

Responses to Information Requests - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Nigeria: The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), including objectives, structure, activities, relations with other Biafran independence groups and treatment by authorities (2017-May 2019)

1. Overview

Sources state the IPOB is a group seeking to form an independent Biafra state (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 11; Campbell 21 Mar. 2018; BBC 5 May 2017). A report by Amnesty International on the repression of pro-Biafra activists indicates IPOB was formed in 2012 (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 11), while other sources state IPOB was formed in 2014 (BBC 5 May 2017; Turnbull Aug. 2017, 30). According to sources, an attempt to declare an independent Biafra in 1967 led to a civil war, resulting in approximately one million dead, and the secessionists defeated (Campbell 21 Mar. 2018; BBC 5 May 2017).

Biafra is a region in South East Nigeria (Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017; BBC 5 May 2017). It is populated predominately by people of the Igbo ethnicity (Campbell 21 Mar. 2018; BBC 5 May 2017). Sources state people in the South East feel marginalized due to the Nigerian military presence (*Foreign Policy* 15 Feb. 2019) or to the lack of government investment in the region (*Foreign Policy* 15 Feb. 2019; AFP 31 May 2017; Al Jazeera 30 May 2017). Corroborating information regarding Nigerian military presence in Biafra could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Amnesty International report explains that many IPOB members and supporters are young and unemployed and feel they cannot achieve their goals without an independent Biafra (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 12). Meghan Turnbull, a visiting assistant professor at Skidmore College who gave a presentation on armed groups in Nigeria during an EASO practical cooperation meeting held in Rome in June 2017, notes that young men in particular are marching in IPOB rallies (Turnbull Aug. 2017, 28).

In an expert's comment published on the Chatham House [1] website, Sola Toya, an associate fellow at the Africa Programme at Chatham House, and journalist Fidelis Mbah explain that the IPOB gained prominence after the election of President Muhammadu Buhari, who was perceived as "at best dismissive, and at times hostile" towards Nigerians in the South East region (Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017). Sources indicate the anti-Buhari sentiment in the region contributed to the visibility of the IPOB (Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017; Al Jazeera 30 May 2017). Sources state that Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the IPOB, was jailed on charges including treason, which is punishable by death (*Newsweek* 17 Oct. 2017; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017; International Crisis Group 4 Dec. 2015), and kept in custody until April 2017 despite the court ordering his release (Turnbull Aug. 2017, 30; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017). Sources indicate Kanu's imprisonment contributed to his rising popularity (Al Jazeera 30 May 2017; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017).

2. Objectives, Leadership, and Structure

According to an interview with Agence France-Presse (AFP), Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, stated:

"The mission and the values of IPOB are very simple: to restore Biafra, to make sure Biafra comes by whatever means possibleWe have chosen the track of peaceful agitation, non-violence, persuasion, logic, reason, argument. We are going to deploy all of that to make sure we get Biafra Our ultimate goal is freedom, referendum is the path we have chosen to take to get Biafra... There is no alternative." (AFP 31 May 2017, last ellipsis in original)

Sources name the following leadership of the IPOB:

- Nnamdi Kanu, leader of the IPOB and director of the London-based Radio Biafra (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 11; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017);
- Mazi Alphonsus Uche Okafor-Mefor (*Foreign Policy* 15 Feb. 2019) or Uche Mefor (*The Independent* 30 Nov. 2017), deputy leader (*Foreign Policy* 15 Feb. 2019; *The Independent* 30 Nov. 2017);
- Mazi Chika Edoziem, head of the Directorate of State of the IPOB (IPOB 15 May 2017; *The Independent* 30 Nov. 2017);
- Emma Powerful, media and publicity secretary (*The Guardian* 31 May 2017; *Vanguard* 30 May 2018) and the main host of Radio Biafra (*LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019).

According to a report by Amnesty International, the IPOB's activities are led by state chapters directed by state coordinators, who are managed by the "Coordinator of Coordinators" (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 12). The same source notes that the "Directorate of State" manages IPOB representatives abroad (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 12). However, a statement issued by Nnamdi Kanu in May 2017, reprinted on the IPOB-operated news website, the Biafra Telegraph (Radio Biafra n.d.), indicates that the following organizational changes have taken place:

- the position of "Coordinator of Coordinators" have been "abolished";
- the "world [a]dministrative [h]eadquarters" are located in the UK and Germany;
- Radio Biafra London, with satellite stations in South Africa, Malaysia and Germany and "soon to be opened" in the US, is the official channel of communication for the IPOB; and
- Uche Mefor and Mazi Chika Edoziem are authorized to communicate and issue directives on behalf of Kanu and the IPOB (IPOB 15 May 2017).

A statement from Emma Powerful, quoted in the *Independent*, a Nigerian newspaper, indicates the "'world administrative headquarters'" of the IPOB was opened in Langenfield, Germany in December 2017 (*The Independent* 30 Nov. 2017). Powerful stated that the IPOB's regional liaison offices, which serve as "regional points of contact," continue to operate in London, Tel Aviv, Ankara, New Delhi and Los Angeles, but only the administrative headquarters is authorized to issue "diplomatic directives" under the direction of Edoziem (*The Independent* 30 Nov. 2017). Further and corroborating information on the structure of the IPOB could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In an interview with the *Sun*, a Nigerian newspaper, Emma Powerful stated that the

IPOB established the Biafra Secret Service (BSS), a "vigilance" group to "gather intelligence and to safeguard those returning to Biafraland from the North," while also noting the peaceful nature of the IPOB and that the group would not be "militarised" (*The Sun* 20 Aug. 2017). In the same article, the Abia State Police Commissioner was quoted as stating the BSS is illegal and anyone caught promoting the BSS, including by posting videos of the group on social media, will face the "full weight of the law" (*The Sun* 20 Aug. 2017). In an interview with Reuters, a special advisor to the Abia State Governor stated he saw IPOB "uniformed national guard and secret service" hold parades in September 2017, while he also indicated he never saw IPOB members carrying weapons (Reuters 3 Oct. 2017). Further and corroborating information on the BSS could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Activities

3.1 Radio Biafra

Various sources state Radio Biafra broadcasts from London (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 5; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017; BBC 5 May 2017). However, a *Los Angeles Times* (*LA Times*) article published in April 2019 indicates the broadcasts are conducted live from an undisclosed location in Nigeria (*LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019). Tayo and Mbah state the daily broadcasts are in English and in Igbo (Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017). Sources further indicate broadcasts on IPOB's Radio Biafra are used to advocate for an independent Biafra (Turnbull Aug. 2017, 30; BBC 5 May 2017; *LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019). The *LA Times* article states that Radio Biafra is used by its main host, Emma Powerful, to organize protests, including a boycott of the 2019 election (*LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019). The same source further indicates that the broadcasts are illegal, and that activists report that people caught listening have been beaten or arrested (*LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Amnesty International, the broadcasts contain messages that "may constitute incitement to violent acts against the Nigerian state," including Kanu calling for retaliation against the military by stating "we shall hunt them down, the zoo soldiers, and kill them" after the military killed two IPOB members and injured thirty in August 2015 (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 11). The same source indicates that despite the rhetoric of Radio Biafra, IPOB demonstrations documented by Amnesty International for their 2016 report were "largely peaceful" (Amnesty International 24 Nov. 2016, 12). Similarly, Meghan Turnbull states that Radio Biafra's "rhetoric has been violent," including stating that they "needed guns and bullets," but IPOB-organized demonstrations have been "overwhelmingly peaceful" (Turnbull Aug. 2017, 30).

3.2 Protests and Boycotts

Sources indicate the IPOB and other pro-Biafra groups, including Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (*The Guardian* 31 May 2017) issued a "sit-at-home" order for 30 May 2017 (*Vanguard* 30 May 2017; *The Guardian* 31 May 2017). Sources indicate 30 May is the anniversary of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Biafra (AFP 31 May 2017; Al Jazeera 30 May 2017). According to an article by AFP, Kanu stated his aim was using "civil disobedience" to force a referendum on self-determination, while the police warned that they would

"deal decisively" with any protest (AFP 31 May 2017). The same source notes that most markets were closed and roads were mostly empty in Onitsha, "the economic hub of Anambra state" (AFP 31 May 2017). Sources indicate schools and shops in Enugu state were closed (*Vanguard* 30 May 2017; *The Guardian* 31 May 2017).

The IPOB issued another "sit-at-home" order for 30 May 2018 (Premium Times 30 May 2018; *Vanguard* 30 May 2018). According to an article by *Vanguard*, a Nigerian newspaper, the Governor of Ebonyi State was quoted as saying any business which closed in compliance with the order will lose their shop (*Vanguard* 30 May 2018). An article by Premium Times, a Nigerian news website (Premium Times n.d.), states that markets, banks and schools were closed in Aba in Abia State and Onitsha, while some shops were opened in Enugu, and the order was ignored in Ebonyi State with businesses operating normally (Premium Times 30 May 2018). The same source further indicates twenty vehicles from "major security agencies" were seen patrolling the streets of Abakaliki in Ebonyi State and a police surveillance helicopter flew over the city (Premium Times 30 May 2018). The BBC, quoting their Igbo-language service, states there was "total shutdown" in Enugu and Anambra state, while Port Harcourt and parts of Abia state were also affected (BBC 30 May 2018).

According to sources, the IPOB again issued a "sit-at-home" order for 30 May 2019 (*Vanguard* 31 May 2019; Premium Times 30 May 2019; *The Guardian* 30 May 2019). An article by Premium Times indicates markets, schools and banks were closed in Onitsha, while Enugu, Owerri, and Abakaliki ignored the order with businesses staying open (Premium Times 30 May 2019). The same source notes over 2,000 members of a youth group led by a former advisor to the Ebonyi State Governor marched around Abakaliki to ensure "total clampdown" on Biafra supporters and Ebonyi state police were seen at "strategic" locations in Abakaliki providing security (Premium Times 30 May 2019). The *Guardian*, a Nigerian daily newspaper, indicates that there was partial compliance in Enugu (*The Guardian* 30 May 2019). According to a *Vanguard* article, businesses were closed in Onitsha and Nnewi; banks, schools and shops were closed in Aba; partial compliance with the order in Enugu with some business opening in the afternoon; and the order was ignored in Imo and Ebonyi (*Vanguard* 31 May 2019). The same source further states that security agencies, including the army, navy, police and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps, were posted to various locations in Onitsha; police vehicles were stationed in front of major entrances of markets in Aba; and there was no police or military presence in Enugu (*Vanguard* 30 May 2018). Further information on the response by authorities to the May 2017, 2018 and 2019 "sit-at-home" protests could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that the IPOB called for the boycott of the February 2019 general election (*Foreign Policy* 15 Feb. 2019; AFP 17 Feb. 2019). According to an article by AFP, Kanu stated the boycott was part of the IPOB's push for a referendum (AFP 17 Feb. 2019). *Vanguard* indicates that IPOB members held marches in eleven states to demonstrate their support of the boycott on 23 November 2018 (*Vanguard* 24 Nov. 2018a). According to sources, police and IPOB supporters clashed during an election boycott march in Nnewi, Anambra State, leading to the death of one police officer (*The Nation* 23 Nov. 2018; *The Sun* 25 Nov. 2018). Sources state that, according to the Anambra State police, thirty-four IPOB members were arrested for the death of the police officer, injuring others and setting a police vehicle on fire (*Vanguard* 24 Nov. 2018b; *The Sun* 25 Nov. 2018). Emma Powerful, quoted by the *Sun*, stated the march was peaceful, denied that any IPOB member was arrested or that the death of

the police officer occurred (*The Sun* 25 Nov. 2018). Sources indicate Kanu called off the boycott two days before the election without providing a reason, stating on Twitter that ""preconditions and terms have been met, signed, sealed and delivered"" (AFP 17 Feb. 2019; Premium Times 15 Feb. 2019).

4. Relations with Other Biafran Independence Groups

Sources indicate seven pro-Biafran groups, including the IPOB, MASSOB, Biafran Revolutionary Organization (BRO), Eastern People Congress (EPC), Joint Revolutionary Council of Biafra (JRCB), Biafra Liberation Crusaders (BLC), and Salvation People of Biafra, have agreed to work together to secure a referendum under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu and aim to speak with "one voice" on Biafran issues (*Vanguard* 29 June 2017, Ndigbo News 29 June 2017; Concise News 29 June 2017). Sources indicate that the umbrella group is named the Biafran People National Council (Ndigbo News 29 June 2017; Concise News 29 June 2017) and that the agreement was announced at the end of June 2017 (Concise News 29 June 2017; *Vanguard* 29 June 2017). Further information on the Biafran People National Council could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources report the existence of a coalition of pro-Biafra group called Biafra People Liberation Movement (BPLM) (*The Sun* 31 May 2019; *Daily Post* 30 May 2019) which includes MASSOB, EPC, Igbo Youth Cultural and Restoration Initiative (IYCRI), Movement of Biafrans in Nigeria (MOBIN), and Customary Government of Biafra (CGB), among other organizations (*The Sun* 31 May 2019; *Daily Post* 30 May 2019). In a statement published by the *Daily Post*, a Nigerian newspaper, the BPLM acknowledges "the effort of other pro[-]Biafra groups like ... [the] Mazi Nnamdi[-]led IPOB" (*Daily Post* 30 May 2019). Further and corroborating information on the Biafra People Liberation Movement and its relationship with the IPOB could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Treatment by Authorities

Sources indicate the Nigerian military launched "Operation Python Dance II" that started on 15 September 2017 and was set to last until 15 October 2017 in the South East region to tackle crime (*Daily Trust* 24 Sept. 2017; *Vanguard* 17 Sept. 2017). According to a statement from the Nigerian army, quoted in a *Vanguard* article, the operation "is not targeted at any individual or group" (*Vanguard* 17 Sept. 2017). Sources state the military raided Nnamdi Kanu's home as part of the operation (Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017; Reuters 3 Oct. 2017). Sources indicate that the IPOB stated that approximately twenty IPOB members were shot dead during the raid, while the military denied the raid took place (Reuters 3 Oct. 2017; *Newsweek* 17 Oct. 2017). In contrast, Amnesty International states that ten IPOB members were killed and twelve injured by the military, and the military noted the deaths occurred during their attempt to arrest Kanu at his home (Amnesty International 22 Feb. 2018). Sources indicate the following information:

- Kanu disappeared after the raid (Reuters 3 Oct. 2017; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017);
- he surfaced in Israel in October 2018 (Premium Times 15 Feb. 2019; AFP 17 Feb. 2019); and
- he has been in Britain since early 2019 (*LA Times* 30 Apr. 2019; AFP 17 Feb.

2019).

Sources indicate that the Nigerian military designated the IPOB as a terrorist organization in September 2017, citing the IPOB's formation of the BSS and attacks on security forces as reasons (Reuters 15 Sept. 2017; VOA 26 Sept. 2017). Sources indicate the label of "terrorist" organization has been rejected by international observers (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019; Tayo and Mbah 9 Nov. 2017). According to sources, five South Eastern States in Nigeria, including Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, banned all IPOB activities (Pulse.ng 15 Sept. 2017; Channel Television 15 Sept. 2017). Sources indicate that the Abia State Police Commissioner stated, subsequent to the terrorist designation and the ban on IPOB activities, that anyone caught with "Biafran materials would be arrested and prosecuted" (NAN 17 Sept. 2017; *Vanguard* 18 Sept. 2017). The Anambra Police Commissioner, quoted by the *Punch*, a Nigerian news publication, indicated the ban would be enforced and anyone involved in the activities of the IPOB would be charged with terrorism, which carries a minimum sentence of twenty years and a maximum sentence of the death penalty (*The Punch* 19 Sept. 2017).

Four IPOB members, who were arrested with Nnamdi Kanu in 2015, were jailed and charged with "treasonable felony" (*The Punch* 25 June 2018; Campbell 21 Mar. 2018) or "preparations to secede from Nigeria" (*Vanguard* 6 July 2018). Sources indicate they were granted bail in June 2018 pending their trial (*The Punch* 25 June 2018; *Vanguard* 6 July 2018).

Sixty pro-Biafra supporters, who participated in an IPOB rally which left a police officer dead and a police station "nearly" burned down, were charged and jailed for "conspiracy, terrorism, attempted murder, and membership in an unlawful society" (VOA 26 Sept. 2017; Premium Times 25 Sept. 2017). According to Reuters, the Abia State Police Commissioner stated that 74 IPOB members have been arrested and charged since 12 September 2017, with many charges stemming from the burning of the police station, while the IPOB denied it was involved with the fire (Reuters 3 Oct. 2017).

Sources state that 112 [or over 100 (Premium Times 24 Aug. 2018)] women in Owerri, Imo State were arrested during an August 2018 protest regarding the whereabouts of Nnamdi Kanu (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019; Sahara Reporters 24 Aug. 2018; Premium Times 24 Aug. 2018). Sources indicate they were detained and charged with treason and unlawful assembly, sparking outcry and demands for their release from rights groups (Sahara Reporters 24 Aug. 2018; Premium Times 24 Aug. 2018). Sources indicate they were discharged and released after six days (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019; Sahara Reporters 24 Aug. 2018; Premium Times 24 Aug. 2018).

According to sources, 51 people suspected of being IPOB members, were arrested in December 2018 as they "were reportedly setting for [a] Judaism service within the premises of the country home of the leader of [IPOB] Mazi Nnamdi Kanu" in Unuhia (*The Guardian* 8 Jan. 2019) or during a procession through the streets which started in the Afaraukwu community from which Kanu hails (*Vanguard* 12 Dec. 2018). Sources indicate they were demonstrating for an independent Jewish State (*Vanguard* 12 Dec. 2018; *The Guardian* 14 Dec. 2018) and that they were arrested for "being in possession" of different emblems of the IPOB (*Vanguard* 12 Dec. 2018; Legit.ng 14 Dec. 2018). Sources state they were arraigned at magistrate court for terrorism and treason but the court decided it lacked jurisdiction to hear the case and ordered the detainees into custody while the case is transferred (Legit.ng 14 Dec.

2018; *The Guardian* 14 Dec. 2018). Counsel for the defendants was quoted as saying the prosecution's decision to arraign the respondents at a court lacking jurisdiction was illegal and unconstitutional, citing similar Supreme Court decisions (Legit.ng 14 Dec. 2019; *The Guardian* 14 Dec. 2019). According to the *Guardian*, the detainees were granted bail on 8 January 2019 (*The Guardian* 8 Jan. 2019).

A representative of the Enugu Police was quoted, by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), a state-run news agency (NAN n.d.), as stating that 140 IPOB members were arrested for "engaging in unlawful procession and display of prohibited items" in the Nsukka region of Enugu State on 22 May 2019 (NAN 23 May 2019). In contrast, the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), a Nigerian civil society and human rights group, as quoted in the *Sun*, stated that the 140 individuals were arrested at a military and police checkpoint while going to a funeral, "tortured," then arraigned in court on 23 May, where the court decided it does not have jurisdiction to hear the case and ordered them to prison (*The Sun* 6 June 2019). The same source further states that the detainees have not received a trial date as of two weeks after their arraignment (*The Sun* 6 June 2019). Similarly, the South-East Based Coalition of Human Rights & Democracy Organisations (SBCHROs), "a coalition of 22 rights and democracy groups operating in the Southeast part of Eastern Nigeria," quoted in News Express, a Nigerian online newspaper (News Express n.d.), indicates "Biafra insignias" including "flags and bangles" were found by the "Enugu State Joint Security Patrol teams" on some of the 140 people going to a funeral (News Express 26 May 2019). The same source indicates that all 140 individuals were arrested and charged with terrorism, and were sent to prison by the magistrate court until their case can be heard at the High Court (News Express 26 May 2019).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] Chatham House is a London-based policy institute "engaging governments, the private sector, civil society and [its] members in open debates and private discussions on the major issues in world politics" (Chatham House n.d.).

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