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Abstract When Nigeria confirmed its first COVID-19 case on February 27, 2020, the government deployed the military to enforce movement restrictions and public compliance measures. With an extensive presence in domestic security operations across multiple states, redeployment required minimal effort. While some new operations were established, many overlapped with existing deployments. Two new regulations expanded the powers of security agencies, further integrating the military into the national pandemic response. This chapter examines the securitisation of Nigeria's response to COVID-19, focusing on the military's role in enforcement and crisis management.

1 Introduction

The principal mandate of the Nigerian armed forces is to defend Nigeria against external threats and aggression to ensure that external forces do not breach the country's territorial integrity. Nigeria's armed forces consist of three branches: the army, the air force, and a naval unit. The three branches together employ over 223,000 personnel, with the army accounting for more than two-thirds of this total (Macrotrends 2022). The figures represent a 137 percent increase from 2003 when the combined forces had 94,000 personnel (Gbor 2003, 61). The increase points to two indicators: a growing demand for the armed forces to counter the increasing and worsening security situation in Nigeria, and the lack of a reserve force that the state can readily call upon in times of emergencies. Nevertheless, due to high levels of youth unemployment and the prestige and status attached to military service in Nigeria, the armed forces always attract a pool of candidates, often exceeding the numbers needed, whenever the institution is recruiting.

On February 27, 2020, Nigeria confirmed its first case of COVID-19, two days after the arrival of a traveller from Milan, Italy. Two months later, the infection rate

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had soared, and the country had about 2,000 confirmed cases. This created both panic and a health crisis because the demand for isolation centres and treatment facilities was high and further strained the already poorly maintained, decaying, and ineffective Nigerian health infrastructure (Aborisade 2021). To reduce the spread of the virus, the national and subnational governments put in place containment measures such as social and physical distancing and the use of face masks in public places. However, the level of compliance was negligible. The government also put in place more stringent measures such as isolation and quarantining of infected patients, contact tracing, the imposition of widespread inter-state travel restrictions, and the subsequent closure of international borders (Ibekwe and Adebayo 2020). The government further strengthened containment measures by, for instance, closing market squares, a majority of which are busy market stalls, but this led to public criticism, condemnation, and controversies.

Critics argued that the government was inconsiderate and failed to ameliorate the suffering of most Nigerians who must work daily to earn income to pay for their upkeep. The critics further argued that shutting down the markets without offering any monetary support would only worsen the living conditions of the poor (Chidume et al. 2021). When the national government allocated food assistance as palliatives to subnational governments across the country, some chose to hoard or delay its distribution rather than promptly distributing it. This provoked public anger, leading hungry citizens to break into and loot warehouses where the food was stored (Akinyemi et al. 2020).

Similar reactions followed the directive that all social events were to be banned, including religious and cultural gatherings such as funerals and wedding ceremonies. Conspiracy theories, civil disobedience, and in some instances demonstrations and protests followed the imposition of this measure (Anyanwu et al. 2020). In Plateau State, for instance, popular Islamic cleric Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir and his followers staged a protest demonstrating against the state government's lockdown measures over what he considered to be Western deceit and a conspiracy against Muslims.

Passive resistance and disregard for the protocols compelled the government to deploy the military to enforce compliance and to ensure public orderliness and adherence to all the prescribed containment measures. However, this deployment raised numerous concerns, key among which was the heavy-handedness that has become the norm for Nigerian military actions (Gulleng and Musa 2020). Other concerns included the abuse and violation of civilians' human rights and an "extortion bazaar" of commuters (i.e., bribes demanded of motorists, especially those flouting the presidential order) on main highways (Musa 2021; Ibekwe and Adebayo 2020).

2 Domestic Operations

2.1 *Constitutional and Legislative Framework*

Although using the military within Nigeria leads to numerous challenges for the government, Section 217 (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) makes provision for the internal deployment of the military where the need arises. It stipulates the purpose of the military as:

- (a) defending Nigeria from external aggression; (b) maintaining its territorial integrity and securing its borders from violation on land, sea, or air; (c) suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President, but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly; (d) performance of such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly (Federal Government of Nigeria 1999).

In addition to this statute, Section 8 (3) of the Armed Forces Act 2004 provides an additional mandate for the operational use of the armed forces “for the purpose of maintaining and securing public safety and public order” (Federal Government of Nigeria 2004). The government often relies on this statute when it wants to deploy the armed forces internally to counter a breach of security (Peterside 2014).

In terms of civil oversight, section 217 (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [CFRN] (as amended) legitimizes the internal deployment of the military when needed, and section 218 grants the president the authority to authorize such deployment. As the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the president determines the military’s operational use. To ensure checks and balances and prevent abuse of this power, subsection 4 of section 218 gives the National Assembly parliamentary oversight for any military deployment. This oversight requires that the National Assembly make laws that regulate the president’s power when the president is acting as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Essentially, while the president has the mandate to authorize military deployment, the legislature controls its operational use (Arowosegbe and Akomolafe 2016, 5).

2.2 *Deployment in Domestic Roles*

Since the country’s independence in 1960 and beginning with its first deployment that year, the Nigerian military has frequently played a significant domestic role. The military is readily available for political elites to use to execute various tasks in times of crisis or during civil disputes. At least 46 deployments have taken place since the Cold War, on top of another 17 before this period. Publicly available records indicate that the military has been deployed internally for numerous operations, including suppressing protests and demonstrations and containing civil disputes and conflicts.

It has been common practice for both civilian governments and military dictators who have usurped political power in the past to deploy the Nigerian military domestically. My analysis of these deployments shows that the military has been used to respond to several categories of domestic issues involving: (1) protests, demonstrations, and civil actions; (2) criminality and violent conflicts (ethnic, political unrest, resource conflict, communal violence, and criminality including banditry); (3) natural disaster relief efforts; (4) electoral duties; and (5) in response to insurgencies and rebellion.

Domestic deployments in Nigeria have varied in approach. In some instances, the military has been deployed on a short-term basis to respond to public order emergencies, quelling protests, demonstrations, or riots without maintaining a long-term presence at the locations involved. More commonly, military operations are authorized for brief, short-term, and medium—to long-term deployments, depending on the nature of the security problem and the ability of the state to resolve the conflicts or security incidents. A notable example is Operation Safe Haven, the over 11-year military deployment responding to violent conflicts and attacks in Plateau State. These extended deployments not only militarize the state but have also led to the military being labelled “armies of occupation” (Dode 2012, 416).

Despite the variations, there is a discernible pattern in the type of operations conducted. For instance, a thorough examination of the deployments reveals that numerous operations had no codenames. Typical among these is the deployment resulting in the massacre at the #ENDSARS protest in October 2020 and the deployment to address the Ali Must Go University Students’ Protest of 1971. Such deployments are quick, repressive, and meant to quell civil actions or uprisings and disperse protesters or demonstrators. These operations are rarely named because they generally do not last long and may not have followed the various legal requirements. Odoemene (2012, 234–235) described such deployments in Ogoniland in the Niger Delta as “assuming the form of direct repression using military and mobile police personnel (popularly known as ‘Kill and Go’ operations) ... to do ‘whatever it would take.’” Notably, in 1977, celebrated Nigerian musical activist Fela Kuti recorded and released the song “Sorrow, Tears and Blood” in which he rightly described the quick, short-term pattern of domestic military deployments in this capacity.

Given the government’s penchant to often deploy the military “to do whatever it takes” to disperse protests and demonstrations and to suppress conflicts, tracking the different short-term deployments and determining the authorization and the terms of reference of such operations is immensely difficult. In some cases, the military’s instantaneous, short-term deployment means there has been no established formal authorization for that deployment beyond a verbal order to move in, use force, and then leave the scene immediately. Such deployments raise numerous challenges, among which are violations of the legal provision for deployment and complications for the institutionally sanctioned criminal justice procedures (given that the military does not form part of the criminal justice system). Even more challenging is the instantaneous, short-term, and arbitrary nature of the deployments without any clear rules of engagement to juxtapose military actions with applicable terms of reference (Musa 2018, 137).

Since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999, the internal deployment of the military has increased in most parts of the country, particularly between 2015 and 2018. The European Asylum Support Office (2018, 19) noted that "in 2017 and 2018, several security operations were launched, while others already underway were continued by Nigerian security forces." While criminality and insecurity in the country appear to be on the increase, more relevant is the fact that the Nigerian military has become a major player in the domestic security architecture of the state. Musa (2021, 118) succinctly noted this when he remarked that "from the Niger River and across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, military checkpoints are an unmistakable presence, albeit a complex hub of corruption."

Between 2015 and 2020, the Nigerian military conducted over 40 domestic security operations in over 30 of Nigeria's 36 states (Mac-Leva 2020; Iroegbu 2016; Ogunidipe 2016). Many of these deployments are still active today. Beyond responding to insecurity, civil actions, and protests, the military has also been deployed in disaster relief efforts. For instance, in 2003, the military supported relief efforts in response to the overflow of the River Kaduna in Kaduna State. Similarly, the Nigerian Navy provided disaster relief in Rivers State in 2022, transporting flood victims and distributing relief materials. The Nigerian military's disaster response units primarily support natural disaster emergency relief efforts.

In 2014 the government deployed the military to help respond to the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa. As Kwaja et al. (2021) noted, the military helped manage the Ebola crisis in numerous ways, including maintaining security, supporting the provision of health services, and providing logistics support for the emergency response. This included fostering security and peace, ensuring that they were maintained during the emergency period and supporting the provision of health services and the provision of logistics support for the emergency response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the military again played a central role, maintaining law and order and ensuring a strong presence on busy streets, major roads, and highways (Ibekwe and Adebayo 2020). However, these frequent domestic deployments have created significant challenges. The military's operational capacity, particularly that of the army, has been overstretched due to the high demand for personnel. Soldiers often face extended missions without leave, beyond the regular 6 to 12 consecutive-month deployment period. This overstretch is further compounded by a lack of equipment as limited military infrastructure must be distributed across various missions based on operational requirements.

One illustration of the extent of overstretched of manpower and the dearth of equipment is the numerous recorded instances of desertion by soldiers in the war against Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria (Onuoha et al. 2020). Further, the insurgents have overrun many military formations, prompting the military to resort to using a "supercamp" formation strategy in which small units are merged into central formations with more manpower and equipment to reduce fatality levels and the loss of equipment and so they can withstand attacks from armed opposition groups (Zenn 2021). However, the super camp strategy has made small civilian communities vulnerable to attack; many have been attacked and easily overrun by armed groups, prompting many to seek shelter in garrison towns as internally displaced persons.

Similar to the terrorist insurgency in northeast Nigeria, the Nigeria Police Force and its specialized armed unit, the Police Mobile Force, have historically been overwhelmed by the scale and scope of security incidents and the breakdown of law and order in the country (Dambazau 2014). The ability of the police to secure the nation has been undermined by high-levels of corruption and extortion within the service, inadequate policing equipment, poorly trained personnel, and a fractured relationship with citizens (Musa 2018; Hills 2008). Consequently, the government has often relied on the military to support or even lead efforts to restore internal security during violent outbreaks.

As previously noted, the domestic deployment of the military is routine in Nigeria, with the military rarely hesitating to comply with directives, even when those directives lack constitutional authority. This reflects a cooperative relationship between the military and political elites, highlighting a failure of the military to question illegitimate orders from political leaders. However, the nature of these deployments has been a subject of debate and criticism. Critics have raised concerns about the legality of these directives, particularly regarding compliance with constitutional and legal standards. This raises questions about the proper oversight and accountability of military actions, an issue that will be further examined in the civil oversight and accountability section.

3 Military Deployment During COVID-19

3.1 Coordination of the COVID-19 Response

The discovery of the first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the subsequent community transmission of the virus throughout the country was met with differing public reactions and resistance to the government-imposed preventive regulations. To keep the public informed about the government's effort to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the virus, on March 17, 2020, President Muhammadu Buhari established the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF) to coordinate, lead, and oversee Nigeria's multi-sectoral, inter-governmental efforts. The secretary of the government of the federation chaired the committee. Its key mandate was to coordinate and maintain oversight of all COVID-related matters.

In addition to the PTF, the National Emergency Operations Centre at the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control led the public health response and collaborated with and supported the response efforts of the different Nigerian states. The PTF acted as the lead and decision-maker on all COVID matters, while also offering the president recommendations for ratification and public communication. The relationship and interaction between these key bodies was cordial while the task force lasted.

3.2 *Roles of the Military*

When COVID-19 was first reported the government needed to enforce more controls on people's movements and public compliance. With the measures it enacted, it turned to the military, which needed little effort to mobilize. The military continued to provide security and enforce restrictions in the areas where it was already operating. The only new military operation was established in the nation's capital, Abuja. In states with an existing military presence, operations overlapped with current ones. The national government further legitimized the containment measures, including curfews and movement restrictions, by enacting two new regulations to empower the security agencies. The COVID-19 Regulations, 2020, were enacted under the president's authority granted by Sects. 2, 3 and 4 of the Quarantine Act. Later, the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Health Protection Regulations 2021 was also enacted.

In several states where the Nigerian military was deployed internally, soldiers took over security management duties, particularly by enforcing curfews and restricting movements. The military was also crucial in enforcing the ban on all trading activities in open markets and social gatherings, a task that would have quickly overwhelmed the Nigerian Police. Ordinarily, such tasks are a deviation from the conventional notion of security in which the police are the domestic specialists, and the military focuses on the traditional function of defence (Reiner 1992; Weiss 2011), thereby securitizing the pandemic (Musa 2021).

Besides law enforcement tasks, components of the armed forces also provided appreciable support to the government's response and management effort. The military implemented a multifaceted response to the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing critical areas such as logistics and enforcement, public health infrastructure, public awareness, and research and development. This comprehensive approach was crucial in mitigating the impact of the pandemic and it demonstrated the military's capability to adapt and support public health emergencies effectively.

During the pandemic, the Nigerian military played a crucial role in the COVID-19 response, particularly logistics and enforcement. This role was made possible in part by the Ministry of Defence Health Implementation Programme (MODHIP), originally established in 2005 to address HIV/AIDS within the military (Lee et al. 2023). In March 2020, MODHIP set up a COVID-19 public health emergency operations centre (PHEOC) to coordinate efforts in testing, surveillance, case management, risk communication, and logistics.

The Nigerian Air Force provided a vital service in airlifting medical supplies and equipment within Nigeria and to other West African countries. This logistical support addressed the challenges of inadequate healthcare infrastructure and ensured that frontline healthcare workers received essential supplies promptly.

The Nigerian military enforced lockdown measures, helping to limit the spread of the virus. It also enhanced the country's public health infrastructure. MODHIP reconfigured the military labs for SARS-CoV-2 testing and designated specific military hospitals as COVID-19 treatment centres (Ayemoba et al. 2022). Over 220 military medics were deployed to support the healthcare system, helping to address

the shortage of healthcare workers. Infection prevention and control measures were implemented across military formations, with surveillance systems established at facility entrances to prevent individuals infected with COVID-19 from spreading the virus to active personnel. These measures helped in the early detection and isolation of cases, curbing the virus's spread within military and civilian populations.

The military also contributed significantly to public awareness of COVID-19. MODHIP conducted awareness campaigns to educate the public on preventive measures like hand hygiene, mask-wearing, and social distancing. These campaigns were crucial in informing the public and encouraging compliance with health guidelines. Additionally, military personnel were trained on effective community engagement and health education, ensuring they could disseminate accurate information and engage with communities effectively.

Research and development were central to the Nigerian military's COVID-19 strategy. MODHIP's research pillar played a key role in forecasting the pandemic's trajectory and guiding response activities (Ayemoba et al. 2022). The program developed research proposals for validating antigen-based SARS-CoV-2 rapid test kits and conducting COVID-19 seroprevalence studies, which were crucial in understanding the virus's spread and developing mitigation strategies. MODHIP's Clinical Research Centre was selected as a Tier 1 site of the Africa CDC Consortium for COVID-19 Vaccine Clinical Trials, collaborating with various partners to study vaccine efficacy and safety. Insights from these studies contributed to the broader understanding of COVID-19 and informed vaccine development and distribution.

Despite these commendable efforts, the Nigerian military faced several challenges in its COVID-19 response. It lacked a dedicated military public health emergency response plan and emergency funds, and cooperation from different military hierarchies was suboptimal (Ayemoba et al. 2022). In addition, the enforcement of lockdown measures posed further significant challenges.

3.3 Readiness and Effectiveness

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the effectiveness and readiness of the Nigerian military, primarily by reorienting their focus towards public health response and introducing new operational challenges (Yanet et al. 2022). The most significant impact was the redirecting of traditional combat roles to support public health. For example, the military was tasked with airlifting medical equipment and supplies, healthcare professionals, and distributing oxygen and other relief materials, which placed a strain on the military.

Significant redirection of military resources towards the public health response undoubtedly influenced the availability and nature of military deployments during the pandemic (Owonikoko 2021). The redirection of resources and personnel to the COVID-19 response impacted critical military operations such as the counterinsurgency in northeast and domestic operations in the northwest and northcentral regions (Iweze 2020). The Nigerian military faced the challenge of sustaining pressure on

non-state armed actors such as dealing with the deadly actions of Boko Haram on the one hand and dealing with the public health insecurity on the other. As a result, Boko Haram and its affiliates exploited the diversion of military efforts toward lockdown enforcement and the resulting decline in counterinsurgency manpower to intensify civilian abductions and bolster fighter recruitment and training (Iweze 2020). The group expanded its ranks and renewed offensives against both military units and civilian communities, resulting in increased ambushes and fatalities among security forces. A notable incident occurred on March 21, 2020, when officers and more than fifty personnel were attacked en route to Alagarno Forest in Borno State, underscoring the insurgents' exploitation of this gap.

In terms of the impact on readiness and training, like most militaries, the need to enforce physical distancing, meant that many ongoing military training programs were suspended, leave passes suspended, and parades were limited in size. This likely affected routine training schedules and skill development. The precise number of Nigerian military personnel affected by COVID-19 that directly prevented their deployment on traditional missions are not widely publicized. However, the impact on ongoing domestic missions were apparent.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered the operational landscape for the Nigerian military. While it presented challenges related to training and resource allocation, it also highlighted the military's adaptability, its capacity to contribute to national health security, and the critical need for robust public health preparedness and strong civil-military cooperation in the face of widespread crises. Thus, while the crisis revealed some challenges, lessons derived from this period should inform efforts to enhance the synergy between defence and public health institutions in anticipation of future systemic shocks.

4 Civil-Military Relations

4.1 *Securitization of the Pandemic*

Securitization is the process of framing an issue as a security threat, using specific tools and strategies to shape public perception (Rychnovská 2014; Balzacq 2011). A "securitizing actor"—such as a government or leader—employs metaphors, policy tools, stereotypes, and emotional appeals to highlight a "referent object's" vulnerability, whether it be national security, public health, or the environment. This framing convinces the public that the issue poses a critical, immediate threat, justifying the need for urgent policy action.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria was securitized, framing the health crisis as an existential threat necessitating extraordinary measures. The government swiftly implemented a nationwide lockdown and established the PTF on COVID-19, which coordinated response efforts, including the deployment of the military. These actions bypassed normal political processes, reflecting the securitization approach. With its

deployment to respond to COVID-19, the military became even more stretched, and criminal enterprises, including terror groups like Boko Haram, exploited this opportunity. Boko Haram spread false information about the virus, condemned public health measures, and used its influence in areas with weak government control to disrupt health care efforts, thereby worsening the impact of the pandemic (Bukarti 2020).

The pandemic also destabilized Nigeria's security structure, leading to increased crime rates, including armed robbery, especially during lockdowns. Boko Haram further exploited the situation by recruiting new members from the economically vulnerable, specifically those left jobless by the pandemic's fallout. The diversion of military attention and the ensuing rise in criminal activities highlighted the complex challenges of relying on the military to manage a public health crisis.

4.2 Civilian Oversight and Accountability

A robust framework of civil oversight and accountability is essential. In Nigeria, the judiciary plays a crucial role in maintaining checks and balances on the deployment of the military. It subjects the legislative powers and functions, including laws enacted on military deployment, to effective oversight (Aluko 2015). The judiciary has the authority to adjudicate cases involving the military, including human rights abuses and unlawful conduct. Courts-martial and military tribunals operate under judicial oversight to ensure due process and adherence to legal standards. Although Nigeria has a legal framework designed to ensure checks and balances on military deployment, in practice loopholes exist. The president can deviate from constitutional requirements, and the legislature can fail to exercise its mandate when the executive contravenes established legal standards. Indeed, this was the case during the military's response to COVID-19 in Nigeria.

The lack of clear authorization for the military to assist or lead the enforcement of restrictions became a major issue. In his public address on March 29, 2020, President Buhari declared a lockdown curfew and a ban on all interstate and intercity travel, starting with Abuja, Lagos, and Ogun states. The president vaguely mentioned that the "heads of security and intelligence agencies have also been briefed" (Tunji 2020) without clarifying whether the military was included, the extent of its deployment, or its specific roles. Despite this lack of clarity, the coordinator of the military's Defence Media Operations held a press briefing announcing that the military would enforce movement restrictions across Nigeria. Major General John Eneche stated that the military was ready to implement the "directive given by President Buhari during his address to the Nation on the COVID-19 pandemic" (Ajibola 2020). This situation illustrates two key issues and two possible scenarios.

First, it highlights the ambiguity both in the chain of command and the scope of military involvement in internal security matters. Second, it underscores the potential for executive overreach and the necessity for more explicit legislative and judicial oversight to ensure that military deployment complies with constitutional and legal

standards. Addressing these concerns is essential if Nigeria is to maintain democratic governance and uphold the rule of law. Furthermore, despite numerous abuses and violations committed by soldiers enforcing lockdown restrictions, there was a complete absence of civil oversight of the military by the executive or the legislature during this period.

One possible scenario is that the military was never given any formal briefing or authorization to deploy and assumed any role in the effort to combat COVID-19. The choice of words (we (the military) are ready to enforce the COVID-19 lockdown in Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun in reaction to the president's address) is not a response to an invitation. As historical evidence shows, had the military been invited, it would have indicated its readiness by deploying immediately, as it has always done.

The second possible scenario is that the military was indeed briefed as part of the security agencies as the president noted. However, if it had been, it would have been most appropriate for the military coordinator to mention the briefing. On the contrary, the military's decision to act was hinged on the president's ambiguous political statement. The ambiguity and arbitrariness of the military's deployment as announced by the defence coordinator raise questions about both the legitimacy of the deployment and the authorization for it.

Besides the question of the legality of the military's deployment and the failure of both the executive and legislature to allay the fears and concerns of Nigerians over this ambiguity, a key challenge with the deployment pertains to the military's role. Clearly, the absence of any formal authorization meant that there were no applicable terms of reference or rules of engagement for the soldiers to follow during this period, and a lack of guidelines can foster military unprofessionalism, as discussed below. In states where the military already had an established presence before this deployment, a modification of the rules of engagement (if any were provided) would have been the minimum acceptable standard. The lack of formal authorization or rules of engagement had an impact on the military's image and on public opinion and further undercut the military's already eroded legitimacy.

4.3 Public Image of the Military

The military response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria was marred by its excessive use of force against civilians. Soldiers punished civilians who violated curfews and movement restrictions, often humiliating and degrading them. Medical workers, including doctors and nurses, were not spared. In Plateau State, for example, a taxi driver in Jos was severely beaten by soldiers from the Operation Safe Haven Special Task Force for breaching curfew hours. He died from the injuries he sustained in the incident. By the end of the first two weeks of the military enforcement of lockdowns, soldiers had killed 18 civilians, whereas the virus had claimed only 12 lives (Eboh et al. 2020). These actions were clear human rights violations, committed without recourse to the rule of law.

Corruption among soldiers was also recorded, with many taking advantage of their deployment to extort and coerce civilians, especially long-distance truck drivers performing essential duties. Soldiers at military checkpoints extorted commuters and truck drivers on essential duties (Ibekwe and Adebayo 2020). Despite having movement permits, truck drivers had to pay soldiers bribes to be allowed to continue their journeys. Commuters without permits faced even greater extortion (Musa 2021). This behaviour was widespread, indicating systemic problems within the military's internal operations during the lockdown. The extortion attracted public criticism of the military, further diminishing the already low esteem in which many Nigerians held it. The use of excessive force was rampant, continuing a pattern of such behaviour when dealing with civilians.

Friction between the military and government agencies was also evident. On June 13, 2020, soldiers harassed members of the Borno State Committee on the Prevention of the Spread of COVID-19. The committee had closed the Damaturu-Maiduguri Road so it could screen commuters, but the military convoy forced the gate open, bypassing the screening. This aggression resulted in one death, several injuries, and significant property damage. Soldiers even harassed police personnel attached to the unit.

The conduct of soldiers during internal security operations significantly affects public trust in and support for the military. In Nigeria, friction between the military and civilians or civilian agencies frequently arises during domestic deployments. Scholars attribute this to military culture, which contrasts sharply with civilian societal norms. Soldiers, accustomed to using force, often violate human rights as they try to impose compliance; they lack the persuasive communication skills that civilians value (Musa and Heineken 2022; Okros 2013; Esterhuysen 2013; Soeters et al. 2006).

Given this, the military's announcement that it was going to deploy and enforce COVID-19 restrictions sparked public consternation and debate. While some, including the Speaker of the House of Representatives, supported the deployment, human rights activists like Femi Falana opposed it, citing concerns about the legality of the deployment as it was not authorized by the president as required by law. The National Human Rights Commission also raised an alarm, labelling the military and police as the top violators of human rights during this period. The direct involvement of soldiers in administering punishments that led to the deaths of 18 Nigerians in the first two weeks of lockdown restrictions became a focal point of public outrage (Odigbo et al. 2020). Despite these harsh actions, perpetrators were rarely punished as the government often failed to hold the military accountable for unprofessional conduct. Even when the military indicated it would try the perpetrators according to military law, the victims or their families seldom received justice as the outcomes of military trials were rarely made public. Moreover, while the Air Force established an ombudsman in 2021, other branches did not have dedicated offices for such issues, leaving many complaints unaddressed.

The reputational damage to the military arising from rights abuses is significant. Many civilians perceive the Nigerian armed forces as a source of pain and suffering. Some have even labelled soldiers as monsters because of their disproportionate use of

force and human rights violations (Musa 2018). This unenviable reputation undermines the military's ability to succeed in domestic missions where a cooperative relationship with civilians is crucial. For instance, efforts at contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic were hindered by the military's aggressive image which made civilians reluctant to identify and isolate individuals who had contact with positive cases. Fear and panic among civilians when they encounter soldiers (Peterside 2014) complicate the military's role in internal security management. Additionally, some civilians refuse to cooperate with the military including by shielding, hiding, and denying security forces access to communities for lawful operations.

The disdain for the military and the reluctance to interact with it further complicated efforts to enforce interstate travel restrictions. Violators were not promptly identified, and for a long time, the government remained unaware of the alternative routes civilians used to evade detection. This facilitated the community's spread of the virus. Corruption and extortion by soldiers at checkpoints exacerbated the situation. In Plateau State, for example, the first COVID-19 case was a traveller who had violated interstate movement restrictions, leading to significant community spread, culminating in Plateau becoming among the top five Nigerian states with the highest number of COVID cases.

These actions all had implications for civil-military relations in Nigeria. The ambiguous nature of the deployment made it difficult to identify the resources earmarked for this effort. The quadrumvirate interaction theory (Musa 2024), which emphasizes the interplay between the military, government, and society, suggests that the military's excessive use of force and corruption during the COVID-19 response damaged public trust and cooperation. This erosion of trust complicates future internal security missions where civilian collaboration is crucial. Furthermore, the government's failure to hold the military accountable for its actions exacerbates the situation, reinforcing perceptions of impunity and undermining democratic governance.

5 Lessons Learnt

The Nigerian military maintains certain prerogatives over civilians and civilian institutions, typical among which is a high level of unquestioned impunity in what Stepan (1978, 101) describes as a situation of an "unequal civilian accommodation." The COVID-19 deployment has further emphasized to the public that the military operates as a law unto itself, without regard to established due processes. This view was reinforced following the military's violent conduct in the commuter screening disruption incident in Borno State. Similar conduct by soldiers continues to play out in different locations throughout Nigeria where the military is deployed for domestic operations—indicating that effective civil control of the armed forces is absent (Ojo 2006; Odoemene 2012).

The Nigerian government is failing to maintain effective parliamentary oversight over the military to ensure that it operates under constant checks and balances to

curtail its excesses. As a result, because the state is failing to hold the military accountable for the actions of its personnel—and for the institution’s behaviour generally—the civil liberty of civilians is neither well protected nor guaranteed. The right of the citizenry to demand justice and to protest ill treatment from government institutions has been stifled by the authoritarian actions of state institutions in Nigeria. As such, a recurring cycle of abuse and the violation of civilians’ human rights is likely to continue until the military is subjected to effective civil control and oversight (Ojo 2009).

Ultimately, the military’s attitude and behaviour and the inability of the state to guarantee justice to civilians both played a significant role in undermining the ability of the Nigerian government to immediately contain COVID-19 before it spread across the country. In states where soldiers took control of inter-state borders, their bribery and corruption encouraged desperate civilians to violate movement restrictions; civilians paid bribes to soldiers at checkpoints and interstate borders so they could violate the regulations with impunity. Such behaviour undermined Nigeria’s ability to curtail and prevent the circulation and community transmission and spread of the virus. In other instances, the heavy-handedness of the military discouraged civilians from providing useful information that could have ensured that non-formal entry points into different states were successfully controlled. Thus, it is apparent that while the military was deployed to enforce compliance with COVID-19 restrictions, rather than successfully achieving this, soldiers became a part of the problem and contributed to an increase in the community spread of the virus in Nigeria.

A conclusion from a previous study summarizes the problems with the military’s deployment to address the COVID-19 response in Nigeria: “there is a need for an improved civil control of the military, across the various arms of government. As the representatives of the people ... an improved parliamentary oversight by the National Assembly which is empowered to ensure the military complies with the regulations guiding its missions would improve compliance. This can also include making publicly available the military rules of engagement for every internal security operation in the country. The benefit of this is that it will improve accountability, ensure compliance, and serve as the standard by which to assess the performance and activities of personnel deployed” (Musa 2018, 174).

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