

Military Reprisal Attacks and Social Justice in Nigeria: A Case Study of South East Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1306000321>

Received: 22 June 2026; Accepted: 27 June 2026; Published: 09 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Social justice remains the core value on which societies both ancient and modern survive on. Military reprisal attacks in Nigeria have been a recurring phenomenon, often resulting in severe human rights violations and exacerbating social injustices. This article examines the historical and contemporary instances of such attacks, especially in the South-East and Delta regions. Drawing on reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, it analyzes how these actions undermine social justice principles, such as equity, human dignity, and access to justice. The study employs a qualitative and doctrinal research method, relying on Nigeria's constitutional provisions, relevant statutes, treaties, and case laws, including important commentaries and security reports. The scope is limited to Nigeria's legal framework and major instances of reprisal attacks from 1999 to 2024 in the South Eastern part of Nigeria and the Niger Delta. With theoretical frameworks like Rawls' theory of Justice and Walzer's Just War theory, the study adopts the theoretical definition of Social Justice as justice itself. Findings reveal patterns of impunity, civilian casualties, and socioeconomic disruptions that perpetuate inequality. Policy recommendations include judicial reforms, accountability mechanisms, and community-based conflict resolution. The research concludes with a strong recommendation for a paradigm shift in Nigeria's security apparatus and approach to align with international acclaimed social justice imperatives and standards. Key words include: Reprisal, social justice, military, impunity, accountability and justice.

INTRODUCTION

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has had a chequered history laced with numerous security challenges. These include insurgencies, banditry, religious conflicts and ethnic conflicts that even resulted in a full-fledged war. The Nigerian military, whose major responsibility is maintenance of internal security and territorial integrity of the country, has frequently encountered obstacles from citizens in the discharge of their duty and in most cases resorted to reprisal attacks against the communities suspected of harboring or supporting threats to security forces and efforts. (Amnesty International, 2015). These reprisal attacks, while intended to deter further aggression and obstacles from such communities, often result in indiscriminate violence against civilians, leading to deaths, displacements, and destruction of property.

Social justice, as conceptualized by Rawls (1971), emphasizes fairness in the distribution of rights, opportunities, and resources, ensuring that the most vulnerable are protected. In Nigeria, military reprisals contravene these principles by disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, and large population of South Easterners alleged to be IPOB strong base with key case studies limited to the Niger Delta and South East region. This article explores the nexus between military reprisal attacks and social justice, arguing that such attacks foster cycles of violence and impunity, undermining democratic governance and human rights.

The research employs a qualitative and doctrinal research method, relying on Nigeria's constitutional provisions, relevant statutes, treaties, and case laws, including important commentaries and security reports. This methodology was considered appropriate because the military is a constitutionally provided organ of the executive arm of government with extant laws governing their operations. The qualitative research approach

was also considered appropriate because the several reprisal attacks that formed the fulcrum of the work were in the past and it was only right to make reference to documented evidence by relevant state and non-state actors.

The study begins with an espousal of the concept of Social Justice, a look at the historical contexts of military reprisal attacks, some identified case studies, theoretical analysis, impacts on social justice, policy implications and recommendations for better management of military-civilian relationships in Nigeria. Data are drawn from secondary sources especially reports by global agencies and government documents.

The Concept of Social Justice

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Social Justice, in contemporary politics, social science and political philosophy, represents the fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state or society. The term also is used to refer to social, political, and economic institutions, laws, or policies that collectively afford such fairness and equity and is commonly applied to movements that seek fairness, equity, inclusion, self-determination, other goals for currently or historically oppressed, exploited, or marginalized populations.

In theoretical terms, it is often understood to be equivalent to the concept of justice itself, however the concept is defined. Many somewhat narrower interpretations conceive of social justice as being equivalent to or partly constitutive of distributive justice—that is, the fair and equitable distribution of social, political, and economic benefits and burdens. According to some interpretations, social justice comprises among other conditions, the equality of opportunity to contribute to and to benefit from the collective good, including the holding of public office (sometimes referred to as “contributive justice”). Other interpretations promote the stronger goal of equal participation by all individuals and groups in all major social, political, and economic institutions.

Another set of definitions of social justice emphasizes the institutional conditions that encourage individual self-development and self-determination—the former being understood as the opposite of oppression and the latter as the opposite of domination. According to the American Philosopher Martha Nussbaunn (1999), a just society is one that enables the capabilities of individuals to engage in activities that are essential to a truly “human” life—including, among others, the capabilities to live a life of normal length, to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, and to meaningfully participate in political decision-making.

However the notion of social justice is understood, it is naturally grounded in the concept of justice itself.

Historical Context of Military Reprisals in Nigeria

Military involvement in Nigeria's internal affairs dates back to the colonial era, but post-independence, it intensified during civil-military transitions. Under military regimes (1966–1999), reprisals were common responses to dissent, as seen in the suppression of the Biafran War (1967–1970). The return to democracy in 1999 did not eradicate this practice; instead, it persisted under civilian oversight, often justified by national security imperatives.

Key drivers include weak civilian control over the military, ethnic biases in security operations, and the militarization of conflict resolution (Human Rights Watch, 2002). For instance, the 1999 Odi invasion followed the killing of 12 policemen by militants, leading to a full-scale military assault (Wikipedia, 2025). Similarly, the 2001 Zaki Biam massacre was a reprisal for the abduction and murder of 19 soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

In the 21st century, the Boko Haram insurgency (since 2009) has amplified reprisals, with the military accused of razing villages in response to attacks (Amnesty International, 2020). Recent events, such as the 2023 airstrike in Nasarawa State killing 39 civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2023), and operations in the South-East against pro-Biafra groups (Amnesty International, 2025), illustrate ongoing patterns. These incidents reflect a legacy of impunity, where investigations rarely lead to prosecutions (United Nations, 2021).

Key Case Studies

The Odi Massacre (1999)

In November 1999, following the murder of 12 policemen by local militants in Odi, Bayelsa State, President Olusegun Obasanjo authorized a military operation. Soldiers razed the town, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing thousands (Amnesty International, 2001). This reprisal, described as a "killing spree" with no imminent threat to soldiers, violated international humanitarian law (Amnesty International, 2001). Social justice implications include the erosion of community trust in state institutions and economic devastation in an already impoverished oil-producing region. This event also exacerbated ethnic tensions and highlighted discriminatory practices against minority groups, contravening social justice norms of equality. A 2015 Amnesty report documented war crimes, including extrajudicial killings and mass detentions, with 10,000 deaths in military custody (Amnesty International, 2015). Civilian impacts include food insecurity and psychological trauma, perpetuating inequality in access to basic rights.

The South-East Experience

According to Amnesty International, (2025), the South East Region has witnessed several reprisal attacks since 2015, resulting in pro-Biafra protests that led to the killing of thousands and forced disappearance of hundreds. The report further chronicled several outrageous and brutal reprisal attacks in the South East. The report recorded as follows:

- Between March and June 2021, at least 115 persons were killed by state security forces in the South East.
- On the 30th of July 2023, soldiers brutalized and destroyed the goods of traders at Holy Ghost and Old Park areas of Enugu North LGA.
- On the 8th of October 2021, three people were killed and over 50 houses were burnt in Izombe community in Oguta LGA of Imo State by soldiers who invaded the community following the killing of two soldiers during a disagreement with civilians over oil bunkering.
- On the 20th of September, 2023, soldiers conducted a military operation in Ehime Mbano LGA of Imo State and razed several shops and properties of residents following the killing of soldiers by unknown gun men.
- On the 20th of September 2022, several people were injured and houses and shops razed by Nigerian military when they invaded Umunze community I Orumba South LGA in reprisal attack over the killing of their colleague.
- On the 28th and 29th of June 2022, the Nigerian army was reported to have gone from house to house in Ossemola Umunenkwu and Obeagwa communities of Ogbaru LGA and killed scores of people over alleged membership of IPOB.
- On the 20th of January 2022, soldiers of the Nigerian army invaded Owaza community and razed down buildings and property in retaliation of the death of their colleagues causing several damages and forced evictions.
- On 11th June 2021, one person was killed and over 28 houses were burnt by military personnel after they stormed a marketplace in Ohafia, in a reprisal attack.
- On the 7th of November 2022, 10 people were killed and over 50 houses were set ablaze by the military when they stormed Amangwu community in Ohafia LGA over their missing colleague.

- In 2024, Delta State recorded numerous reprisals after soldiers' deaths. Though the army tried unsuccessfully to deny the attacks, Africa News 2024 described them as massacres (Africa News, 2024) signaling a continuation of the pattern. These cases underscore regional disparities in justice application. These cases are just a scratch on the number of reprisals that has occurred in the Niger Delta and South-Eastern region in the past five years.

Theoretical Framework

This work relies on two major theories of justice: John Rawls (1971) Theory of Justice as Fairness, and Michael Walzer's (1977) Just War theory.

This analysis draws on Rawls' (1971) theory of justice as fairness, which posits that social institutions should benefit the least advantaged. Military reprisals fail this veil of ignorance test by imposing undue burdens on vulnerable civilians without due process.

Justice as Fairness, John Rawls (1971). According to this theory, justice is the organizing principle of a society's basic structure, by ensuring that institutions protect citizens' rights and liberties while promoting fairness in social cooperation. Rawls articulated two principles of Justice viz: The principle of equal liberty and the principle of Fair equality of opportunity and the Difference principle. He emphasizes that justice is the first virtue of social institutions and in a just society, the liberties of individuals cannot be overridden for collective welfare, and institutions ought to be structured to prevent injustices while promoting mutual benefits.

This theory which insists that social institutions should benefit the least advantaged does not agree with the philosophies of military reprisal attacks, which in all circumstances, fail the veil of ignorance test by imposing undue burdens on vulnerable civilians without due process.

Just War Theory, Walzer, (1977)

Walzer (1977), developed a framework that addresses both the justice of going to war (*jus ad bellum*) and the justice of conduct within war (*jus in bello*).

Just war theory (Walzer, 1977) distinguished '*jus ad bellum*' (just cause) from '*jus in bello*' (conduct in war), emphasizing proportionality and discrimination. Nigerian reprisals often violate these by targeting non-combatants, as evidenced in HRW reports (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

For war to be justified, Walzer itemized the following conditions: Just cause; Right intention; last resort and probability of success. For the conduct of war (*jus in bello*), he identified the following criteria: discrimination, proportionality and moral equality of soldiers.

A major issue in Walzer's theory is the responsibility and civilian immunity doctrine. He allocated broad immunity to citizens. In his opinion, the citizens are not responsible for the state's decision to go to war and should therefore not be legitimate targets of a war. This civilian immunity and responsibility clause is heavily infringed upon by military reprisal attacks on civilian targets and goes contrary to the '*jus in bello*' principle.

Human rights frameworks, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), affirm rights to life and security, breached in these attacks. Social justice is further eroded through structural violence (Galtung, 1969), where state actions perpetuate poverty and exclusion.

Impacts on Social Justice

Human Rights Violations

According to the United Nations (2021), Reprisals involve extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances, fostering a culture of fear. Amnesty's 2025 report noted that thousands have been killed in the South-East since 2015, with impunity denying victims justice (Amnesty International, 2025). Reprisal attacks violate the fundamental rights to life of the affected victims. Though this basic right can be infringed upon by

the state, due diligence must be followed to ensure that the recipient of the capital punishment should have made himself an unjust aggressor with his culpable acts. Closely associated to the right to life are the rights to human dignity, right to work and an adequate standard of living, the right to food, the right to social security. These rights as enshrined in Articles 6, 11, 9, 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), are all infringed upon by military reprisal attacks. Amnesty International (2025) reported over twenty five verifiable cases of torture and forced disappearances that were occasioned by reprisal attacks in the South Eastern Nigeria alone between 2020 to 2024, torture and forced disappearances violate the fundamental right to the dignity of the human person as enshrined in Section 34 of the Nigerian Constitution, 1999.

Reprisal attacks also infringes on the fundamental human right to fair hearing. Fair hearing is an inalienable right that is protected by all conventions and the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Fair hearing does not give room to group punishments. Even when more than two persons are involved in a crime, their degree of involvement may differ and the degree of coincidence of 'Actus Reus' and 'Mens Rea' may also differ. The law at each point seeks to protect the innocent. Reprisal attacks do not take into consideration, the degree of involvement of the individual members of the community and thus denigrates their fundamental right to fair hearing.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Reprisal attacks destroy livelihoods. In the case of Odi an oil-dependent community, victims faced severe environmental and economic ruin (Oxfam, 2023 proxy via search). Households were utterly destroyed with valuable properties. In the case of Izombe in Imo state, businesses that operated within the community were also destroyed thereby forcing the victims to untold economic hardship. Displaced populations, due to conflicts exacerbate poverty and violate economic justice (Brookings, 2020),

Reprisal attacks also result in destruction of homes and forced evictions. The ICESCR which Nigeria domesticated 1993 recognizes the right to adequate standard of living which comes with it, adequate housing. The ICCPR enshrines the right against arbitrary and unlawful interference with the privacy of an individual, family or home. The African Charter on Human Rights expresses the rights to property and the right to health in chapters 14 and 16. Article 18 of the same charter, emphasizes the duty of the state to protect the family. When viewed from the lens of the principles of John Rawl's theory of justice which upholds that social institutions should benefit the least advantaged and individual rights should not at all times be sacrificed at the altar of collective benefits. The theory upholds that justice is the first virtue of social institutions and in a just society, the liberties of individuals cannot be overridden for collective welfare, and institutions ought to be structured to prevent injustices while promoting mutual benefits

Erosion of Rule of Law and Impunity

Lack of prosecutions, as in all the cases cited in this work, (Human Rights Watch, 2002), undermines judicial independence. The U.S. State Department (2020) highlights military overreach due to police inadequacies, perpetuating inequality in legal protection.

There is no law that approves military retaliation on civilians. It makes a total mess of the entire essence of the human rights safeguard and springs forth the question of military supremacy and principality in modern day African constitutional democracy. The question that comes to common sense is: what is the justification for assaulting, shooting, maiming innocent citizens and razing their homes, when common intelligence can tell that the perpetrators of the crime must have eloped or in most cases, especially with Boko Haram and ESN attacks, the attackers are not natives of the community. Reprisal attacks negates all principles of social justice known to man, because innocent citizens suffer for offences they know nothing about. Rather than visit mayhem on innocent citizens, the army should in collaboration with the Nigerian Police Force, investigate and fish out the offenders for trial before a court of competent jurisdiction. (Mbang, C. (2024)

It must be stated that the military is just an agent of government and in governance, there is separation of powers which is a cardinal ingredient of democracy. Section 217 (1) of the constitution 1999 (as amended) states that:

There shall be an armed forces for the federation which shall consist of an Army, Navy, Air-force and such other branches of the armed forces of the federation as may be established by an Act of the National Assembly.

Section 130 (2) of the constitution provides that:

“The president shall be the Head of state, the chief executive of the federation and commander in chief of the Armed forces of the federation.” Service Chiefs are appointees of the president and subject to his directives and orders. Thus, it is logical to submit that the military lack the power to take retaliatory acts on citizens who the president had sworn to protect. Even the president himself lacks the power to call out the army against the citizens without the approval of the National Assembly as stipulated in sections 217(2) and 218(4) of the 1999 constitution as amended.

According to Olasupo T. et al, the continued persistence of military reprisal attacks have grave implications for public trust in state institutions. Reprisal attacks which lead to extra-judicial killings, torture, unlawful detentions, disappearances of citizens, create an impression of the state as oppressive instead of being protective. This erosion of public trust, weakens the whole essence of the social contract that instituted the State, in the first instance. The ripple effect of this lack of public trust sometimes snowballs into mutiny since citizens are often forced to defend themselves.

A major issue in Walzer's theory is the responsibility and civilian immunity doctrine. He allocated broad immunity to citizens. In his opinion, the citizens are not responsible for the state's decision to go to war and should therefore not be legitimate targets of a war. This civilian immunity and responsibility clause is heavily infringed upon by military reprisal attacks on civilian targets and goes contrary to the 'jus in bello' principle. A major issue in Walzer's theory is the responsibility and civilian immunity doctrine. He allocated broad immunity to citizens. In his opinion, the citizens are not responsible for the state's decision to go to war and should therefore not be legitimate targets of a war. This civilian immunity and responsibility clause is heavily infringed upon by military reprisal attacks on civilian targets and goes contrary to the 'jus in bello' principle.

Increased Violence and Community Divisions:

Reprisal attacks as seen so far has not reduced violence in our communities, rather, it has exacerbated the levels of violence. A case in hand is the Odi massacre which instead of cowing the Niger Delta youths led to the formation of various militant groups and led to increased violence in the region. The highhanded maltreatment of IPOB members also escalated the level of violence in the South Eastern region. IPOB at its inception was not in any way an armed group, but the consistent military attacks on their members led to the formation of the ESN and the unknown gun men menace in the society. According to the War Prevention Initiative, (2020), reprisal attacks fuel radicalization, prolonged conflicts like Boko Haram, Niger Delta militancy and IPOB agitations. It also deepens divisions, hindering national cohesion and equitable distribution of both natural and other national resources.

Social Disorganization:

Reprisal attacks facilitate social disorganization within the communities that are affected. During reprisal attacks both the formal and informal social justice systems are broken down because it comes with it, breakdown of law and order. The Social Disorganization theory of crime emphasizes that crime thrives when society is disorganized. At that time, it is all men to their tent and people take laws into their hands, especially issues of safety and survival. Thus, each time there is a reprisal attack, the social order breaks down and this breeds crimes of various magnitude and the organs of social justice will not be able to function optimally.

Marginalization of Minority groups:

The indiscriminate recourse to reprisal attacks in the South East by the Nigerian army, at the slightest provocation, lends credence to the claim of marginalization by the South Easterners. In a country ravaged by terrorism, banditry and serial kidnapping along the Middle belt, North East and North West regions, and the exercise of caution by the military in these other regions while visiting the South East with total crack down at the least provocation cannot in any way promote social justice in all of its ramifications.

Policy Implications/Recommendations:

Accountability: Accountability should be strengthened through independent inquiries and ICC cooperation (Amnesty International, 2025). The soldiers responsible for reprisal attacks must be held accountable for their actions. Until that is done, they will always see it as business as usual. Impunity has become the watchword of our military personnel, thus the justice system has to be strengthened in such a manner that perpetrators of such acts face the law adequately and victims are compensated adequately too.

Adequate Training on Human Rights: A major training requirement for military personnel should be on Rights of the human person as enshrined in the constitution and International Human Right charters which Nigeria has already domesticated. The soldiers should be abreast with the basic rights and responsibilities of citizens and the limits those rights place on their operations as military and law enforcement personnel. The training should also address the Jus in Bello doctrine of Walzer (1977).

Promote civilian-led conflict resolution: Search for Common Ground, (2017) in their report stated as follows: “By working to achieve their interests, each side is also helping the other get what they want, this fosters a spirit of collaboration as one-time adversaries attack the problem at hand instead of each other. Nothing breeds trust like a shared success, so as opposing sides make small gains in working towards their shared goals, they also build trust. Attitudes towards and perceptions of “the other” shift, relationships grow stronger, and adversaries collaborate more successfully. Because the ultimate solution satisfies both sides’ needs, both sides are more likely to maintain peace.”

Judicial Reforms:

The United Nations in 2021, advocated for judicial reforms to enhance the capacity of citizen or victim redress (United Nations, 2021). The current judicial process in Nigeria does not encourage victims to seek redress from the courts. The victims lack adequate state protection and the judicial process itself is often very slow and expensive. The Nigerian government needs to establish a separate court with jurisdiction to entertain such matters. The court in question shall not operate like a military tribunal whose processes are not open to the public. The outcome and judgments of such a court should be in the public domain such that citizens can know that they can seek and get redress from the reckless conduct of military personnel. Legal representation should also be subsidized or even free. The National Human Rights Commission should be more empowered to pursue legal redress for victims. That way, justice will not only be done but would be seen to have been done.

Promote Policies that Address Root Causes of Conflicts:

According to Oxfam, (2023). Nigeria stands at a critical juncture where the demand for accountable governance intersects with the urgent reality of the climate crisis. Inclusiveness demands that all voices should be heard and concerns raised should be addressed. The situation where double standards are maintained for military and civilian offenders, create an impression of impunity for the military personnel. Impunity does not augur well for democracy at all.

Strengthen Anti-torture Act/National Committee on Torture:

Nigeria should not pay lip service to the anti-torture act but should ensure that the provisions of the Act are fully implemented. This will involve the prohibition of destruction of peoples’ homes and forced evictions, and ensure that even when such happens, they do not amount to collective punishments. The National Committee on torture should also be adequately empowered and funded to carry out its job. All detention facilities should be inspected periodically to ensure they meet the basic standards for human habitation. I align myself with the recommendations of Amnesty International (2025), that all safeguards against unlawful killings, extra judicial killings, unlawful arrests, arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances must be implemented. More so, Nigeria should take urgent steps to criminalize all cases of enforced disappearances and extra judicial killing.

CONCLUSION

The negative impacts of military reprisal attacks cannot be over emphasized. There is no gainsaying that

Nigerian citizens have been faced with a plethora of reprisal attacks which represent a profound assault on social justice, manifesting in human rights abuses, inequality, and impunity. The five major principles of Social Justice are: Access to resources, Equity, Participation, Diversity and Human rights. From all that has been stated here, it is obvious that reprisal attacks runs afoul of all the major principles of social justice and should be condemned in its totality. Historical cases like Odi and the plethora of killings in the South-East, alongside ongoing operations, underscore the need for reform. By integrating justice principles into security strategies, Nigeria can break violence cycles and foster equity. Reprisal attacks also fails the test of John Rawls theory of justice as fairness and Walzer's theory of just war. It fails short of all the indices of Jus in Bello. Reprisal attacks also represent a systemic challenge to social justice, manifested in historical militarization of society and weak accountability mechanisms.

Thus, having failed both the theoretical and empirical test of social justice, it is the opinion of the researcher that reprisal attacks should be discouraged at all fronts and governments especially Nigerian government , should strive to bring it to an end.

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