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Nigeria: Treatment of the members of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the availability of state protection (July 2005 - August 2009)

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A 26 November 2007 report on Nigeria published by the United Kingdom (UK) Home Office indicates that "the human rights situation has ... improved since the return to civilian rule in 1999," even though the federal government of Nigeria takes measures against movements "that threaten the unity of the country," such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The same report states that MASSOB leaders and those closely affiliated with them "are at risk of arrest and detention by the authorities on account of their political opinion" (UK 26 Nov. 2007, Sec. 3.7.7). MASSOB leader Ralph Uwazuruike has been arrested numerous times (*ibid.*, Sec. 3.7.2), but less prominent MASSOB members are "at risk of ill-treatment by the authorities in order to intimidate others" (*ibid.*, Sec. 3.7.7).

Nigerian authorities reportedly accuse members of MASSOB of committing many violent acts (Reuters 20 July 2006) and describe them as "common criminals" and "armed robbers" (BBC 30 May 2007). According to the observations of a high-ranking officer with the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), collected by Radio France internationale (RFI), MASSOB members are armed and have been involved in attacks on buildings and public property (RFI 2 July 2006).

Two articles published on 8 September 2005 report that MASSOB members were arrested, wounded or killed in two different Nigerian states during protests against "the continued harrassment" of their leader Uwazuruike (*The Punch* 8 Sept. 2005; *Daily Champion* 8 Sept. 2005). One MASSOB leader claimed that earlier, police forces had attacked the MASSOB headquarters and destroyed equipment stored there (*The Guardian* 8 Sept. 2005).

According to a Swiss Refugee Council (Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés, OSAR) report and a United Nations (UN) Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article, MASSOB founder Uwazuruike and many other members were arrested in November 2005 (OSAR Dec. 2006; UN 6 Nov. 2007); while other sources reported that they were arrested in October 2005 (Africa Masterweb 9 Nov. 2005; Reuters 20 July 2006). In November 2005, Uwazuruike and six other MASSOB members appeared in court, charged with treason (PANA 8 Nov. 2005; Reuters 20 July 2006; UN 5 Dec. 2005). A November 2007 IRIN article indicates that the MASSOB leader was released in October 2007 (UN 6 Nov. 2007). However, a May 2008 *Vanguard* article reports that Uwazuruike and 10 MASSOB members, who had been detained for several years, obtained a conditional release in May 2008 because the Court of Appeal found that the evidence against them was insufficient to justify their prolonged detention (*Vanguard* 16 May 2008).

According to a lawyer, [translation] "these actions are intended to thwart the activists' efforts," because, despite many arraignments, there have been no convictions, which according to the lawyer, only confirms that MASSOB members [translation] "do not use violence" (RFI 2 July 2006). Although many MASSOB members who have been arrested are quickly released without charge, some have nonetheless awaited their judgment in custody (UK 26 Nov. 2007, Sec. 3.7.2).

Despite being banned in 2001 (ibid.) or in 2002 (PANA 8 Nov. 2005), MASSOB is still very active, which gives rise to clashes between its members and the police (UK 26 Nov. 2007, Sec. 3.7.4; PANA 8 Nov. 2005). Such conflicts have resulted in the deaths of several MASSOB members (ibid.; UN 6 Nov. 2007). For instance, on 5 December 2005, MASSOB called for a general strike demanding the release of its leader and independence for the regions inhabited mainly by Igbos, (UN 5 Dec. 2005; see also *Vanguard* 7 Dec. 2005). In response to the strike, the police used tear gas grenades and fired shots in the air to disperse MASSOB supporters (UN 5 Dec. 2005). On 7 December 2005, an article in *Vanguard* reported that 20 people had been killed during that event. In contrast, a chief of police was quoted as saying that he had received no information about anyone being killed (*Vanguard* 7 Dec. 2005).

Clashes between the police and MASSOB members following a campaign organized by MASSOB to boycott the population census in 2006 apparently resulted in dozens of deaths, including a few police officers (PANA 23 Mar. 2006). In addition, former president Olusegun Obasanjo expressed anger at MASSOB for the successful census boycott campaign and decided that MASSOB should be "destroyed" (USAfricaonline 13 July 2006).

According to an article published on 20 June 2006 on the website of Voice of America (VOA), an international news service financed by the government of the United States (US) (VOA n.d.), Nigerian authorities accused MASSOB of being involved in an attack that apparently freed 200 prisoners from a prison in southeastern Onitsha. A MASSOB spokesperson refuted those allegations and identified the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO) as being responsible (VOA 20 June 2006). During the conflict, a dozen people were reportedly killed in clashes between police and MASSOB members; there were also "street battles" between members of MASSOB and the NARTO (ibid.). According to RFI, in June 2006, a police raid of a MASSOB office in Onitsha resulted in the death of several individuals (2 July 2006).

An article published by *Leadership* on 5 June 2008 reported that more than 15 individuals were arrested and tried at various courts in Asaba for being MASSOB members. The arrests took place following a May 2008 police order to arrest any individuals found with a Biafran flag in their possession (*Leadership* 5 June 2008; *Nigerian Tribune* 1 June 2008).

According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, in June 2008, the police arrested several MASSOB members who were commemorating the secessionist state of Biafra and charged them with "conspiracy to commit a felony" (US 25 Feb. 2009, Sec. 1d). Further information on the outcome of these arrests could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

According to an article published by IRIN, many MASSOB members have died in clashes with the police since the movement was founded (UN 4 Sept. 2006; see also Africa Masterweb 24 May 2008 and UN 5 Dec. 2005). According to MASSOB, between May 2000 and April 2008, "over 2,000 of its members were killed by Nigerian security forces ... and over 1,000 [are] languishing in various prisons in the country," although Nigerian police officials dispute these allegations (Africa Masterweb 24 May 2008).

Further information on the statistics could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

IRIN reports that members of the Igbo ethnic group feel that they are "discriminated against" by Nigeria's federal government (UN 6 Nov. 2007). Uwazuruike explains that the Igbos feel marginalized because of the repression they have faced from successive governments since the end of the civil war in 1970, and especially because no Igbo has ever been appointed to any senior position in the security forces, even though they make up one of Nigeria's three largest ethnic groups (UN 4 Sept. 2006; see also Reuters 10 July 2006).

An article published on 19 August 2008 in *This Day*, a newspaper from Lagos, reports that MASSOB called for the arrest and arraignment of former president Olusegun Obasanjo before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), on charges of "genocide ... [and] for ordering the killing of many MASSOB members" (see also USAfricaonline 13 July 2006). Further information on the outcome of this motion could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

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.

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