



perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

NIGERIA

The implications of the escalation
in Abia





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Overview

Despite a court hearing scheduled for 17 October, the Nigerian Army, under the guise of a military exercise, went into Umuahia, the capital of Abia state in the country's South-East, in an attempt to get at Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of separatist group, the Indigenous People of Biafra.

The operation, which was disguised as a military exercise, Python Dance II, in the main part succeeded in creating chaos.

This report attempts to explain what should be expected next.

Legal implications

The Army's jumping of the gun in designating IPOB, a group with no generally known violent affiliations or organised militia capable of, or having carried out attacks, as a terrorist organisation, will set a precedent for the future where there will be other attempts to ignore existing laws, procedures and regulations – a situation which we had predicted in our 2017 outlook report in December 2016.

The Terrorism Protection Act specifically states that the chain for the declaration of a terrorist organisation is somewhere between the Office of the National Security Adviser, the Attorney General of the Federation, and the Inspector-General of Police. All three were ignored when the Army declared IPOB a terrorist group, and none of them were carried along when the governors of the South-East states, clearly under pressure, proscribed IPOB.

Where two or more persons associate for the purpose of or where an organisation engages in—

(a) Participating or collaborating in an act of terrorism;
(b) promoting, encouraging or exhorting others to commit an act of terrorism; or
(c) setting up or pursuing acts of terrorism, the judge in Chambers may on an application made by the Attorney General, National Security Adviser or Inspector General of Police on the approval of the President; declare any entity to be a proscribed organization and the notice should be published in official gazette.

(2) An order made under sub-section (1) of this section shall be published in the official gazette, in two National newspapers and at such other places as the judge in Chambers may determine.

Section 2 (1) and (2) of the Terrorism Protection Act 2011 as amended in 2013

The speed of IPOB's labelling as a terrorist organisation is also an interesting point to note. Nigeria and its security partner, the United States were famously reluctant to label Boko Haram, responsible for the loss of at least 20,000 lives since 2009, as a terrorist organisation until 2013, despite a concerted campaign that was waged by human rights advocates, American politicians and certain sections of the Nigerian public in the wake of the bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja in 2011. IPOB, according to multiple sources was registered in the United Kingdom in 2012 but only became a significant factor in the Nigerian political calculus in October 2015,

when its leader, dual British-Nigerian national Nnamdi Kanu was arrested by Nigerian authorities.

Despite the Chief of Army Staff Lt.-Gen. Tukur Burutai's statement on 18 September walking back on the inelegant declaration, the damage has been done and a precedent has been set.

A quick note must be made of the quick and timely intervention by the Senate President, Bukola Saraki.

In the interests of maintaining the balance of powers which all democracies routinely have to deal with as well as preserving hard won civic freedoms, the legislature's stated intent of not tolerating a situation where the military arrogates powers to itself unlawfully is a good step at reassuring a bewildered citizenry and worried investors.

The Army

The sequence of events around the stand-off reads like a guide on how not to run an operation in a civilian area. The army's use of Mine Resistant Armoured Vehicles in civilian areas has given fillip to human rights campaigners who continuously insist that the army has learned nothing, and is unwilling to improve on its poor human rights record. Its already poor reputation has taken a beating.

Then, the timeline of the designation of IPOB as a terrorist organisation shows a worrying lack of internal communications within the army hierarchy.

On Thursday, 14 September, 2017, the Army issued a statement which clearly mentioned that IPOB is an unarmed group. The next day, IPOB was declared a terrorist organisation, and then two days after, on the next working day, the COAS stepped down from that position in a tacit manner.

This begs the question about coordination within the military towards a common position, and brings up uncomfortable concerns that implications in active operations further afield.

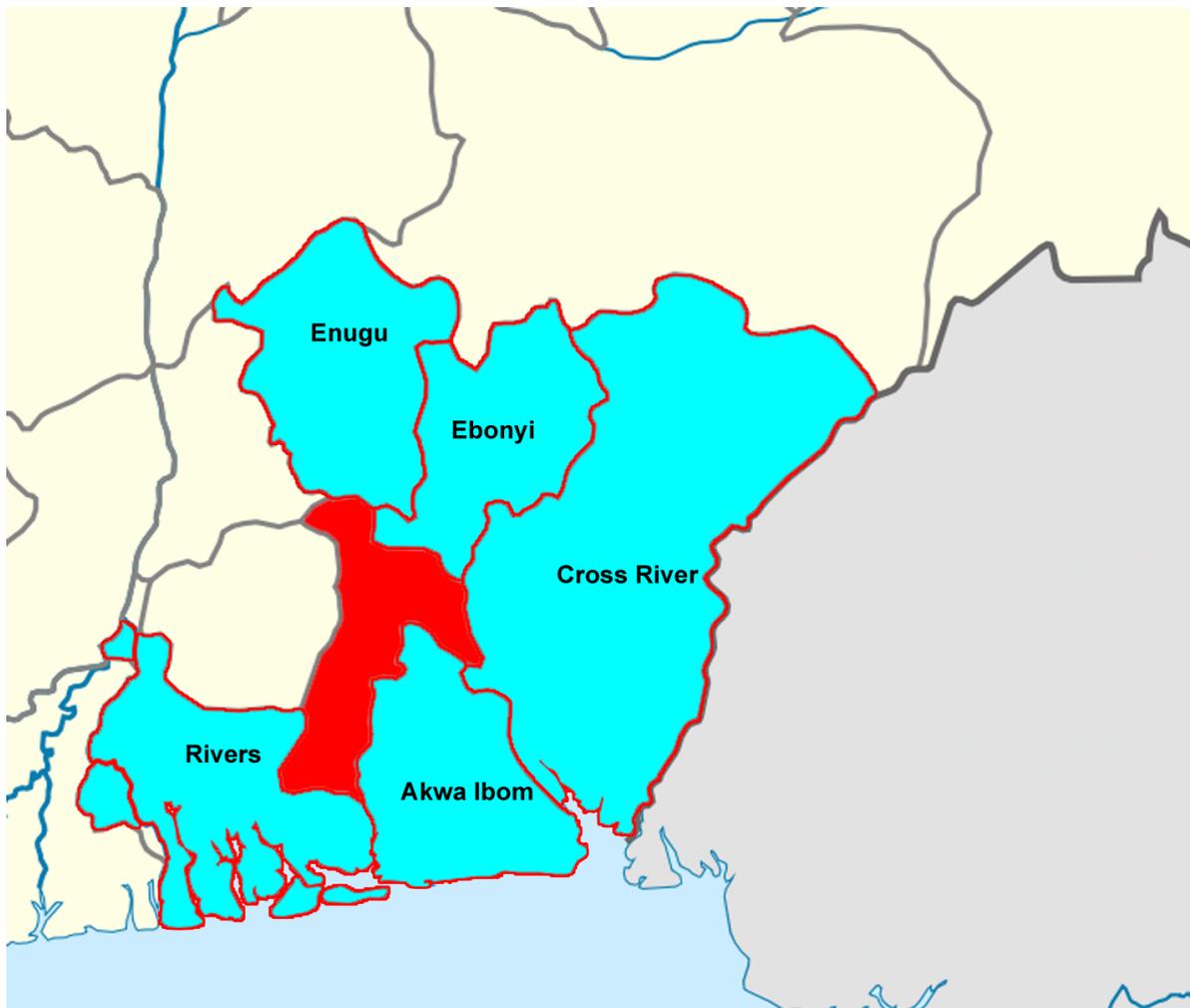
The operation has in practical terms driven IPOB underground. This is a dangerous state of affairs because it leaves the authorities in a diminished position to project what the separatists will do next – a less decent position for the intelligence and law enforcement services.

Questions that arise immediately include:

- Are IPOB members arming themselves?
- Will they go ahead with plans to disrupt the elections in Anambra state on November 8?
- Have they scattered to various locations across the country?

Economic implications

In practical terms these days, Abia is a crossroads state. It is almost impossible to transport goods between Rivers state and either of Enugu, Ebonyi, Cross River or Akwa Ibom, without passing through Abia. Passenger traffic between the littoral states of Rivers, Cross River, and Akwa Ibom, almost always entirely goes through Abia now. Many have now chosen to avoid Aba, and brave the traffic caused by the broken road through Onne. This has a real time effect in terms of cost, and ease, of business.



Map showing geographical location of Abia. Next map superimposes the road network

In Abia itself, the #MadelnAba initiative will have taken, at the very least, a hit in perception. Sources on the ground say that despite the relaxation of last week's curfew, businesses no longer remain open after dark in the Aba area. Some contacts also claim that many non-indigenes of the area, both of Northern Nigerian extraction or otherwise, have, for fear of possible attack by IPOB elements, either moved out, or have chosen to stay mostly indoors. All of these have an economic effect whose cost will only be calculated in future.



Map of major roads highlighting the importance of Abia as transit point

The economic implications go beyond Abia. This conflict will heighten Nigeria's country risk profile and in effect its credit rating, liveability rating and ease of doing business ranking.

Geopolitical implications

The immediate effect of last week's violence has been to reinforce the bunker mentality possessed by most Nigerians of Igbo ethnicity. Another unforeseen effect has been to pull the Anioma region of Delta state more into the Igbo orbit. Despite being closely related to the South-East Igbos ethnically, linguistically and geographically, the Anioma have in the past sought to assert their own unique identity. Saturday morning's attack in the Cable Point area of Asaba, Delta state, has awakened tribal sentiment and bound that region closer to their South-Eastern cousins. This is another unrest that the already restive Niger Delta can do without.

Yet another unplanned effect has been to emasculate the governors of the states in the South-East region. They have walked on eggshells in this conversation for a long time, and in the face of increasing frustration amongst their people. Their appearing to take the side of a federal government that is not loved across the region, will undermine their legitimacy among many of the frustrated young men in the region, and may, in the long run, do more harm than good.

However, a positive that has arisen is the stand taken by the primary Igbo cultural group, the Oha n'eze ndi Igbo. With the right handling, and dialogue rather than alienation, Oha n'eze could go forward, provide a medium for a real conversation between Abuja and the Igbos of Nigeria.