

Biafra is Back

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Traditional ruler Prince Ozo Onna and supporters of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) before IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu appears in court in Abuja, Nigeria, December 1, 2015. Afolabi Sotunde/Reuters

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Tension is rising in Nigeria over secessionist claims by “Biafran” organizations in southeast Nigeria. The [Nigeria Security Tracker for the week of September 9 to 15](#) documents significant bloodshed in fighting between the security forces and alleged Biafran secessionist movements. The Nigerian army is currently conducting an exercise, called Operation Python Dance II, in the territory of the 1967-70 secessionist state of Biafra. Observers claim that the soldiers participating in the exercise are committing widespread human rights abuses against civilians, so much so that a human rights umbrella organization based in the region is [preparing to “monitor” it](#). Meanwhile, the army and the security services, joined by the southern

governors, have labeled the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), its leader Nnamdi Kanu, and other pro-Biafran groups as “terrorist.” Kanu and other’s associated with the IPOB have gone into hiding and the security services are seeking their arrest. His lawyer has not heard from him since September 14, and **fears the worst**. (Kanu is on trial for 'treasonable felony charges,' but was granted bail for health reasons.) Meanwhile, there is a swirl of charges and counter charges of ethnic and religious attacks across the country but tied in various ways to the southeast region.

The security services **claim** the IPOB is securing weapons and uniforms and creating a “secret” army. The IPOB maintains that it is a peaceful movement for self-determination. However, an IPOB spokesman is warning that the movement might resort to violence. He said that the organization’s Directorate of State, headquartered in Germany, would meet soon “to vote on the vitality or otherwise of continuing our struggle in this non-violent manner.”

Another Biafra secessionist organization, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) denies that the security services and the southeast governors have the authority to declare organizations to be “terrorist,” a point also made by others, including Senate President Bukola Saraki. Members of parliament from the southeast are calling for the “de-escalation” of military operations. Human rights groups are saying that it is the police that should be concerned with maintaining internal order in the country, not the army.

There are similarities between the current Biafra secessionist movement and the Biafra of the 1967-70 civil war, but the differences are perhaps more significant. The Biafra of the civil war was a territorial state. It inherited the administrative structures of one of the three regions that then made up Nigeria, and its army was led by officers who had defected from the Nigerian

army. As it was a territorial state, the Nigerian federal forces defeated it by taking back the seceded territory, just as Union forces reoccupied formerly Confederate territory until little was left of the Confederacy in the American Civil War. The current movement for Biafra is more diffuse and administers no territory. The formal institutions of government in the region are opposed to secession, as has been made clear by the southern governors. Nor is it clear that the current movement has the widespread domestic support that Biafra enjoyed, at least during the early days of the civil war. The concern must be, however, that abuses by the security service and mismanagement by the federal authorities could fan the flames. The decision of the security services to designate Biafran secessionist organizations as “terrorists” does not help and is probably illegal.

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