

COUNTERINSURGENCY, MILITARY CASUALTIES, AND NIGERIA'S FRAGILITY

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Abstract

Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign against Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) has recorded persistent military casualties, including senior officers and rank-and-file personnel, raising concerns about state fragility and operational effectiveness. Recurrent losses suggest deeper structural weaknesses in intelligence, logistics, morale, and command systems. This study examined the causes and manifestations of military deaths in Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations, evaluates government responses, and assesses implications for operational readiness and national security. The study is anchored on State Fragility Theory and Asymmetric Warfare Theory. State Fragility explains weak institutional capacity to provide security, while Asymmetric Warfare explains how weaker insurgents exploit vulnerabilities of stronger state forces through ambushes, mobility and leadership targeting. A qualitative design was adopted using purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant respondents. Secondary data from academic literature, policy reports, and media sources complemented interview data. Findings show that key causes of military casualties in counterinsurgency operation include intelligence failures, poor surveillance, weak logistics, inadequate air-ground coordination, and insufficient weapon systems. Consequences of military casualties include troop resignations, mutinies, low morale, disrupted command structures, and reduced combat effectiveness. Government responses remain largely reactive despite increased budgets and weapon procurement. The study concludes that military casualties affect Nigeria's counterinsurgency and these casualties are preventable or can be minimized. The study recommends among other things that sustainable counterinsurgency requires intelligence-led operations, welfare reforms, institutional accountability, and community-centred security strategies.

Key Words: Insecurity, Fragility, Terrorism, Insurgency, Nigerian Armed Forces, Boko Haram

Introduction

Security is broadly understood as freedom from fear and want, especially hunger and violence (Alkire, 2003). It remains a core aspiration of all states and societies, yet it is difficult to achieve because no state is entirely free from insecurity. Across the world, states experience varying levels of insecurity; low, medium, or high. UNDP (2022) reports that about 1.2 billion people live in conflict-affected areas, with almost half of them (560 million) in countries not usually considered to be fragile, indicating that the traditional ideas about which countries are most vulnerable to conflict need to be revisited. Even stable countries like Britain, Germany and even the United States of America remain concerned about neighbouring threats, migration pressures, terrorism, and internal instability. Powerful states also face both external and internal security challenges, showing that insecurity is a universal feature of political life.

In Africa, insecurity is particularly widespread. The continent has experienced civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, and political violence. Civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia and insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and many in the Sahel face these crises (Idris, Thompson et al, 2025). Weak governance, porous borders, and external interference have contributed to persistent instability (Thompson and Adams, 2021). Citizens and leaders often find themselves both affected by and implicated in insecurity. In recent years, insurgency and terrorism have become the dominant security challenges in many African states, severely undermining governance and development.

Nigeria's counterinsurgency campaign in the northeast over the past decade reflects these broader challenges. The country continues to face persistent insurgent threats that strain military institutions (Thompson, 2021). Increasingly, both senior officers and lower-ranking personnel are being targeted and killed in hundreds (Akemu, 2025) with no official figure. The assassination and ambush of senior officers demonstrate insurgent capability and adaptability, while losses among rank-and-file soldiers reveal weaknesses in training, morale, welfare, logistics, and coordination. These losses expose structural vulnerabilities within Nigeria's defence system.

This situation raises concerns about the effectiveness of Nigeria's military command structure and national stability. When both leadership and frontline troops are vulnerable, it indicates weaknesses in intelligence, coordination, and resource management. Insurgents exploit these gaps by targeting leadership to disrupt command cohesion and weaken operations, thereby prolonging instability and undermining counterinsurgency efforts.

Although studies have examined insecurity and counterinsurgency in Nigeria (Thompson and Adams, 2021; Thompson, Ademola et al., 2025; Osho, 2025a; Osho, 2025b; Oladele, Osho et al., 2025), limited attention has been paid

to the impact of military deaths on operational effectiveness. This study therefore explores how the targeting of military personnel reflects Nigeria's fragility in its fight against insurgency. It addresses questions on the causes and manifestations of military killings, government responses, and implications for counterinsurgency outcomes. It situates the issue within state capacity, civil–military relations, and asymmetric warfare, arguing that sustained military losses significantly affect national security and resilience.

Literature Review

The targeting of both senior military officers (“the ranks”) and lower-ranking personnel (“the files”) has become a defining feature of contemporary insurgent violence in Nigeria's counterinsurgency environment. In conflicts such as the Boko Haram insurgency, armed groups deliberately attack command structures while simultaneously inflicting heavy casualties on rank-and-file soldiers. This dual strategy reflects a broader logic of asymmetric warfare, where weakening leadership and degrading troop strength are pursued simultaneously to undermine state capacity. Thompson and Aduradola (2019) reveal that the modern phase of counterinsurgency in Nigeria began in 2009 following the violent uprising and killing of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in Maiduguri. This event triggered the transformation of the movement into a full-scale insurgency under Abubakar Shekau, leading to widespread attacks on civilians, security forces, and state infrastructure. In response, the Nigerian state launched sustained military operations involving the Nigerian Armed Forces, police, and intelligence agencies, marking the formal beginning of contemporary counterinsurgency operations.

Accorsi and Fazal (2025) define military effectiveness as the ability of armed forces to convert resources into combat power and achieve strategic objectives through coordinated operations and battlefield success. They further argue that effectiveness is closely tied to task performance and organizational cohesion, including coordination, leadership, and tactical execution. The removal of key personnel, especially commanders or specialists, undermines these elements by creating gaps in leadership, communication, and expertise. Millett, Murray, and Watman (1986) similarly argue that military effectiveness depends on the integration of leadership, doctrine, training, and morale rather than sheer numbers or technology, with organizational adaptability and strategic coherence determining success in combat operations. Millett and Murray (2010) further emphasize that effective armed forces rely on organizational competence, leadership quality, and the ability to coordinate complex operations.

In examining battlefield fatalities, Katzenell et al. (2012), using Israel Defense Forces trauma registry data (2002–2009), found that gunshot wounds accounted for 63% of deaths, while hemorrhage caused 81.5% of fatalities. Most deaths from hemorrhage occurred before medical evacuation, highlighting

the importance of rapid response. The study also distinguished between non-compressible torso hemorrhage and potentially survivable limb or neck injuries, emphasizing that improved pre-hospital care and hemorrhage control could reduce avoidable deaths. Holcomb et al. (2007) similarly found that 85% of battlefield deaths were nonsurvivable, largely due to explosions and gunshots, while 15% were potentially survivable, mainly from hemorrhage. They stress improved evacuation and trauma care as critical to survival.

Military effectiveness is also shaped by organizational and psychological factors. Biddle (2004) argues that modern warfare success depends heavily on force employment, including training, discipline, and unit integration. Wainstein (1986) identifies personnel, equipment, supply, command structure, and morale as key determinants of combat effectiveness, noting morale as the most decisive factor. Mabry et al. (2000), in comparing Mogadishu (1993) and Vietnam War casualties, found that body armour reduced fatal thoracic injuries but shifted fatalities to unprotected areas, highlighting the adaptive nature of battlefield injuries. Thompson (2021) links mutiny to loss of comrades, especially from preventable deaths.

Table 1: Combat Reaction Stages

<i>Category</i>	<i>Apprehension ("Normal Fear")</i>	<i>Incipient Combat Reaction</i>	<i>Partial Combat Reaction</i>	<i>Complete Combat Reaction</i>
<i>Social and Behavioral</i>	Appropriate; Combat effective; Close with comrades; Shares fears with comrades	Add: Irritability	Reclusive; Morose; Overdependent and avoids responsibility; Reduced initiative; Impulsive; Decreased interest in combat, food, letters, etc.; Unit members alarmed	Unstable; Erratic; Reckless or overcautious; Savage irritability; Unreasonable and defiant; Sobbing; Screaming; Passive and helpless
<i>Emotional and Cognitive</i>	Increased vigilance; Worries: death/mutilation; Incapacitating fear; Losing caste with group through fear	Add: Startle reaction	Mild disorientation; Reduced judgment; Psychomotor retardation; Affect blunting; Depressed; Ruminating regarding survival, combat failure, excess combat aggression	Confused; Disorganized; Amnestic
<i>Somatic</i>	Tense; Autonomic arousal (gastrointestinal disorders, etc.); Disturbed sleep (including sleepwalking); Psychosomatic complaints	Add: Major insomnia	Severe diarrhea and vomiting; Somatic preoccupation	Stammering and incoherent; Tremulous and uncoordinated; Mute and staring; Conversion symptoms: deaf, blind, paralyzed, convulsive

Source: Bartemeier et al, 1946;Cooke, nd, 147)

Cooke (n.d.) adds that combat stress and psychological trauma significantly reduce morale, decision-making, and operational readiness, producing “bloodless casualties” that degrade effectiveness.

Nigeria's insurgency and counterinsurgency dynamics have also been widely studied. Thompson et al. (2025) show that prison breaks significantly increase insurgent attacks and worsen insecurity. Abdusalam (2023) argues that lack of civilian understanding and support undermines counterinsurgency success and recommends addressing socioeconomic grievances, improving civil–military cooperation, and strengthening intelligence and training. Zango (2024) finds that Nigerian counterinsurgency measures, while initially effective, failed to defeat Boko Haram and instead contributed to renewed violence and human rights violations. Thompson et al. (2026) show how many youths in the southeast are afraid to join the military as a result of these obvious reasons such as the continuous killings of the military personnel, poor pay among others. Dan-Azumi further argues that militarised counter terrorism strategies globally have proven ineffective, especially against Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, and recommends integrating indigenous knowledge, local voices, and community-based approaches as more sustainable alternatives.

However, there remains limited scholarly attention to the increasing targeting of military personnel by insurgent groups and the implications of these attacks for Nigeria's security architecture. Specifically, little is known about how persistent attacks on military personnel affect troop morale, operational effectiveness, recruitment and retention, military-civilian relations, and the overall trajectory of counterinsurgency campaigns. Furthermore, few studies have examined the social, psychological, and institutional consequences of military casualties for affected families, military communities, and national security governance. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the growing targeting of military personnel and its consequences for Nigeria's counterinsurgency efforts.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the fragile state theory and the asymmetric warfare. State Fragility Theory explains the condition in which a state is unable to effectively perform its core functions of governance, particularly the provision of security, the maintenance of law and order, and the delivery of basic public services. What then is a fragile state? The OECD (2025) defines fragility as the combination of exposure to risk and the insufficient resilience of a state, system and/or community to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks. In this context, fragility does not necessarily imply total collapse, but rather a weakened capacity of state institutions to exercise authority, respond to crises, and maintain legitimacy across its territory.

A fragile state is therefore one in which gaps in governance create opportunities for instability, violence, and the rise of non-state actors who challenge the state's monopoly over the use of force (Cebotari et al, 2025). Within the framework of Nigeria, State Fragility Theory is particularly useful for understanding persistent security challenges, especially insurgency, terrorism, and widespread criminality. The inability of the state to fully secure all regions, especially remote and conflict-prone areas, reflects institutional weaknesses in intelligence, coordination, resource allocation, and accountability. These deficiencies create conditions in which groups such as insurgents and armed militias can operate, recruit, and expand their influence.

The theory also emphasizes that fragility is both a cause and consequence of insecurity. Weak institutions lead to insecurity, and sustained insecurity further weakens institutions, creating a cyclical pattern of instability (Thompson, Aina et al, 2026). In the case of the Nigerian Armed Forces, persistent operational challenges, leadership vulnerabilities, and resource constraints can be understood as manifestations of broader state fragility. Thus, the theory provides a critical lens for analyzing how and why states struggle to maintain effective control in the face of sustained internal threats.

Asymmetric Warfare Theory explains conflicts in which opposing actors possess significantly unequal military capabilities, strategies, and resources. In such situations, weaker actors—often non-state groups—avoid direct confrontation with stronger state forces and instead adopt unconventional tactics designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of the more powerful opponent. These tactics may include ambushes, guerrilla warfare, and sabotage, improvised explosive devices, psychological warfare, and targeted attacks on both civilians and security personnel. The core logic of asymmetric warfare is not to defeat a stronger opponent in conventional battles, but to weaken, frustrate, and gradually erode its operational effectiveness and political will.

In the context of Nigeria, asymmetric warfare is highly relevant to the activities of insurgent groups operating against the Nigerian Armed Forces. Groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP avoid conventional battlefield engagements and instead rely on surprise attacks, intelligence gathering, and mobility to target both military formations and civilian populations. This approach allows them to compensate for their lack of conventional military strength while sustaining prolonged conflict against a more equipped state military. As a result, asymmetric warfare theory helps to explain the persistent instability in Nigeria's counterinsurgency environment and the adaptive nature of insurgent violence.

Nigerian Military and Nigeria's Counterinsurgency (COIN) Wars

The Nigerian Armed Forces refers to the unified military institutions responsible for defending the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and internal security of Nigeria. It is composed of three main services: the Nigerian Army, Nigerian Navy, and Nigerian Air Force. These forces operate under the authority of the Commander-in-Chief, who is the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

In relation to Nigeria, the Armed Forces play a central role not only in external defence but also in internal security operations, particularly in counterinsurgency campaigns against groups such as Boko Haram and other armed non-state actors. Over time, their role has expanded due to persistent insecurity, making them key actors in addressing terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, and other violent crimes. Nigeria's counterinsurgency (COIN) wars since 2009 are primarily associated with the rise of Boko Haram and subsequent splinter groups, marking one of the most prolonged internal security challenges faced by the country.

Between 2010 and 2014, the insurgency intensified, with Boko Haram expanding its operations across the North-East, particularly in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states (Thompson and Aduradola, 2016). The period was characterized by bombings, assassinations, and mass abductions, most notably the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping, which drew global attention and escalated military responses. From 2015 onward, under intensified military campaigns and regional cooperation with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the Nigerian state recorded significant territorial recoveries. However, insurgent tactics shifted toward guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and attacks on military formations, reflecting an adaptive asymmetric strategy rather than outright defeat.

By the late 2010s and into the 2020s, the conflict further evolved with the emergence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which splintered from Boko Haram and adopted more structured, tactical, and intelligence-driven operations. This phase saw increased targeting of military bases, convoy ambushes, and leadership strikes, highlighting persistent vulnerabilities within Nigeria's counterinsurgency architecture.

Overall, Nigeria's COIN wars since 2009 illustrate a protracted and evolving conflict marked by shifting insurgent strategies, regional spillover into the Lake Chad Basin, and continuous adaptation by both state and non-state actors. Despite military offensives, the conflict persists due to structural weaknesses, intelligence gaps, and socio-economic drivers of insurgency.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to investigate the persistent targeting of Nigerian military personnel by insurgents and terrorists during counterinsurgency operations. The qualitative approach was suitable because it enabled in-depth understanding of perceptions, operational realities, and institutional challenges surrounding military casualties. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 15 participants with relevant expertise and experience. Participants included serving and retired military officers, police personnel, and lecturers in security studies drawn from Abuja, Maiduguri, Lagos, Kaduna, Ibadan, Ilorin, and Abeokuta. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2026, physically and through secure telephone conversations, depending on participants' availability and security concerns. Each interview lasted approximately 30–50 minutes.

Inclusion criteria were: participants must possess direct professional experience in security operations, policy, or counterinsurgency research; be aged 18 years and above; and voluntarily consent to participate. Exclusion criteria included civilians without security expertise, individuals unwilling to provide consent, and participants unable to complete interviews. Secondary data were obtained from journal articles, government reports, credible newspapers, and defence publications. Data were analysed thematically by coding recurring issues such as intelligence failure, logistics, morale, and command disruption. Ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent were strictly observed throughout the study.

Findings

Causes and Manifestations of Deaths

The deaths of both senior military officers (“the brass”) and rank-and-file soldiers (“the files”) in Nigeria are driven by a combination of operational, structural, and strategic factors. Key causes include intelligence failures. A participant said, “I think one of the reasons why the terrorists kill our military be it high ranking or file is the lack of intelligence or intelligence failure. Sometimes, they may hear that the Boko haram are operating in a village and by the time they get there, they would not see them rather, the Boko Haram would appear from another place. This is no doubt mis-intelligence where the intelligence is supposed to be live. As the Boko Haram are moving to another location, the troops or theatre should be informed of the movement. So, when this happens, it is certain that the intelligence is inadequate or non-existence (Army Officer, Abuja, April 2026). Another said that the intelligence given to the military is always insufficient or false and sometimes they are obsolete (Army officer, Maiduguri, March 2026).

According to a police officer in Ilorin:

The military source for intelligence just like the Boko haram or terrorists. I feel that the failure of intelligence by the Nigerian military may not be failure per se but as a result of intelligence maneuvering by the Boko haram. In warfare, camps or combatants in a war try to outwit one another or each other by selling fake or false intelligence or information so sometimes, the Boko Haram may use style to sell information that are fake to the military through proxies or even members of a community in order to catch the military unaware or ambush them (Nigerian Police Officer, Ilorin, April 2026).

Inadequate surveillance

A participant reported that inadequate surveillance could be one of the reasons why the military has turned easy targets for the terrorists and that where there have been adequate surveillance, be it physical or aerial, there might be a limited or reduced if not non-casualty of the military. He went on to state that drones and even animals could be used for surveillance than throwing individuals or personnel into the fray only to be killed for nothing (Lecturer, security studies Abeokuta, April 2026). Another participant said:

In this kind of warfare, there must be adequate surveillance of where the enemies are, what they are planning their strength, their weapons, positions etc. But in the case of Nigeria, we would prefer to go there to see and that is where our soldiers are killed. In a normal atmosphere, the military should send drones or other forms of surveillance like even technology or GPS and other sophisticated technology to look at this before striking. So because we lack these or we are not privy to them we suffer heavy casualties (Lecturer, Peace and Strategic Studies, Abeokuta, April 2026).

Poor logistics

A participant said that logistics is very important to counterinsurgency but where it is poor or inadequate or unplanned, it may result to casualty on the part of the Nigerian military. According to another participant Poor logistics remains a critical driver of military casualties in Nigeria's counterinsurgency operations. It refers to the inadequate provision and management of essential resources such as weapons, ammunition, transport, communication equipment, medical support, and supplies. Within the Nigerian Armed Forces, logistical gaps often result in delayed reinforcements, limited mobility, and insufficient operational readiness. Troops deployed to conflict zones may lack necessary

equipment or face challenges in maintaining supply lines, making them vulnerable to well-coordinated insurgent attacks.

That is why in Nigeria, poor logistics not only undermines the effectiveness of military operations but also contributes significantly to the loss of both senior officers and rank-and-file personnel (Army personnel, Ibadan, March 2026).

Another participant said that the issue of logistics is a careful planning that could centre on food, structure, transportation, ammunition and even fueling but that most times, our people do not plan well and that was why the latest killing of a general was because of the inadequate fuel in the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) (Military officer, Lagos, April 2026). A media report supports this claim that General Braimah was killed inside the MRAP (Akogun & Ojo, 2026)

Limited air-ground coordination during operations

A participant expressed that most times, the air support has been lacking or limited and that is why the military suffer lots of casualties. He decried the need for coordinated air support to assist the military when they are on ground (Sergeant, Lagos, April 2026). Another participant said:

The air force through its air support needs to do more but in cases where it either does not respond adequately or does not have the capacity leading to the shooting of wrong targets, this may affect the entire operations and the counterinsurgent warfare. If the air support is adequate, then the military will suffer less or no casualty as the air support will complement the ground forces (Nigeria Police, Abuja March 2026).

Inadequate or poor ammunition or weapon

A participant said that the weapon used by the insurgents in so many cases are bigger and sophisticated than that of the Nigerian military and in terms of ammunition, they appear to have more ammunition than the Nigerian military as we see some of their videos and propaganda and that our soldiers have gone online several times to cry out on the sophistication of the terrorists weapon while they lack adequate weapon and ammunition (Lecture, security studies, Abeokuta, April 2026). To support this, there have been several reportage on the media on how the military had not had enough ammunition and complaining to their superiors (Zanna, 2024).

Table 2: Manifestations of some media reported military officers killed, 2016-2026

Name	Rank	Location (Where Killed)	Year
Muhammad Abu Ali	Lieutenant Colonel	MallamFatori, Borno State	2016
B.U. Umar	Lieutenant Colonel	Bitta–Pirang Road, Mubi in Adamawa state	2016
OtoibriseUmusu	Lieutenant Colonel	Near Baga, Borno State	2016
Ibrahim Sakaba	Lieutenant Colonel	Metetele, northern Borno state	2018
Dahiru C. Bako	Colonel	Wajiroko in Borno state	2020
Z. Manu	Lieutenant Colonel	Unguwar Doka, Faskari LGA, Katsina State	2020
DzarmaZirkusu	Brigadier General	AskiraUba, Borno State	2021
AliyuSaiduPaiko	Colonel	Bama LGA, Borno State	2025
Musa Uba	Brigadier General	Damboa–Wajiroko road, Borno State	2025
Umar Ibrahim Mairiga	Commanding Officer (rank not specified in article)	Mayenti, Bama LGA, Borno State	2026
S.I. Iliyasu	Lieutenant Colonel	Konduga area, Borno State	2026
Oseni Braimah,	brigadier general	Benisheikh, Borno state	2026
Umar Farouq	Lieutenant Colonel	Kukawa LGA of Borno state	2026

Source: Eze (2026)

Table 2 shows few reported cases of military brass or officers killed while thousands of the file (soldiers) male or female killed as well. However, there are no official figures.

Government Responses

The Nigerian government has responded through:

Promises of leading from frontlines

A lecturer said that a former head of state had promised to lead the fight from the frontline and that as a retired head of state, who had decimated

terrorists cells in the 1980s, he was ready to do the same for the Boko Haram if elected (Lecturer, security studies, Abeokuta, April 2026). Another said that there have been talks and promises by leaders to also lead the military against the insurgent onslaughts.

Intensified military offensives and re-integration

A participant said that the bombings and military officers since the beginning of the insurgents is a clear sign that the government set out to decimate the insurgents at all cost and that the offensive has been through both aerial and land attacks (Military officer, Ibadan, March 2026). Another one said:

The government had initially used stick approach but when it found out that it was not too effective, it switched to carrot approach. But from these approaches so far, one would know that the government is trying its best to make sure that it ends the insurgency (Military officer, Ibadan, March 2026).

Deployment of advanced weaponry

The Nigerian military has also invested in military hardware production and also its deployments to all theatre commands. A participant said that the government has tried to buy weapon from advanced countries so that it could deployed to the war front after so many denials by the US governments based on the Leahy law (Security lecturer, Abeokuta, April 2026). The Chief of Army Staff (COAS), WaidiShaibu, highlighted the Nigerian Army's ongoing efforts to bolster security operations in Benue State, emphasizing that the acquisition of modern weapons and critical military equipment—provided by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu—will enhance the operational effectiveness of troops in tackling emerging security threats (PRNigeria, 2026).

In February 2026, the Nigerian military signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with a startup company and in less than two months, it launched an artificially intelligence drone killer. This shows that there have been partnership in order to increase military offensive (Kareem, 2026; Ibeh, 2026)

Increased salary and defense budgetary allocations

A participant said that the government over the years have increased the salaries of the military and its defense allocation so that there would be no excuse to lose the war or falter (Police officer, Ilorin, April 2026). Another participant said that:

The salary increase over the years than the police and other security officers or para-military agency is to boost their efforts and morale on the counterinsurgency war. More so it is a way of parting them in the back to do more. Also, the government has improved their salaries and allocation than even education, health and other sector. It now consumes the largest chunk of the country's annual budget since God knows.

Worried by the rising cost of living and worsening economic hardship, the Senate has urged the Federal Government to consider reviewing upward the N50,000 minimum wage and salary structure of the Nigerian Armed Forces in line with current realities. Former Senate Chief Whip, Senator Ali Ndume said:

In Ghana, the entry-level pay for a private soldier is equivalent to about N180,000 per month; in South Africa, N250,000; in Egypt, N230,000– N 280,000; and in Kenya, about N200,000, excluding operational allowances, The wage level in Nigeria does not reflect the magnitude of sacrifices made by our troops who daily risk their lives in internal and external operations under extreme and hazardous conditions (Folorunsho-Francis, 2025)

The above is a reflection of how poor the remunerations of the security agencies are and why the senator pushed for an upward review.

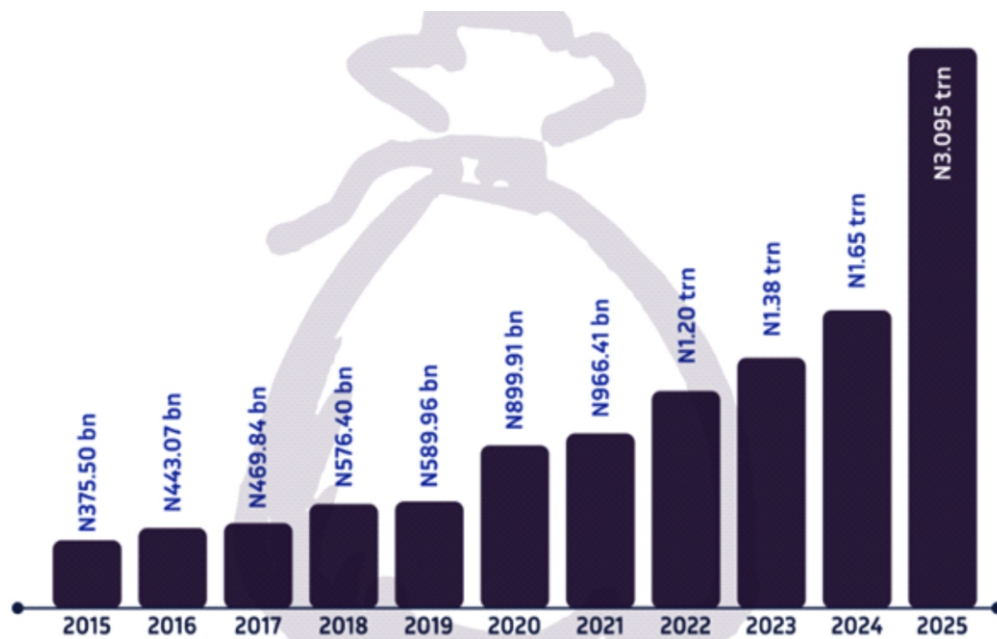


Figure 1: Nigeria's Budget to Ministry of Defence in 10 years, 2015-2025
Source: Ripples (2025)

In March 2026, the federal government yielded to this logic and the salary was reviewed upwards. Whether this has been implemented is another issue. Nevertheless, it is a testament that there have been an increase in the salary. Aside salary, the federal government has also over the years increased the defense budget.

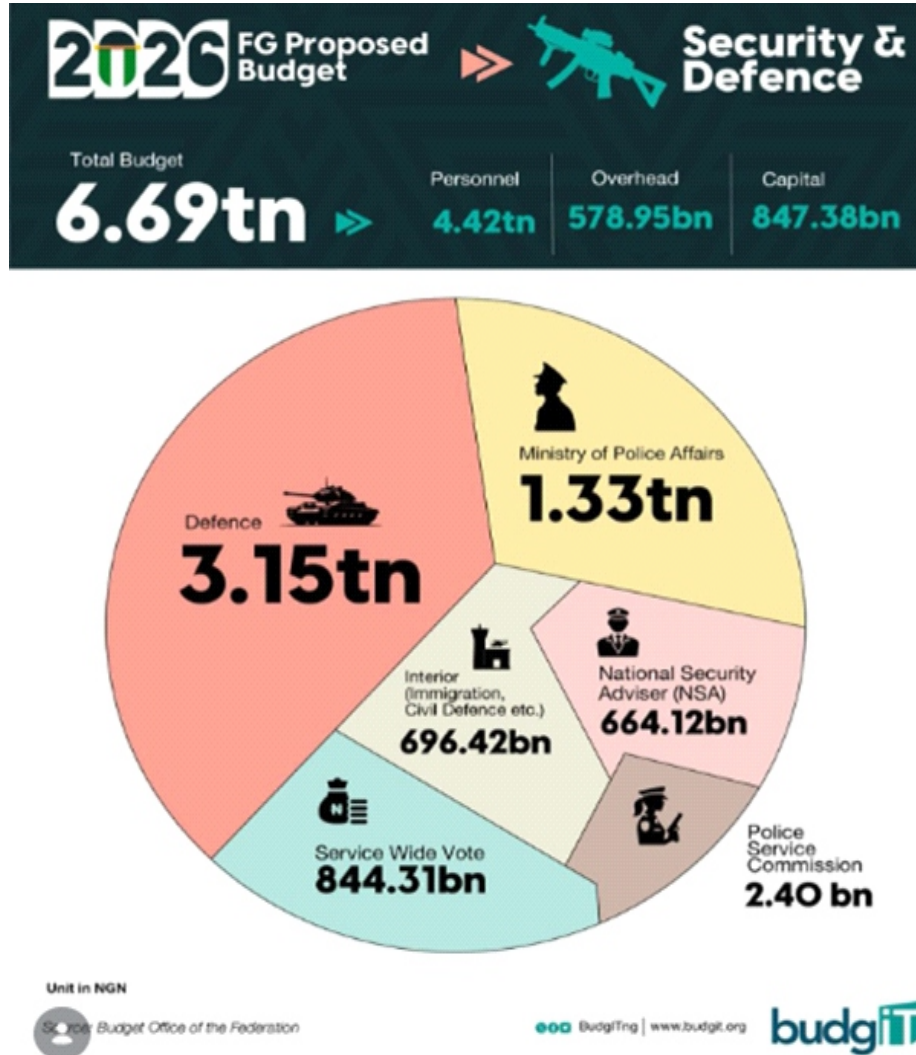


Figure 2: Security Allocation in 2026 Budget

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DTkVjCgCt9K/>

Figure 3 shows that the defense sector again has N 3.1 trillion from the N49trillion estimate. It has been reported that Nigeria sharply increased its military expenditure in 2025, raising spending by 55 per cent to \$2.1bn,

Regional Military Collaborations and the strengthening of intelligence-sharing mechanisms

Another participant said that the military and the federal government has

partnered with not just other neighbouring countries but also the military of other countries in joint operations in order to curb the menace and end insurgencies in the country though the alliances seem to lack a framework in recent times (Military officer, Kaduna, March 2026).

Leadership restructuring and changes within the military

A participant submitted that the government has responded through constant leadership changes and the reshuffle of military officers and soldiers from time to time in order to prevent exhaustion and wear as a result of being stationed in a single place for a long time as this may affect their effectiveness (Police officer, Abuja, March 2026). Another participant said “There are other Policy responses which include counterterrorism frameworks, military modernization efforts, and attempts to improve troop welfare. However, these responses have often been reactive, following major attacks rather than preventing them.” (Security lecturer, Abeokuta, April 2026). He went on to state that some of these policies have failed as a result of Corruption, mismanagement of defence resources, inadequate training, poor welfare conditions for soldiers, intelligence gathering and coordination remain weak, and limiting the ability to anticipate and prevent attacks. Another source said, “Furthermore, over-centralization of command, lack of accountability, and weak civil-military relations have contributed to inefficiencies within the system. The continued vulnerability of both high-ranking officers and frontline troops indicates systemic weaknesses rather than isolated operational lapses” (Police officer, Ilorin, April 2026).

Implications of Military Casualties for Counterinsurgency (COIN)

The targeting of both leadership and rank-and-file personnel has serious implications for counterinsurgency efforts in Nigeria.

Resignations and mutinies

A participant said:

The killing or massacre of military officers or soldiers no doubt have a way of affecting not just the physical but also psychological wellbeing of the living officers or soldiers. That is why the insurgents sometimes, like to kill them live in order to send a message to the military. It also affects them through declaration of mass resignation or even mutinies (Lecturer Security studies, Abeokuta April 2026).

Another said that “it is true that such death of colleagues can lead to mass resignation and mutinies and it has happened in the past” (Sergeant, Ilorin, April 2026).

To further buttress this point, it was reported that more than 1000 soldiers resigned from the Nigerian Military between 2020 and 2024. The report claimed that No fewer than 1,008 soldiers have resigned from the Nigerian Army in the last four years and that in 2023, the Nigerian Army approved the retirement of no fewer than 59 soldiers adding that in August 2024, 196 soldiers resigned from the Nigerian Army; in 2022, a total of 261 soldiers resigned; in 2021, 127 resigned, and 365 resigned in 2020 (Odeniyi, 2024). Though the Military leadership disregarded such claims that it was normal in the military, no doubt that a few may not be unconnected to the killings of colleagues.

Undermining of troop morale

A participant said that the death of colleagues be it junior or senior or contemporaries may affect the morale of the troops (Police officer, Abuja, April 2026). Another said:

When troops die, this could undermine the troop morale or even dampen their spirits and the fall of a seasoned soldier or officer may demoralize the other combatants or may even lead to not giving their all when on the battle field (Military officer, Maiduguri, April 2026).

After General Braimah was attacked, Akogun and Ojo (2026) give an account of the struggling troops that:

When we started hearing that our colleagues in other locations had been overrun, it shook us. Then someone shouted that the Brigade Commander was dead. That was when fear fully set in. The confusion and psychological impact of the attack, sources said, contributed to a breakdown in coordination among troops, forcing some to retreat towards the town.

Disruption of command-and-control structures

A participant said that the killing of soldiers and officers by the insurgents could affect the command and control structures because replacing the deceased may be hard let alone obeying his or command as the battalion may be used to the tactics of their deceased officer or colleague and this usually affect how they adopt to the new strategies of the new command (Military officer, Abuja, April 2026). Similarly, another participant said:

It is always hard to cope with a loss one especially one that is close to the battalion or team. To now replace that kind of person may be much hard as the squad may have gotten used or fond of him or her. Where the person is also an expert in a particular field may further pose serious challenge not just to the squad but also to the entire operations. Such was the death of Lt Col Abu Ali who was reported to be very good at handling armoured tanks.

No doubt that such deaths would have effect on the morale of the troops and the command and control structure (Lecturer security studies, Abeokuta, April 2026).

A participant said that the killing of a soldiers usually affect the command structure and it could have long standing effect on military command, control and structures (Military officer, March 2026).

Reduction in operational readiness and effectiveness

A participant noted that the killing of military officers or soldiers can significantly undermine operational effectiveness, as certain tasks are highly specialized and often performed by specific individuals; the loss of such personnel may therefore disrupt operations and weaken overall military effectiveness (Military officer, Ibadan, April 2026). Another participant observed that when key personnel are killed, the roles they occupied are left vacant, and replacing them can be difficult due to the specialized nature of their duties. This gap, they argued, can adversely affect operational effectiveness (Military officer, Abuja, March 2026). Another said that “The loss of experienced officers affects strategic planning, while frequent casualties among soldiers weaken combat readiness and that by so doing, soldiers may be lackluster about going out for operations or emergency calls.” (Military officer, Ibadan, April 2026).

These dynamics reinforce the argument that Nigeria's counterinsurgency approach requires a shift from reactive, force-driven operations to more proactive, intelligence-led strategies. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving coordination, and addressing underlying structural weaknesses are essential for enhancing the effectiveness of COIN operations and reducing the country's broader state fragility.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that persistent military casualties in Nigeria's counterinsurgency environment reflect broader institutional fragility. Intelligence failure emerged as a dominant factor. This supports State Fragility Theory, which argues that weak states struggle to gather timely intelligence, coordinate agencies, and secure territory. Thompson and Adams (2021) similarly noted that Nigeria's spiralling insecurity is closely linked to ineffective state responses. Poor intelligence enables insurgents to stage ambushes, relocate rapidly, and attack military formations. The study also found inadequate surveillance and weak air-ground coordination. These shortcomings confirm Asymmetric Warfare Theory, where weaker actors avoid conventional confrontation and instead exploit technological and tactical gaps of stronger forces. Boko Haram and ISWAP's use of surprise attacks, mobility, and terrain familiarity aligns with this logic. Zango (2024) observed that Nigeria's counterinsurgency initially gained ground but later failed to fully neutralise insurgents because state responses remained predictable and militarised.

Poor logistics, insufficient ammunition, and delayed reinforcement were equally significant. Biddle (2004) and Millett & Murray (2010) stress that military effectiveness depends not only on troop numbers but on organisation, supply systems, and leadership competence. Where logistics fail, casualties rise and combat readiness declines.

Although government responses include higher defence spending, weapon procurement, and leadership reshuffles; participants described them as largely reactive. Dan-Azumi (2025) argues that militarised responses alone cannot defeat insurgency. Sustainable success requires combining force with local intelligence, community trust, accountability, and socioeconomic reforms. Thompson, Afolabi, et al (2020) show how corruption has crept into all facets of the country including the institutions

Finally, the findings show that these killings have implications on counterinsurgency. Psychologically, repeated deaths weaken morale and may trigger resignations or mutiny. Thompson (2021) show how killings can cause mutiny. This validates Cooke's argument that combat stress creates “bloodless casualties” that impair cohesion and readiness. Reports of soldier resignations between 2020 and 2024 reinforce this conclusion. Millett and Murray (2010) asserts that loss of senior officers such as commanders and field strategists—can therefore create immediate operational dislocations, disrupt decision-making chains, and weaken battlefield coordination. Thus, the findings show that military casualties are not isolated battlefield incidents but symptoms of deeper governance and institutional weaknesses.

Conclusion

This study examined how the persistent targeting of senior military officers and rank-and-file soldiers reflects Nigeria's fragility in its counterinsurgency campaign. The evidence shows that military casualties are driven by interconnected weaknesses in intelligence gathering, surveillance, logistics, command coordination, welfare systems, and equipment adequacy. These vulnerabilities allow insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP to exploit the operational gaps of the Nigerian state through asymmetric tactics, including ambushes, surprise raids, and leadership strikes.

The deaths of military personnel have consequences beyond immediate battlefield losses. They disrupt command-and-control systems, reduce troop morale, encourage resignations, and weaken operational readiness. Such outcomes prolong conflict and diminish public confidence in the state's capacity to provide security. Although the government has responded through increased defence budgets, procurement of modern weapons, salary reviews, and regional partnerships, the findings suggest that these measures remain largely reactive and insufficiently coordinated.

The study concludes that effective counterinsurgency in Nigeria requires more than military offensives. It demands intelligence-led operations, stronger civil-military relations, improved troop welfare, transparent defence management, rapid casualty care, and sustained community engagement. Addressing unemployment, exclusion, and local grievances is equally important for reducing insurgent recruitment. Ultimately, Nigeria's security challenge is both military and governance-based; unless structural fragility is addressed, tactical gains may remain temporary.

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