized every nook and cranny of Aba. Ogor Hill, Ngwa Road, Abayi Road, and Port-Harcourt roads were hotbeds. People's houses and banks had their walls blown up, girls were taken forcefully and impregnated and their babies sold out to prospective buyers who needed babies to fulfil their marriages and those for ritual purposes. Anyaele, Ijioma and Onyeanu (2017) blamed everything on bad governance and there was an urgent need to bring the law to bear on the various criminal elements that operated in the city.

### **Consequences of the criminal activities of the Gangs**

Data revealed that Aba was divided into territorial toll zones by hardened criminals who collected tolls from landlords and residents. They mounted checkpoints for tolls on the roads, while others had control over motor parks and operated without police intervention. The gangs exhibited various levels of authority and power that defied government control and people were subjected to all manner of dehumanization (Eze and Eze, 2017). The respondents believed that gruesome murders and kidnappings were probably sponsored by highly placed individuals who were protected by law enforcement agents and anyone who reported them with evidence became the accused. Murder for rituals was widespread; people got missing on daily basis without a trace; mutilated bodies often littered everywhere and nobody hunted down the perpetrators. Armed robbery increased and criminals used sophisticated weapons to attack banks which led to the strike by bank workers. The criminals controlled almost all activities in the Ariara market and every form of lawlessness reached unprecedented height (Onyeziri, 2017). Thus, insecurity reigned.

Research shows that the most prominent gang known mafia created fear in its territory and this affected normal life in the city including the safety of traders from all over the country and from West and Central African countries who come to transact businesses in the Ariara market. Kalu (2017) argued that the Amalgamated Traders Association in Aba estimated that

about 200 of their people were killed by armed robbers within this period as firearms were carried freely which also motivated many adults to procure guns to defend themselves against criminals. All these affected economic activities in Aba and its environs ((Onyeziri, 2017); Anyaele, Ijioma and Onyeonu, 2017).

### **Strategies for combating the criminal activities**

Good governance and crime prevention and control are fundamental to peaceful societies because they promote progress. Also, the security architecture of a particular area must recognize the nature of the area and the type of crime to be expected. With this consideration, attempts were made to adopt a non-conventional security outfit that would add spiritual intelligence to the existing conventional approach of policing, (Nwolise 2012); Therefore, Bakassi Boys were given the mandate to eradicate this menace from the city. Respondents agreed that there was an agreement between the State Government; local government chairmen in Aba, owners of the business, the landlords and the police, which supported the complementary role of the Bakassi Boys.

This security outfit was established in 1998 by traders in southeastern Nigeria cities to safeguard their investments and the lives of residents from criminals (SAS 2005; WAR 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2000). With the legal backing given by the government of Abia and Anambra states, traders mobilized to hunt down the perpetrators of the murder of a pregnant woman near Ariara market of giving the Bakassi Boys the necessary resources to hunt down the criminals and their accomplices. Many of them were arrested in their hometowns and villages.

Bomboi Iromakwe, a Bakassi Security personnel, argued that:

We acted according to the directives of the spiritual intelligence on our machetes, which drove us towards criminals who confessed without torture; those who were tortured had highly spiritual powers that defied the lower order. Therefore, physical torture forced them to yield just as the formal police apply physical torture on hardened criminals to extract a confession. The machete was the symbol of power and the colour red identified criminals in society. With this, our job was made easier.

This strategy showed significant results as many suspects were identified, rounded up, interrogated and punished or handed over to the police for appropriate punishment. Some police personnel proven to be culpable were given the same justice as their civilian counterparts. The gangs were chased out of Aba; the parks were rescued from them and people could travel without molestations. The strategy corroborated the argument that the nature of crime determines the methodology for tackling it. Data revealed that when this revenge violence subsided, economic activities resumed and customers from Nigeria and outside the country returned to do business (CLEEN intervention in Aba, 2001. The Bakassi Boys collaborated with other formal security agencies to restore peace in Aba. Residents and visitors could move about without molestations and businesses including banks operated full scale once more. Lives and property became safer unlike when the criminals were in full control.

Despite these successes, there were reports of extrajudicial killings by the Bakassi Boys; arbitrary arrests, and torture of suspected criminals (HRW and CLEEN May 2002; Nigeriaworld, 2005). Also, in August 2005, Bakassi Boys were alleged to have rounded up thirty-seven suspected criminals in Aba, detained them in "illegal and poorly ventilated cells" and they were reported to have died (This Day, 30 August 2005; AFP 16 August 2005). Another incident occurred in November 2005, when the Bakassi Boys were alleged to have engaged in the extrajudicial murder of twenty people in Aba (Vanguard 18 November 2005). They were other issues concerning their being used by politicians to destroy political enemies which made the outfit unpopular. These were the sore parts of their performance.

Data revealed that the second strategy involved intelligence gathering; the officers, the police and Bakassi Boys, were in constant touch with those on patrol. This strategy ensured that every nook and cranny of Aba was monitored and personnel were constantly transferred to prevent being compromised by criminals who wanted protection from the law. This strategy enabled the police to monitor the City's environs with their civilian counterparts. This strategy helped the police to foil the kidnap of a businessman, Kalu Deno Hansond, along Umuocham road. The kidnapers had abducted the man and dumped him at the back of his Volkswagen

Torres SUV, but civilian intelligence personnel alerted the police and on sighting the police van, the kidnapers abandoned the vehicle and fled. (Sunday Vanguard, 2017). The study thus established that the initiative was result-oriented. Usman Dogo (Not real name) (2017) added that there has been a synergy between the police and the traditional rulers in Aba and its environs, and also with the Bakassi vigilante ensure security of lives and property which is the primary purpose of government.

The synergy between the police and Bakassi Boys and the traditional rulers in Aba and its environs, sponsored by the landlords, strengthened the relationship and yielded quicker results. Traditional rulers complemented the security agencies through the recruitment of the young and old in intelligence gathering in their various domains. Chief Umeorji, explains that the traditional rulers recruited the youths to comb kidnapers' dens and their armoury. There were also teams of spies set up by the traditional rulers in the four (4) local governments to monitor and detect signs of anti-social behaviour and then invite the police and the Bakassi to act. Policing became more collaborative as the criminals were dislodged from their hide-outs. Positive intelligence helped foil criminal plans.

The third strategy revealed that some special forces were posted to patrol major roads leading outside the city to Umuahia, Owerri, Port-Harcourt and Ikot-Ekpene-Uyo -Calabar axis, and prevented re-entry of criminals into the city including those escaping from Aba and some of the security officers disguised as travellers. This strategy aborted kidnap and robbery attempts by vehicle owners and their accomplices. This was made possible by improved intelligence. A bank staff, David (2017) revealed that "Security was also reinforced around the banks and business malls. There was regular monitoring around motor parks, churches and even other institutions such as market centres and recreational facilities."

Data finally established that the Government initiated empowerment schemes for youths to discourage crime. They were shoe-making, graphic designing, drama and film making, music talent hunt programmes and workshops to promote productivity and discourage crime.

## **Conclusion**

Data revealed that crime control and prevention in urban centres has come with a lot of challenges; therefore, innovative strategies for combating them are required to forestall anarchy in Aba, southeastern Nigeria between 1999 and 2010. Several factors were responsible for the reign of criminality in the city. Firstly, the study showed that the neglect of the Port-Harcourt and Calabar ports forced importers and exporters from the Eastern Region to relocate to Lagos ports of Apapa and Tin Can and this rendered several youths redundant. Unemployment exposed them to crime. The study further revealed that bad governance impoverished the lives of citizens while politicians lived ostentatious lifestyles. Findings further established that poverty and frustration led to armed robbery, kidnapping, territorial toll collection, ritual induced crime, rape and many others conducted by Ngwa Road boys, PDP Boys (Omuma Road Branch), the Park Boys and the Down Below group.

All these were corroborated by respondents. The study revealed that the consequences of their activities resulted in insecurity. There was an atmosphere of fear, widespread murder of people, incessant rapes of women and deprivation of rights to personal property, and poverty. However, the synergy between the police, Bakassi Boys and the traditional institutions restored peace and security through effective and efficient intelligence. Finally, the government of Abia State provided skill acquisition centres to equip the youth to stay away from crime.

## **Recommendations**

Considering the sensitive nature of the causes and consequences of the high incidence of criminality in Aba during the period investigated, the study recommends that the two ports in Eastern Nigeria should be brought back to life to revive economic growth and employment. This must be supported by good governance and equip the police and its sister agencies adequately. There should also be a well-detailed synergy between conventional and non-conventional approaches to crime control and prevention. Finally, effective and efficient intelligence gathering should be made a priority in fighting crime.

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