NIGERIA

Conflict dynamics and humanitarian implications in North East, North West, and North Central

acaps
Thematic Report
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ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim

This report provides an analytical overview of the escalating, complex, and interlinked violence occurring across Nigeria's North East, North West, and North Central geopolitical zones. It aims to support humanitarian and development decision-making by synthesising recent trends and using anticipatory analysis to highlight the likely implications of the crisis's intensification over the next six months, focusing on projected humanitarian needs, displacement dynamics, and access constraints.

Scope

This analysis focuses on key conflict dynamics observed across Nigeria's three major zones: the North East (NE), dominated by the Boko Haram and Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) insurgency; the North West (NW), characterised by widespread organised criminal banditry and kidnapping; and the North Central (NC), marked by ethno-communal tensions and herder-farmer conflicts. It is important to note that the concentration of available data often aligns with areas experiencing severe and prolonged violence, which may result in uneven visibility across zones. These crises overlap geographically and interact through displacement flows, illicit economies, and cross-regional armed group networks, highlighting the interconnected nature of crises across regions instead of viewing them in isolation.

Methodology

This analysis is based on an in-depth secondary review of open-source information, including reports from national and international media, government statements, and humanitarian organisation publications, synthesised with contextual knowledge. The ACAPS team assessed the contributing drivers of violence and escalating humanitarian needs to project how these dynamics might evolve and affect access, displacement, vulnerabilities, and likely short-term trajectories.

Limitations

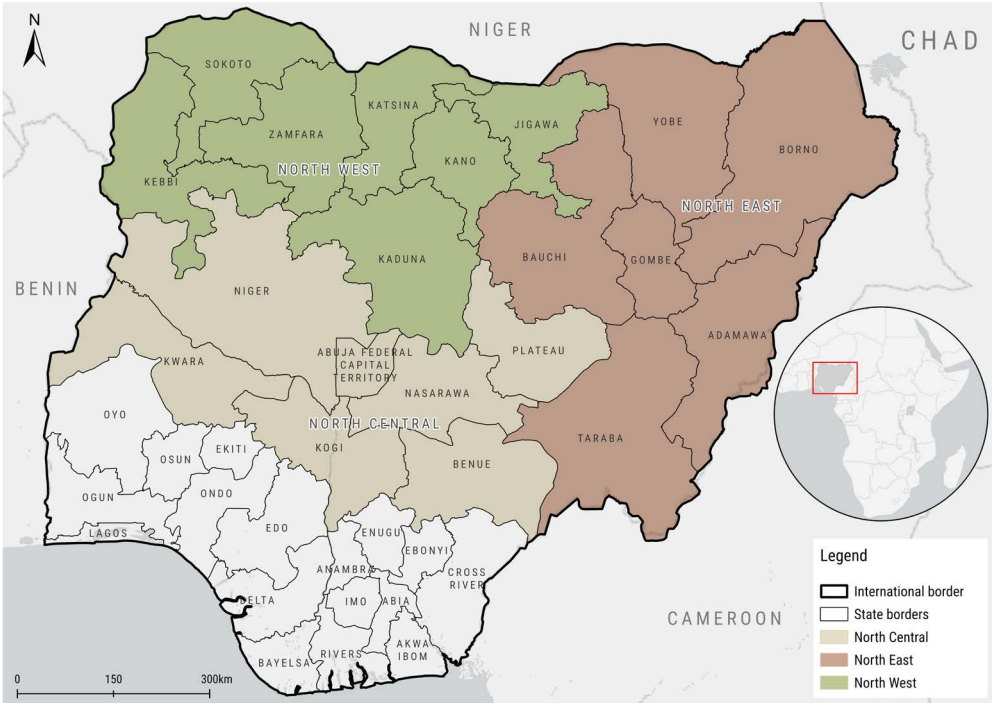
The outlook provided here is based on information available up until 7 November 2025, but unanticipated security or political events may rapidly alter the outcomes described. The capacity to assess the full scale of current and future humanitarian needs is also limited by persistent data gaps, restricted physical access to conflict-affected regions (particularly in the NW and NC), and the complexity of documenting hybrid conflict drivers.

Information gaps

- Information across northern Nigeria remains constrained, limiting full understanding of the conflict dynamics and humanitarian impacts. Several gaps persist.
- The attribution of incidents is difficult as armed groups operate across overlapping geographies (NW, NE, and NC).
- Many attacks occur in remote rural areas where monitoring is limited and underreporting is widespread.
- In the NW, kidnapping is so common that many survivors do not self-report, obscuring the true scale.
- The humanitarian response is heavily concentrated in the NE, leaving visibility gaps in terms of needs in other regions.
- In the Plateau and parts of Nasarawa states, the absence of humanitarian responders despite growing displacement leaves a significant gap in both response and data collection (ISS 26/06/2025).

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Map 1. Nigeria



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 02/11/2025)

Violence perpetrated by non-state armed groups (NSAGs) in Nigeria has reached its highest intensity in years, with civilian fatalities in the first half of 2025 already surpassing the entire death toll recorded in 2024 across the NW, NE, and NC regions, driven by insurgency, banditry, and intercommunal geopolitical zones (OCHA 23/01/2025; UNPFA 18/07/2025). This protracted crisis is rapidly straining state capacity and humanitarian resources. The scale of violence has intensified in 2025, with at least 2,266 people killed by NSAGs in the first half of the year, a significant rise compared to around 1,083 fatalities during the same period in 2024 and already surpassing the 2,194 recorded over the whole of 2024 (NHRC 07/07/2025; Reuters 08/07/2025; The Guardian 09/07/2025; Punch 09/07/2025). This surge in fatalities, coupled with continuing mass displacement (over 2.2 million in the NE, more than 650,300 in the NW, and nearly 601,700 in the NC by October 2025), points to a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation characterised by large-scale population movements, loss of livelihoods, and escalating food insecurity, which is expected to intensify during the upcoming dry season (NHRC 16/05/2025; Reuters 08/07/2025; IOM 06/10/2025; UNHCR 17/09/2025).

BACKGROUND

In the NW, rural banditry rooted in localised cattle theft and farmer-herder clashes escalated in 2011 in Zamfara into a more sophisticated and organised system of violence involving widespread cattle rustling, kidnappings, and community raids. By the mid-2010s, violence had spread across Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, and Sokoto states, as well as extending into parts of NC, driving displacement, kidnappings, and livelihood losses (ENACT 29/08/2024; Global Initiative 11/10/2024; IPI 22/05/2024).

In the NE, the Boko Haram insurgency – later splintered by the ISWAP – persists after more than 15 years, continuing to drive displacement and food insecurity. The area became a humanitarian hotspot after Boko Haram's emergence in 2009, with the crisis escalating in 2013–2014 as the group captured territory across the Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, instigating large humanitarian needs (BBC 08/09/2014; EUAA 10/2021; OCHA 23/01/2025).

In the NC region, long-standing farmer-herder tensions based on resource scarcity (land/water) have been worsened by climate change, rapid population growth, and ethnic and religious tensions, leading to a humanitarian crisis since 2013, particularly in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states. Rising competition over land and water, population growth, and the southward movement of herders have intensified clashes and displacement (Ajodo-Adebanjoko/Nwofor 21/07/2024; ICG 26/07/2018; IFPRI 03/06/2025; EUAA 02/2019).

The geographic expansion of violence and convergence of armed groups is the primary cross-regional trend. Banditry, which began as localised cattle rustling in the NW, has evolved into profit-driven criminal networks that now extend into NC states including Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau. This spillover is compounded by the south and westward spread of NSAGs (e.g. the Ansaru, Mahmuda faction, and possibly Islamic State affiliates) into NC states, illustrating the adoption of more diffuse tactics outside the traditional NE area (ADF 10/06/2025; ISS 01/06/2022). The resurgence of highly organised groups such as the Lakurawa (with cross-border operations into Niger and Mali) in the NW and NC zones further compounds the hybrid security environment (BBC 24/01/2025; LSE 27/01/2025). In the NE, ISWAP is consolidating control by adopting advanced tactics, including the use of small drones for reconnaissance and limited strikes, while establishing parallel governance systems in areas abandoned by the military's 'super-camp' strategy (ISPI 16/07/2025; ISS 11/09/2025).

Climate-induced migration and resource competition are accelerating the movement of herders southward, as diminishing grazing lands in the north push them further into the Middle Belt. This shift, compounded by displacement linked to Boko Haram violence, continues to heighten tensions and fuel cycles of conflict over land and resources (ICG accessed 15/10/2025; CGIAR 14/07/2025). Displacement flows are multidirectional: while the NE remains the epicentre with the majority of numbers, insecurity in the NW and NC zones is

driving new movements that compound vulnerabilities in transition areas such as Kaduna and Niger states. The entrenchment of illicit economies, parallel taxation, and fragmented governance reinforces NSAGs resilience, raising the risk of expanded humanitarian needs across a wider geographic area.

Table 1. Humanitarian and Socio-Demographic Overview of Nigeria's Northern Geopolitical Zones

INDICATOR	NORTH WEST	NORTH CENTRAL	NORTH EAST
Population (estimated)	Over 50 million (around 23% of the national population)	Around 20 million (about 11% of the national population)	Around 30 million (about 13% of the national population)
People in need	9.2 million	6.2 million	7.8 million (2025 projection for Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states)
Primary crisis type	Banditry	Farmer-herder conflict	Protracted armed conflict (Boko Haram, ISWAP, and NSAG insurgencies)
Main drivers	Farmer-herder conflict, criminal groups (bandits), cross-border illegal arms trade, environmental degradation/climate change (drought/floods), and high poverty rates	Resource scarcity (land/water) aggravated by climate change, rapid population growth, and ethnic/religious tensions (often overlapping)	NSAG activities, counter-insurgency operations, destruction of critical infrastructure, and climate change (floods/drought)
Key states affected	Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara	Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Plateau	Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe
Displacement (IDPs)	Over 650,300 (by October 2025)	Nearly 601,700 (by October 2025)	Approximately 2.2 million (by October 2025)
Dominant ethnic groups	Hausa, Fulani	Angas, Birom, Gwari, Idoma, Igala, Nupe, and Tiv, along with Hausa and Fulani minorities	Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, and Marghi
Religious breakdown	Predominantly Muslim, with minority Christian communities	Almost evenly split between Christian and Muslim communities	Predominantly Muslim, with significant Christian and traditional faith minorities

Sources: NPC (05/05/2020); City Population (accessed 06/10/2025); NWDC (accessed 06/10/2025); Nairaland (16/04/2024); State Department (24/06/2024); WB (12/11/2019); Infrastructure Dialogue (27/08/2025); Udosen (2018); CETRI (10/01/2012); OCHA (23/01/2025); FEWS NET (06/11/2014)

NORTH WEST NIGERIA

Map 2. North West Nigeria

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 02/11/2025)

Crisis overview

The rural banditry crisis in NW Nigeria has evolved from cattle rustling and localised resource disputes into a more organised system of violence and criminal governance. By the mid-2010s, bandit groups increasingly operated as criminal networks across Zamfara state, financing themselves through mass kidnappings, cattle theft, extortion, and armed robbery, accompanied by severe protection abuses including sexual violence (UNIDIR 31/07/2024; Rosenje et al. 05/07/2024).

The shift was driven by a combination of declining rural livelihoods, rising youth unemployment, and a limited state security presence, which created permissive spaces for bandit groups to consolidate control and impose parallel systems of taxation and authority. Beyond direct attacks, such groups impose informal taxation and curtail people's access to rural markets, farms, and roads, undermining livelihoods and limiting humanitarian access (Schouten/Barnett 19/08/2025; UNIDIR 31/07/2024; ICG 26/05/2021; DiA 24/08/2021; TNH 30/01/2023). These parallel systems of control both increase NSAG resource bases and make them harder to dislodge, perpetuating cycles of violence and dependence on NSAGs for security and livelihood access (UNIDIR 31/07/2024; ICG 26/05/2021; The Soufan Center 22/08/2025).

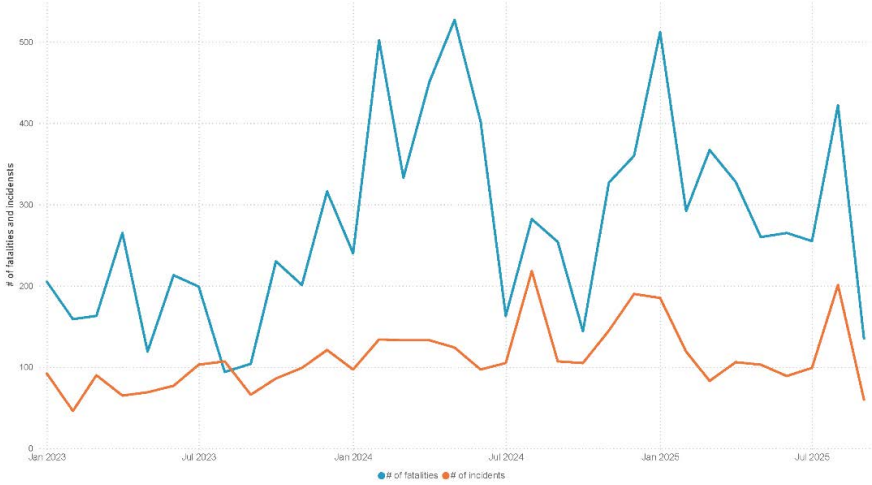
Household and state-level economic losses linked to banditry in the NW are substantial. In Katsina, maize farmers surveyed in 2022 reported that, compared with pre-banditry levels, their average household income had fallen by 30–40% and yields had declined by more than half (Ibrahim et al. 01/07/2024). Similarly, a 2023 survey in Zamfara found crop income per hectare had dropped by about 57% compared to production before the 2011–2018 escalation of violence (Ekpa et al. 29/04/2025; Nwankpa 01/10/2024). At the macro level, Zamfara's agrarian economy lost an estimated NGN 43 billion (USD 100 million) in potential agricultural revenue in 2022 alone. Farmers across the wider NW also paid roughly NGN 139.5 million (USD 96,996) in levies to NSAGs between 2020–2023, indicating how insecurity erodes livelihoods not only through lost production but also systematic extortion (BD 04/03/2024; Business Insider 04/03/2024; GI accessed 18/09/2025; SBM 03/2024).

By August 2025, nearly 30,000 bandits were operating across numerous loosely organised groups, varying from small gangs to formations of over a thousand fighters, taking advantage of the limited reach of state authorities (The Soufan Center 22/08/2025; ICG 26/05/2021). These dynamics create severe protection risks for civilians in the violence-concentrated states of Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara (ICRC 27/06/2023; Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 14/12/2021).

Key trends

The security situation in NW Nigeria between 2023–2025 demonstrates a geographically expanding and escalating trajectory of violence, primarily driven by banditry and mass-casualty attacks across the core flashpoints of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara states. Over this three-year span, the region recorded a total of 3,600 incidents leading to 9,380 fatalities, with violence peaking in 2024 (nearly 4,000 fatalities) before moderating slightly in 2025 (over 3,100 fatalities). This concentration of violence, particularly with Zamfara and Katsina accounting for nearly 57% fatalities (5,300), confirms that the protracted crisis remains one of Nigeria's most severe internal security and humanitarian challenges (ACLED accessed 22/10/2025; CFR 01/07/2023).

Figure 1. Fatalities in NW Nigeria 2023–2025



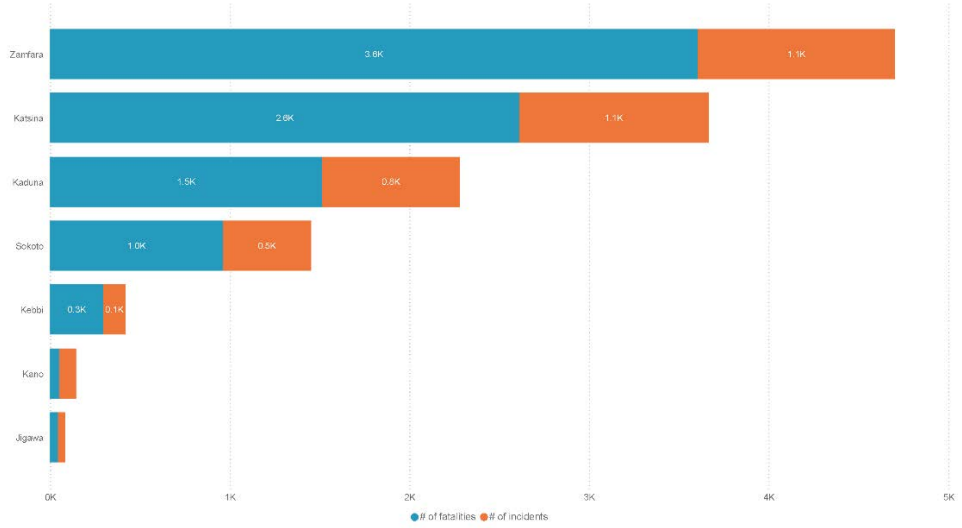
Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

Kidnapping incidents in NW Nigeria surged between 2023–2025, reaching a total of 716 recorded events. This criminal activity peaked in 2024 with 290 incidents, representing a nearly 50% increase from the 195 incidents recorded in 2023. This trend is overwhelmingly concentrated in the major banditry hotspots of Zamfara (230 incidents), Katsina (200 incidents), and Kaduna (156 incidents), highlighting the regional crisis fuelled by the lucrative kidnap-for-ransom economy. Proceeds from these abductions are increasingly used to finance further operations, procure arms, and enforce territorial control through fear, extortion, and coercion, entrenching a self-sustaining cycle of violence and insecurity across the NW (ACLED accessed 22/10/2025; Reuters 18/07/2025).

Displacement in NW Nigeria has remained consistently high since 2022, mirroring the escalation of armed banditry and widespread kidnappings. Between 2022–2023, displacement figures remained relatively stable before escalating significantly in 2024 and early 2025, indicating a shift from chronic crisis to one of rapid escalation. The substantial surge, reaching a three-year high of over 655,000 in March 2025 (around 20% higher than December 2023), reflects how intensifying violence is not only generating new displacement but also continuing to prevent returns and disrupting vital rural livelihoods (IOM 18/03/2025, 30/12/2024, and 15/11/2025).

A sustained increase in attack frequency means that communities face a constant and widespread threat, denying the safe windows needed for essential activities, such as farming, and fundamentally undermining the safety required for returns. The end of the rainy season, October–December, improves forest and road terrain, granting bandit groups increased operational mobility to launch attacks using motorcycles. Crucially, this period follows the harvest season, allowing NSAGs to replenish stockpiles by intensifying raids for looted grains, livestock, and ransoms before the long dry season, thereby directly driving displacement. The rainy season often constrains armed and illicit operations by flooding routes and isolating rural communities, yet attacks during this period disrupt planting and harvesting cycles, compounding livelihood losses. These alternating dynamics reflect a predictable seasonal rhythm of violence in which shifts in mobility and agricultural activity shape both the timing and intensity of attacks (ICG 18/05/2020). The threat of NSAGs in the NW has evolved beyond traditional strongholds, indicating a significant spillover of violence into neighbouring states and across international borders. The resurgence of Lakurawa, an armed group active in Sokoto and Kebbi states with cross-border operations into Niger and Mali, has contributed to worsening insecurity in the NW (AJ 10/01/2025; BBC 24/01/2025; HumAngle 21/06/2025). This geographic expansion reflects a broader concerning trend regarding the adaptability of NSAG networks to evade localised military operations. Since late 2024, Lakurawa has been linked to repeated incidents, with over 100 fatalities recorded between January–July 2025 (ACLED accessed 01/10/2025). Lakurawa exerts control through livestock taxation and the selective provision of financial or agricultural support, punishing those who refuse to cooperate by, at times, flogging (BBC 24/01/2025). Media reports suggest that the group operates with greater organisation and capacity than most bandit formations in the NW, reflected in its access to heavier weaponry, structured leadership, and more durable logistical networks (HumAngle 21/06/2025; Vangaurd 17/11/2024; VOA 08/11/2024). This NSAG has critical implications, as it has the capacity to increase the sustainability and complexity of its operations, significantly boosting the resilience of its criminal networks to withstand state security pressures. Ultimately, this reflects the emergence of a more structured armed group in the region, one capable of not only surviving but sustaining sophisticated, cross-border operations despite sustained military efforts.

Figure 2. Cumulative fatalities and incidents in NW Nigeria, 2023–2025



Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

Banditry in the NW has evolved dramatically from localised cattle rustling in the early 2010s to a sophisticated, multi-state criminal enterprise focused on mass kidnappings and extortion (GITOC/ACLED 04/12/2024). Over time, these groups consolidated into profit-driven criminal networks, embedding themselves in illicit economies and imposing parallel systems of taxation. By 2025, their operations extended well beyond Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara (in the NW) into Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states (in NC). This extensive territorial influence significantly complicates humanitarian access and protection strategies. The expansion creates multi-jurisdictional hurdles for aid organisations seeking security clearances and increases the risk of access denial, targeted attacks, and aid diversion across a wider and more volatile operational landscape, ultimately leaving at-risk populations harder to reach and protect (ENACT 29/08/2024; UNIDIR 31/07/2024). This progression highlights both the adaptability of armed groups and the Government's limited capacity to secure rural areas, raising the risk of further displacement and humanitarian needs across a wider geographic area.

Drivers

Banditry in NW Nigeria stems from a convergence of communal tensions, governance failures, security weaknesses, and regional dynamics. These factors have converged into a self-sustaining conflict economy. Originally triggered by localised farmer-herder clashes over land and water access, the violence has evolved into a complex conflict ecosystem shaped by climate pressures, population growth, and the erosion of traditional conflict-resolution systems (ICG 26/05/2021; UNIDIR 31/07/2024). Security operations in the NW are constrained by persistent capacity gaps and weak coordination. Forces are overstretched, with limited personnel covering vast rural areas, leaving communities vulnerable to repeated raids (UNIDIR 31/07/2024). The Nigeria Police Force has historically maintained a ratio estimated at 1:602 in 2017, which is significantly worse in sparsely populated and conflict-affected rural areas, leaving massive territorial gaps (NPF 11/07/2017). Inadequate training, low morale, poor equipment, and fragmented coordination between the military, police, and vigilantes further undermine response effectiveness (Madueke 23/06/2025; Punch 11/07/2021; Usman/Singh 21/12/2021). At the same time, weak rule of law and the limited accountability of state officials have allowed banditry to persist with minimal deterrence. Impunity, enabled by widespread corruption and the under-enforcement of organised crime laws, serves as a key sustaining factor for armed groups in the NW. This lack of accountability results in minimal prosecutions, effectively allowing groups to expand their operations and adopt more structured, highly profit-driven criminal tactics with little fear of judicial consequence (Thompson 19/04/2025; Adegoke 01/01/2020; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 05/2015).

The breakdown of governance has further entrenched insecurity. In many rural local government areas (LGAs), state presence is minimal or absent, enabling bandits to exert parallel governance systems over communities, including informal taxation and market regulation (Alkali/Putter 17/04/2025). This governance vacuum critically affects humanitarian access and protection. Corruption and poor service delivery have eroded public trust, leaving residents reliant on armed groups for protection and dispute resolution (Oluyemi 13/06/2025; UNIDIR 31/07/2024).

The NW crisis is also shaped by cross-border dynamics. A porous border with Niger has facilitated the inflow of small arms and light weapons, many linked to Sahelian conflicts (IPI 22/05/2024; ICG 29/04/2021; Agu/Ugada 16/10/2024). Weak border management capacity, combined with corruption among border officials, has turned frontier zones into critical supply routes for bandit groups, particularly in Katsina, Kebbi, and Sokoto states. These dynamics connect local violence to regional illicit economies, reinforcing the resilience of armed groups and complicating counter-banditry measures (IPI 22/05/2024; ISS 24/10/2023; Mon et al. 02/07/2025).

Informal gold mining activities, especially in Zamfara state, have opened new revenue streams for NSAGs and drawn in criminal groups from other areas. This resource extraction provides income crucial to sustaining the conflict (ENACT 29/08/2024; UNIDIR 31/07/2024; ACLED 11/12/2024). High levels of poverty, joblessness, and inequality combined with a weak state presence have made participation in banditry an attractive option for some young men. This appeal is further amplified by the collapse of traditional agricultural livelihoods across the NW as a result of perpetual insecurity, which eliminates legitimate income sources and makes the lucrative, albeit high-risk, returns from banditry an increasingly rational economic choice (TRT 07/05/2021; The Guardian 26/10/2020; The Guardian 03/08/2025).

Access and response constraints

Humanitarian access in NW Nigeria remains severely constrained, particularly in Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara states, where insecurity and armed banditry severely limit movement and operations. In 2024, organisations were forced to suspend or evacuate programmes in Zurmi and Anka LGAs following nearby heavy fighting (MSF 11/03/2024). Access restrictions persist across Maru, Shinkafi, and Zurmi, with some LGAs entirely inaccessible to aid workers (IOM 06/10/2025). Armed groups maintain de facto control in parts of rural Zamfara and Katsina, while frequent ambushes and improvised explosive device (IED) incidents continue to endanger road travel (SARI Global 11/07/2025).

Operationally, insecurity and logistical barriers have reduced the humanitarian presence and response capacity. In 2023, dozens of health facilities in affected LGAs either shut down or operated at minimal capacity because of security threats to staff and patients (MSF 11/03/2024). Road closures, ambush fears, and inflated transport costs have increased delivery delays by up to several weeks in some remote areas (IOM 17/03/2025; INSO 08/09/2024).

The humanitarian footprint is minimal, with only a few international organisations present and coordination largely informal (HumAngle 29/09/2022; ODI Global 22/05/2024). The crisis is often framed as a domestic security issue instead of a humanitarian emergency, a narrative that has deprioritised humanitarian engagement and limited funding. Weak data systems further obscure needs and reduce visibility, undermining response planning. As a result, aid coverage is extremely low: an estimated 89% of households in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara have never received humanitarian assistance, highlighting the severe gap between needs and response capacity, especially in areas most affected by insecurity (REACH 02/03/2023; ODI Global 22/05/2024). The combination of persistent violence, chronic underfunding, and limited operational visibility perpetuates a cycle of inaccessibility, leaving at-risk populations without sustained support and deepening the humanitarian crisis over time.

Priority needs

Protection

Armed banditry in NW Nigeria is driving continuing protection threats, particularly in Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara. In 2024, nearly half of all households reported restricting movement because of insecurity, undermining access to markets, services, schools, and livelihoods (UNIDIR 16/12/2024; NHRC 16/05/2025). Civilians face persistent risks of mass abductions, extortion at checkpoints, and repeated village raids, which have forced widespread displacement and the destruction or abandonment of communities (IOM 09/09/2025; TNH 16/09/2025). Men are often targeted during attacks and frequently killed, leading to profound shifts in household roles, as women are left as the primary providers and sole heads of household under precarious conditions. As women assume primary responsibility for household income and survival, they are exposed to a heightened risk of sexual violence and exploitation, particularly in displacement sites (UNIDIR 16/12/2024; Ojewale et al. 26/12/2024).

Children in the affected zones face extreme protection vulnerabilities, including heightened risks of recruitment, forced labour, recruitment and abuse (UNICEF 31/07/2025). These threats are particularly intense in areas with limited access to education and within communities under the de facto control of armed groups, where children are easily coerced into criminal networks. The continuous threat of violence, combined with restricted mobility, family separation during raids, and limited humanitarian access to psychological support, significantly compounds psychosocial distress and overall protection vulnerabilities for displaced and conflict-affected children (REACH 31/01/2023).

Food

Conflict and displacement have severely disrupted food production and marred access in NW Nigeria. Armed groups raid farms, loot harvests, and impose informal taxes on rural communities, reducing household incomes and limiting cultivation capacity (GITOC/ACLED 05/07/2024; Vanguard 18/04/2025). Repeated displacement, including seasonal and permanent, has forced many households to abandon farmland, while insecurity along key roads affects market food supply chains and increases transport costs (Lamidi 28/08/2025; FEWS NET 13/08/2025). These dynamics have reduced crop yields and undermined purchasing power, pushing both producers and consumers into deeper crisis.

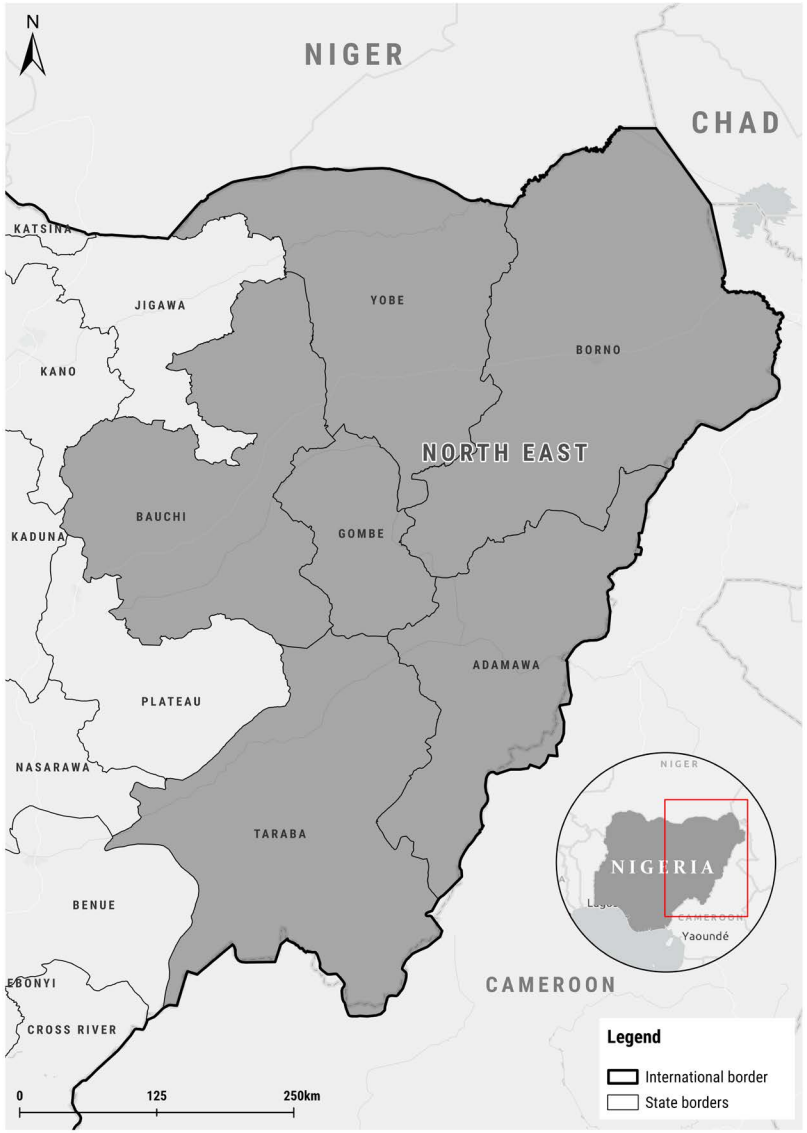
During the June–August 2025 lean season, about 4.2 million people in the NW experienced Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity. Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara were among the hardest hit, with hundreds of thousands in each state projected to experience IPC 4 conditions (FAO 10/03/2025). Malnutrition data underscores this deterioration: in parts of Katsina, global acute malnutrition among children under five doubled between 2023 and 2024, reaching 30% in some LGAs. This alarming rate is compounded by diminishing access to nutrition services as a result of persistent insecurity and the closure of healthcare facilities (MSF 05/12/2024). The loss of livelihood assets and restricted market access are expected to sustain high needs into early 2026, particularly if insecurity continues to limit harvest recovery.

Outlook

Armed banditry is projected to intensify through the dry season, as groups exploit improved mobility and resource scarcity. Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states are likely to record the highest levels of violence and abductions, with attacks spilling into Sokoto and Kebbi. Violence is likely to remain concentrated along rural trade corridors, where insecurity and informal taxation restrict market access and erode household resilience. Displacement is expected to increase slightly as recurrent attacks drive further population movements, though many IDPs will likely remain unregistered because of the limited humanitarian presence and access constraints, especially in areas under partial NSAG control. Livelihood and food security conditions will worsen because of restricted access to farms and trade routes, compounded by reduced assistance. In rural LGAs where bandit taxation and road blockades restrict market access and reduce cultivation, local food prices are likely to rise. Access constraints will persist as humanitarian operations remain minimal and heavily concentrated in state capitals. Ungoverned rural areas in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara are likely to remain strongholds for armed groups, enabling them to consolidate influence and expand operations (ENACT 19/11/2020). Porous borders with Niger will continue to facilitate the cross-border movement of weapons and fighters, sustaining regional insecurity. The withdrawal of Nigerien troops from the Multinational Joint Task Force earlier in 2025 is expected to worsen security gaps along northern corridors, increasing the risk of cross-border spillover and the potential for increased tactical coordination between bandit and NSAG networks (SCR 14/07/2025; The Conversation 28/05/2025). These external risk multipliers underscore the challenge of regional diffusion. Critically, without enhanced coordination between military and humanitarian responders, communities in inaccessible LGAs will face worsening protection and food security conditions.

NORTH EAST NIGERIA

Map 3. North East Nigeria



Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 02/11/2025)

Crisis overview

NE Nigeria, particularly Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, has experienced a protracted insurgency for more than 15 years, primarily driven by Boko Haram, Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad, and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) (OCHA 23/01/2025; Humanitarian Outcomes 07/01/2020). Persistent violence has resulted in mass displacement, widespread food insecurity, and continuing protection risks. In 2016, a factional split led to the emergence of ISWAP, which has since consolidated power in parts of NE Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin (Humanitarian Outcomes 07/01/2020; OCHA 23/01/2025). Unlike Boko Haram's more indiscriminate violence, ISWAP employs a comparatively structured approach, targeting military positions, civilians, and critical infrastructure while attempting to exert governance through taxation and control of local resources (EUAA accessed 10/2021; The Soufan Center 21/05/2025; The Conversation 28/05/2025). ISWAP's reliance on this governance-style model is directly responsible for sustaining the group's resilience and severely complicating humanitarian operations.

Despite military operations and humanitarian interventions, insecurity and a weak state presence continue to limit recovery and access to services (BBC 09/04/2025). By January 2025, nearly 7.8 million people remained in need, highlighting the entrenched and prolonged nature of the crisis (OCHA 23/01/2025). More than 2.3 million people remain displaced, many of whom are in protracted displacement with limited prospects of return. Food insecurity has reached alarming levels, with nearly five million people facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or above levels (Food Security Cluster 19/11/2024; FAO 10/03/2025). The impact is particularly severe for children: over one million children under five years are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, exposing them to life-threatening risks (IFRC 25/09/2025; WFP 05/08/2025). The crisis has become so acute that, in April 2025, the Government declared a national food security emergency, citing escalating hunger and malnutrition across the NE (IFRC 07/07/2025; NAN 14/04/2025).

The cumulative cost of conflict-related disruptions between 2008–2021 has been estimated at around USD 100 billion, reflecting sustained GDP losses and foregone development gains across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe (UNDP 23/06/2021; UNICEF 09/06/2023). The conflict's economic impacts are most visible in agriculture. In Borno state, insurgency-related displacement and land access restrictions have neutralised an estimated 420,000MT of wheat production capacity, which is equivalent to about 30% of Nigeria's annual national consumption (UNDP 23/06/2021). The convergence of protracted conflict, economic erosion, and the collapse of basic services continues to drive one of the most severe and enduring humanitarian crises in Nigeria.

Key trends

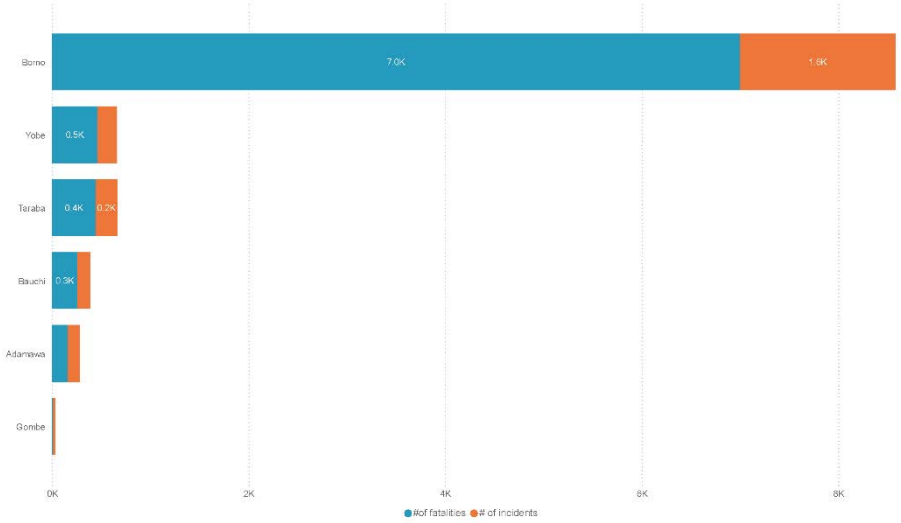
Renewed attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP in 2025 across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states have continued to drive population displacement in NE Nigeria, limiting households' access to fields, livestock, and other livelihood assets (HRW 24/06/2025; OCHA 27/05/2025).

The Nigerian military's 'super-camp' strategy, introduced in 2019, concentrated troops in fortified bases in key towns across the NE. While improving garrison security, the withdrawal from rural areas left large stretches of Borno and Yobe unprotected, creating permissive spaces for armed groups to regroup, expand, and entrench control (ADF 12/08/2025; ISPI 16/07/2025; ISS 30/11/2020; Security Praxis 26/06/2020). ISWAP has capitalised the most on this vacuum, consolidating its presence around the Lake Chad islands and the Borno-Yobe corridor. With no forward-operating bases to limit its movements, the group has established checkpoints, taxed trade routes, and expanded territorial control. Abandoned military equipment has also been seized and reused, further strengthening insurgent capacity (ISPI 16/07/2025). ISWAP has also adopted more sophisticated tactics, including drone reconnaissance and multi-site attacks, marking an escalation in the group's operational capacity compared to previous years, while Boko Haram maintains traditional raid-based operations. Both groups benefit from a foreign fighter influx and technical support, enhancing operational capacity and resilience (AJ 29/04/2025; ISS 23/09/2025; HumAngle 12/04/2025; DW 16/04/2025; ICIR 22/07/2025).

Between 2022 and early 2025, the displacement situation in NE Nigeria remained entrenched, with IDP numbers remaining broadly between 2.17–2.3 million. These sustained levels demonstrate chronic, protracted displacement with limited safe returns, peaking in mid-2023 and edging down only marginally through early 2025 (UNHCR 13/01/2023, 20/01/2024, and 23/12/2024).This high-level stability reflects a chronic protection and access crisis instead of rapid returns: constrained humanitarian access, persistent insurgent activity, recurrent shocks including floods, and limited durable solutions have continued to prevent safe or sustainable returns. The small decline since 2023 likely reflects localised returns and relocations where security and services permitted, but overall return trends are fragile and reversible across most of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe (IOM 07/03/2025).

NE Nigeria is the zone with the highest conflict-related mortality rate by a significant margin, recording 7,743 fatalities in 1,743 incidents between January 2023 and October 2025. This zone, including Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, is dominated by the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency. The region experienced its peak in fatalities in 2023, with 3,039 deaths across 653 incidents. Fatalities then showed a declining trend, but stabilised at a high level in the subsequent years, with 2,367 deaths in 2024 and 2,337 deaths in 2025 (by October). Despite this stabilisation in mortality figures, the number of incidents has been more volatile, peaking at 663 in 2024 before notably declining to 427 in the partial year of 2025. This represents a moderate reduction in overall lethality but indicates continued high-intensity violence, averaging more than four deaths per incident.

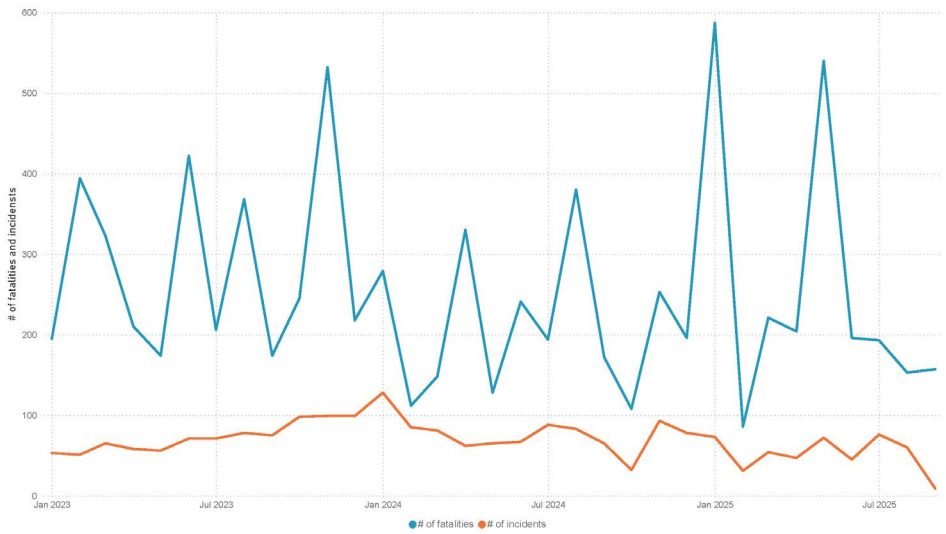
Figure 3. Cumulative fatalities and incidents in NE Nigeria, 2023–2025



Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

The exceptionally high lethality of the conflict, particularly in 2023, is largely driven by sustained and intense intra-factional conflict between rival NSAGs, ISWAP, and Boko Haram (ALCED accessed 22/10/2025). The persistent fluctuation in violence underlines the volatility and unpredictability of the insurgency. Despite the absence of large-scale military offensives, intergroup competition sustains severe civilian risks, continually disrupting essential access routes and critically complicating humanitarian planning, ensuring the crisis remains far from resolution.

Figure 4. Fatalities in NE Nigeria, 2023–2025



Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

Peaks in violence are most evident during the dry and late lean months (roughly November–April). This pattern indicates that conflict intensity exhibits clear seasonal variation, as mobility is higher and roads are more passable, facilitating both insurgent movements and military counteroperations (OCHA 23/01/2025; ACLED accessed 01/10/2025; UNHCR 26/08/2025). While monthly disaggregation of NSAG offensives is limited, evidence from agrarian contexts indicates that lean season stress often coincides with intensification of conflict and heightened humanitarian needs. By contrast, in the rainy months, mobility constraints shift the focus of attacks toward markets, harvests, and food distribution points, where resources and populations are more concentrated. This tactical reorientation significantly increases civilian exposure in economic hubs, and seasonal intentionality highlights how insurgent tactics align directly with agricultural and livelihood cycles, thereby influencing both humanitarian access windows and the timing of crisis peaks across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states (Papale/Castelli 03/02/2025).

Drivers

The protracted conflict in NE Nigeria is driven by a convergence of structural, socioeconomic, and ideological factors. Chronic poverty, high youth unemployment, and limited access to education have created conditions conducive to NSAG recruitment, particularly in rural Borno and Yobe. Governance deficits characterised by corruption, a weak state presence, and exclusionary politics have eroded public trust and left many communities vulnerable to NSAGs as well as reliant upon them for protection and dispute resolution (Mondopoli 22/02/2021; OCHA 20/12/2024).

Religious extremism, particularly the radical ideologies propagated by Boko Haram and ISWAP, has further entrenched violence. These groups exploit local grievances and offer alternative systems of authority, often filling gaps left by the state. This strategic adaptation blurs the line between insurgency and governance, entrenching NSAGs' presence across remote rural areas (Humanitarian Outcomes 07/01/2020; OCHA 23/01/2025; UNIDIR 16/09/2024).

Environmental stressors, including desertification, erratic rainfall, and competition over natural resources, act as conflict multipliers. The presence of ungoverned spaces, porous borders, and the proliferation of small arms facilitate the mobility and resilience of armed groups (GCR2P 15/07/2025; Fasuan E Olawale/Folasade 25/03/2023). These dynamics have produced a hybrid conflict environment in which ideological insurgency, criminality, and communal violence intersect. This intersection critically complicates military containment strategies and severely restricts humanitarian access, sustaining the cyclical nature of the violence and prolonging the crisis across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states (OCHA 23/01/2025).

Access and response constraints

Physical access in NE Nigeria remains largely confined to military-secured garrison towns and a few corridors in central/southern Adamawa, southern Borno, and western Yobe, leaving over 1.2 million people unreached in remote areas (Humanitarian Outcomes 25/11/2020; OCHA 23/01/2025). The proliferation of IEDs and illegal checkpoints along main supply routes, such as the Maiduguri-Damboa road, poses major risks to humanitarian convoys and has resulted in aid worker fatalities (Logistics Cluster 26/08/2025; SARI Global 08/10/2025; TNH 05/11/2025). The NE remains the most dangerous region in Nigeria for humanitarian workers, with over 20 incidents since 2023, mostly in Borno, involving NSAG ambushes and abductions.

Operational continuity depends heavily on air transport and humanitarian hubs, as road access is severely limited. This critical dependence entrenches high costs and systemic access inequities, significantly restricting the overall reach of the response and making it harder to serve at-risk populations outside established hubs. Most INGOs rely on UNHAS

flights, as seasonal flooding frequently damages infrastructure, further isolating rural communities (Logistics Cluster 26/08/2025; OCHA 23/01/2025). Involuntary IDP relocations to remote, insecure areas deny humanitarian assistance to displaced populations (OCHA 23/01/2025; Protection Cluster 13/03/2025). Despite these challenges, the NE remains the main focus of international response, supported by a formal cluster system and around 170 humanitarian organisations (ODI Global 22/05/2024). The response remains geographically uneven and heavily urban-centric: urban garrisons are generally well-served but vast rural areas and newly displaced populations are often systematically excluded, leaving essential coverage highly limited and unequal.

Priority needs

WASH

Access to safe water and sanitation remains a critical humanitarian gap in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, with an estimated 5.2 million people requiring WASH assistance in 2025 (OCHA 23/01/2025). In December 2024, only around two-thirds of households reported access to improved water sources, with many relying on coping mechanisms such as limiting use or travelling long distances to fetch water. Sanitation coverage is also inadequate, as more than a quarter of households share latrines and open defecation persists in some areas, increasing exposure to waterborne disease. These deficiencies have contributed to recurrent cholera outbreaks and placed additional strain on an already fragile health system (FACT/OCHA 20/12/2024). Recurrent natural hazards including windstorms and floods have worsened the situation by further contaminating surface water and damaging WASH infrastructure, particularly in displacement sites (Govt. of Nigeria/IRC 31/08/2025; IOM 25/09/2025).

Food

Food insecurity remains severe across Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, with more than five million people projected to face acute food insecurity in 2025. Inaccessible areas of Borno state – such as Abadam, Bama, Guzamala, and Marte – are likely to experience the most extreme conditions, as insurgent activity continues to restrict farming, fishing grounds, market access, and livelihood opportunities. Recurrent attacks by Boko Haram and ISWAP have displaced thousands and disrupted cultivation, further undermining food availability and household resilience (FEWS NET 29/08/2025 and 01/08/2025; Food Security Cluster 19/11/2024; DFS 17/02/2025; OCHA 23/01/2025). Food insecurity accounts for around a quarter of people in need across the region, highlighting the widespread dependence on food assistance (OCHA 23/01/2025). Cross-border movements from Maiha and Mubi LGAs (Adamawa state) into neighbouring Cameroon are driven primarily by worsening food shortages. At the same time, some Cameroonian refugees have begun returning home for similar reasons (UNHCR 18/09/2025).

Health

By October 2025, an estimated 4.4 million people in NE Nigeria required access to healthcare services (Govt. of Nigeria/Health Cluster 04/10/2025). The lean season (June–September) brought a surge in malnutrition and communicable diseases, including cholera, measles, diphtheria, and acute watery diarrhoea, while early flooding compounded the spread of waterborne infections. Weak health systems and restricted access to remote areas continue to undermine response capacity. Severe acute malnutrition levels are projected to double compared to 2024, reaching around one million cases, as nearly half of nutrition facilities are closed or only partially functional because of funding constraints (OCHA 01/08/2025; Nutrition Cluster 22/09/2025; IFRC 25/09/2025). Overall, reduced vaccination coverage, funding shortfalls, and overstretched facilities reflect a health system struggling to absorb the combined shocks of conflict, food insecurity, and climate-related disruptions (UNICEF 31/07/2025).

Protection

Civilians in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states continue to face severe protection risks linked to armed violence and displacement. Outside major garrison towns, movement remains dangerous, particularly for farmers and displaced people attempting to access fields, markets, or firewood. NSAGs frequently target rural communities, using abductions, forced taxation, and attacks to assert control, while IEDs continue to cause civilian casualties (Protection Cluster 13/03/2025; OCHA 23/01/2025; UNHCR 18/09/2025).

The policy of relocation and camp closure in Borno state has further heightened protection concerns, exposing returnees to renewed insecurity and straining overstretched host communities. Since 2021, more than 200,000 IDPs have been relocated to areas of origin or resettlement sites that often lack adequate security, basic services, and livelihood opportunities. This, in turn, leaves many exposed to renewed violence, a high risk of secondary displacement, and exploitation shortly after their initial relocation (Protection Cluster 30/04/2024; TNH 13/06/2024 and 05/11/2025). Host communities, on the other hand, face growing pressure on limited resources, including housing, water, and livelihoods, as humanitarian coverage remains uneven.

Outlook

Violence is expected to remain aggravated but localised, especially in Borno state, driven by continued clashes between ISWAP and government forces in Borno and Yobe. While large-scale offensives are unlikely, sporadic attacks, IED attacks, and ambushes on main supply routes will persist, sustaining access challenges and limiting humanitarian movement beyond garrison towns. The withdrawal of Nigerien troops from the Multinational Joint Task Force increases the opportunity for ISWAP expansion along the northern border, raising the risk of cross-border raids and arms trafficking (Amani Africa 09/06/2025). This persistent insecurity is expected to keep the displacement forecast static but high, maintaining the massive humanitarian caseload and associated funding demand. Insecurity in southern Borno and cross-border influxes from Cameroon will continue, maintaining pressure on already overcrowded IDP sites and severely straining host community capacity. The humanitarian situation will deteriorate during the 2025–2026 lean and dry seasons, particularly in terms of food security and health. This heightened lean season vulnerability will intersect with severely constrained access and supply chain fragility. Limited agricultural recovery will hinder livelihoods and purchasing power, deepening the crisis for at-risk populations. Flood recovery gaps in low-lying riverine areas, primarily in southern and central Borno and southern Adamawa, will further strain logistics and prolong aid dependence (FEWS NET 06/10/2025; AAH et al. 16/10/2025).

Subsequent damage to transport networks will further strain humanitarian logistics and sustain a high dependence on food and WASH assistance. The conflict is set to continue as a high-intensity, low-mobility crisis, ensuring that humanitarian needs will remain acute and largely stable across NE Nigeria.

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NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

Map 4. North Central Nigeria

Source: ACAPS using data from OCHA (accessed 02/11/2025)

Crisis overview

NC Nigeria, comprising Benue, the Federal Capital Territory, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau states, has experienced escalating violence, particularly in Benue and Plateau. While these two states remain the epicentre, concerning levels of violence have also been documented in Kogi, Kwara, and Niger, underscoring the wider reach of insecurity (Oyebode 13/03/2025; IFRC 23/07/2025; ICG 19/09/2017).

Conflicts in the region have evolved from localised farmer-herder clashes into entrenched cycles of protracted armed conflict. Historical disputes over land and water access have increasingly intersected with demographic pressures, environmental degradation, and

weak governance, transforming disputes into broader security crises (LSE 11/08/2025; GGA 01/07/2025; Ajodo-Adebanjoko/Nwofor 21/07/2024). By 2025, the crisis had become characterised by militia incursions, retaliatory raids, and large-scale community displacement, making NC one of Nigeria's most volatile humanitarian hotspots (HumAngle 01/02/2025; ECHO 19/06/2025).

Several armed groups operate across the region, including ethnically aligned militias and vigilante formations with varying levels of organisation. These include Irigwe militias in Plateau, Tiv community defence groups in Benue, and Fulani armed groups in Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau. While initially mobilised as self-defence groups, many of these now conduct organised raids, retaliatory attacks, and territorial control, reflecting a shift from ad hoc clashes to more structured armed violence (ICG 19/09/2017; GGA 01/07/2025; HumAngle 01/02/2025; ECOI Network 28/09/2021; Persecution 18/08/2025).

The conflict has significant impacts on agriculture and rural livelihoods (FEWS NET 29/08/2025). Persistent insecurity has displaced farming communities, restricted access to arable land, and disrupted crop cycles, contributing to reduced agricultural output and heightened food insecurity across Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, and Plateau (Yunusa/Owoyemi 12/04/2025; Adzenga et al. 01/12/2021). Insecurity has reduced agricultural productivity and household incomes across farming communities. Surveys show that 43.3% of arable crop farmers earnt between NGN 20,000–50,000 (USD 13.60–34) per month during periods of heightened violence, up from 35.8% before insecurity escalated (Awotokun et al. 10/02/2020; Ioryue et al. 17/10/2024). Nigeria is estimated to have lost USD 13.7 billion between 2016–2018 from farmer-herder conflicts. Benue state alone incurred losses exceeding NGN 400 billion from property destruction and disrupted agricultural production (Awotokun et al. 10/02/2020; Cega accessed 21/10/2025). Such significant financial losses reflect the devastating intersection of insecurity, economic collapse, and humanitarian needs within Nigeria's Middle Belt.

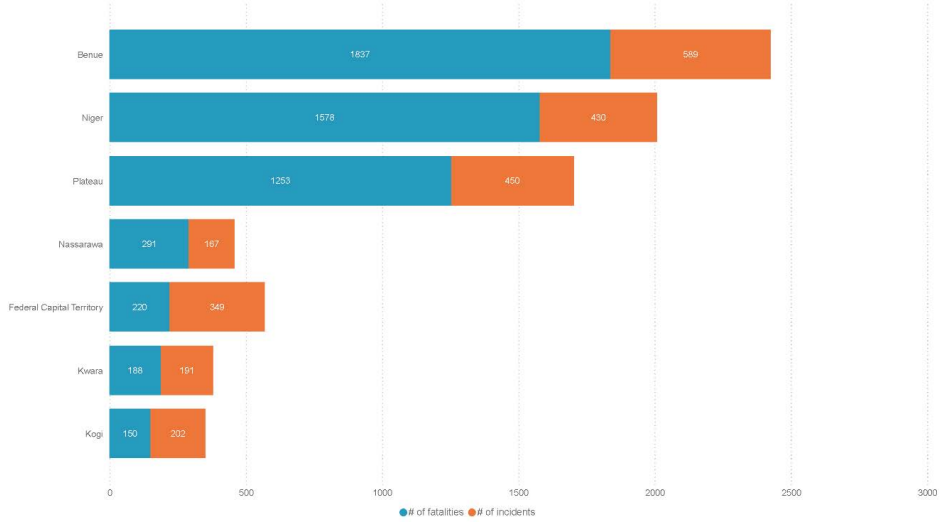
Key trends

Violence in NC Nigeria is seasonal. Empirical studies and operational analyses indicate that most farmer-herder clashes occur in the rainy and planting season (approximately May–October), when transhumant herds move into farming areas and compete for grazing and water. Climate variability, delayed or shortened rains, and prolonged dry spells alter migration timings, amplify seasonal pressures, and increase competition over finite resources, leading to recurrent peaks in violence and associated displacement (Alexander 02/11/2022; CGIAR 14/07/2025; Abugu et al. 31/08/2022).

Displacement in NC Nigeria has fluctuated since 2022, reflecting shifts in conflict dynamics. Numbers stood at 515,000 IDPs in early 2022, stabilised around 509,000 by December 2022, and declined to 463,200 by late 2023 (IOM 02/11/2022, 31/03/2023, and IOM 11/03/2024).

The caseload remained steady in March 2024 (463,000 IDPs) before rising to 580,000 in June, linked to renewed violence in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau. By December 2024, displacement had decreased slightly to 522,000 IDPs, though Benue alone accounted for over 400,000, most of whom were displaced by communal clashes and farmer-herder violence. This disproportionately high figure is a direct result of dense agrarian settlement patterns in the state combined with recurrent high-casualty raids (IOM 30/12/2024 and 02/07/2024; BD 11/09/2025). By February 2025, the total again rose to 580,000 IDPs, with communal clashes emerging as the main trigger across Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states (IOM 18/03/2025).

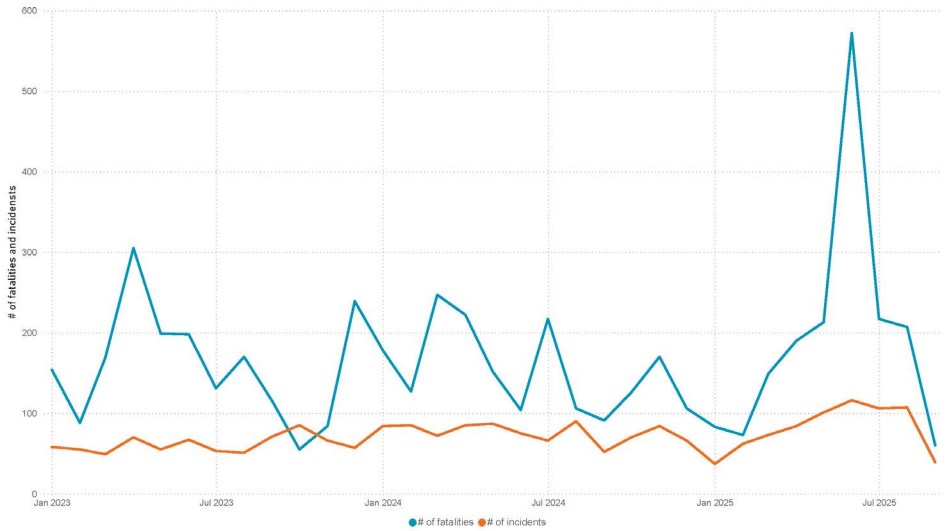
Figure 5. Cumulative fatalities and incidents in NC Nigeria, 2023–2025



Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

Fatalities in NC Nigeria have remained persistently high, with only marginal variation over the past three years. At least 1,780 deaths were recorded in 2023 and 1,730 in 2024, but by September 2025, the region had already recorded more than 1,700 deaths, nearly matching the previous years' totals. This sustained high level of lethality demonstrates that local peace agreements have had limited deterrent effect against the underlying drivers of conflict, underscoring how violence in the region has become cyclical instead of episodic, driven by structural and environmental pressures that continue to fuel communal and resource-based conflict in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau (ACLED accessed 24/09/2025; ICG 04/05/2021).

Figure 6. Fatalities in NC Nigeria, 2023–2025



Source: ACLED (accessed 02/11/2025)

There were nearly 5,500 fatalities in over 2,200 incidents between January 2023 and October 2025 in NC Nigeria. Fatalities decreased from 1,781 in 2023 to 1,745 in 2024, but had already reached 1,959 by October 2025. The sharp rise does not reflect a broad escalation but instead clustered and high-impact violence, such as the June 2025 attack in Benue, which left nearly 200 people dead (ACLED accessed 24/09/2025; BBC 19/06/2025). This trend points to a persistent but geographically concentrated conflict, where spikes are driven by specific flashpoints instead of sustained territorial offensives.

Alongside communal and criminal groups, NSAGs such as Ansaru, Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Lakurawa (a criminal-militant hybrid group) are present in the NC zone (ADF 10/06/2025). Lakurawa was implicated in attacks in Kebbi state in 2024, including killings and cattle theft. A newer group, referred to as the Mahmuda faction, has appeared with links to Boko Haram and possibly Islamic State affiliates. The Mahmuda faction operates across forested and park areas in Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, and Niger, conducting raids, extortion, and attacks on vigilantes. The emergence of the Mahmuda faction indicates the fragmentation and ideological diffusion within the insurgent landscape (BD 13/07/2025; ADF 10/06/2025; Sahara Reporters 14/07/2025). Officials have also alleged that some armed groups include fighters from neighbouring countries, such as Niger and Mali. While such claims remain unverified, they strongly point to deeply porous border dynamics and the potential of crucial regional linkages to sustaining the conflict through the movement of fighters and weapons (The Nation 23/04/2025).

Drivers

Violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt is shaped by a convergence of resource competition, identity-based tensions, and governance responses that often aggravate instead of mitigate the crisis. This interplay has created overlapping layers of insecurity that are both structural and adaptive, allowing conflicts to persist and evolve across political, economic, and communal lines. These tensions are worsened by climate change and environmental degradation in northern Nigeria, which continue to push herders further south into densely cultivated areas, heightening competition and intercommunal mistrust. Disputes over land and water between predominantly Fulani Muslim herders and largely Christian farming communities underpin much of the conflict (LSE 11/08/2025; The Guardian 27/05/2025; HRW 18/06/2025; ISS 26/06/2025). The Boko Haram insurgency has also indirectly contributed, displacing herders and accelerating the disruption of traditional transhumance routes into the Middle Belt (GCR2P 18/06/2025).

The introduction of state-level anti-grazing laws has become a defining feature of conflict dynamics in NC Nigeria. While these laws were intended to curb farmer-herder violence, they instead became a major flashpoint. Benue's 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law was the first to directly restrict pastoralist mobility. While aimed at reducing farmer-herder clashes, enforcement of the law has been widely perceived as targeting herding communities, fuelling resentment and triggering reprisal attacks. Instead of containing violence, the law has often transformed local disputes into cycles of armed conflict and large-scale displacement (Azomani/Gasiokwu 28/06/2025; Benue State Government accessed 01/09/2025).

Other states have followed similar approaches. Taraba and Plateau adopted comparable restrictions, while the Mopamuro local government in Kogi state passed bylaws in 2024 limiting grazing hours and imposing financial penalties for crop damage (Independent 22/11/2024; Daily Trust 27/11/2017; Mazeli/Side 17/09/2023). These measures have rarely been accompanied, however, by investment in ranching infrastructure or conflict-resolution mechanisms. As a result, such measures have deepened divisions between farmers and herders and created enforcement challenges that sometimes escalate into violence (Modern Ghana 01/09/2020; Ilesanmi et al. 27/11/2023; Accord 13/12/2018).

Plateau reflects another dimension, as the state displays long-standing communal clashes that intersect with herder-farmer tensions. Together, these dynamics sustain a self-reinforcing cycle of insecurity and displacement. Disputes over land ownership and political representation have historically fuelled violence, with ethnicity and religion often layered onto resource-based grievances (Reuters 14/04/2025; GGA 01/07/2025; AI 29/05/2025).

Access and response constraints

Humanitarian access in NC Nigeria remains limited and under-documented, particularly in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau, where recurrent farmer-herder violence and localised banditry restrict movement and limit humanitarian field presence.

Logistical barriers further hinder access. In several areas, transport costs have risen as a result of banditry and road attacks, delaying staff movement and aid delivery. In parts of Benue and Kaduna, bans on motorcycles and trucks – the main transport modes in remote areas – have forced field teams to use tricycles and other less effective alternatives, causing delays and coverage gaps and limiting the volume of goods transported to affected areas (Punch 03/08/2022; IOM 17/03/2025 and 06/10/2025). Data on access conditions in the NC region remain sparse, with few organisations systematically tracking access incidents or coverage. This limited visibility masks the extent of operational challenges and constrains effective planning and advocacy (Hart accessed 23/10/2025).

Priority needs

Food security and livelihoods

The escalation of farmer-herder conflicts has critically undermined regional food security, directly resulting in massive displacement, widespread destruction of productive assets, and severe food access challenges across the Middle Belt (FEWS NET 29/08/2025). In Benue's Guma LGA, coordinated attacks destroyed food stores and cropland. In June 2025, nearly all households reported food shortages, with nine in ten describing themselves as food insecure. With the WFP and other organisations reducing distributions in the NC states since mid-2025, displaced families are relying heavily on overstretched host communities or resorting to coping mechanisms with potential harmful effects (UNICEF 02/07/2025; FAO 08/04/2025; IFRC 23/07/2025). The disruption comes at a time when agriculture is the main source of income for more than 70% of households in Benue, underlining the long-term consequences of repeated violence on livelihoods. Continuous erosion of productive assets (e.g. farms, livestock, and equipment) severely undermines the long-term recovery capacity of both individual households and the state economy (IFRC 23/07/2025; Michigan State University 01/06/2022).

Shelter and NFIs

Attacks in Benue, Niger, and Plateau states have forced families into temporary shelters, schools, and churches, many of which lack basic facilities. In Makurdi and Daudu camps, capacity is already overstretched, and assessments in Benue report that two-thirds of affected households have lost or seen serious damage to their homes (UNICEF 02/07/2025; ECHO 19/06/2025). Most displaced families reported limited access to household essentials beyond blankets, with overcrowding and poor sanitation contributing to deteriorating living conditions. In Plateau's Riyom LGA, communities displaced by raids have been informally accommodated without organised humanitarian support, increasing reliance on ad hoc community assistance (UNICEF 02/07/2025; IOM 19/06/2025).

Protection

Protection concerns are acute across the NC states. Women and girls face heightened exposure to gender-based violence in overcrowded sites, with unsafe water points and firewood collection areas compounding risks. Child protection challenges include family separation, loss of schooling, and child labour, with over four-fifths of school-aged children out of school in some Benue sites (UNICEF 02/07/2025; IFRC 23/07/2025; ECHO 19/06/2025). Psychosocial distress is widespread: displacement and repeated exposure to violence have disrupted family and community support systems, resulting in high levels of trauma, stress, and anxiety among conflict-affected populations. In Benue, children and caregivers are showing signs of trauma, and health teams have observed early cessation of breastfeeding among mothers facing psychological stress (UNICEF 02/07/2025; IOM 19/06/2025).

Outlook

Violence in the NC zone is expected to flare intermittently, driven by ethno-communal tensions, herder-farmer disputes, and environmental and security pressures in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau. The upcoming dry season will likely intensify competition over water and grazing corridors as pastoral migration resumes, raising the risk of retaliatory attacks between armed community groups (CGIAR 14/07/2025; HPN 13/03/2024). Displacement is likely to fluctuate mainly in response to periodic surges in violence instead of sustained offensives. Political and religious narratives may further polarise communities, particularly in Plateau, where cycles of revenge violence and misinformation have deepened mistrust. Protection risks will remain elevated, driven by persistent ethno-communal and religious tensions as well as rising incidents of gender-based violence. The growing risk of armed groups from the NW exploiting porous interstate borders to establish new bases in parts of Niger and Nasarawa states further compounds these threats, as the blending of criminal and communal violence increasingly undermines civilian protection and complicates humanitarian access. NC could likely experience a slow but widening spread of hybrid insecurity instead of a single large-scale escalation.