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**For: Immediate Release**

## **Ethnic Profiling, Hate Speech and Endemic Violence: A Preliminary Post-Election Statement on the 2023 General Election in Nigeria**

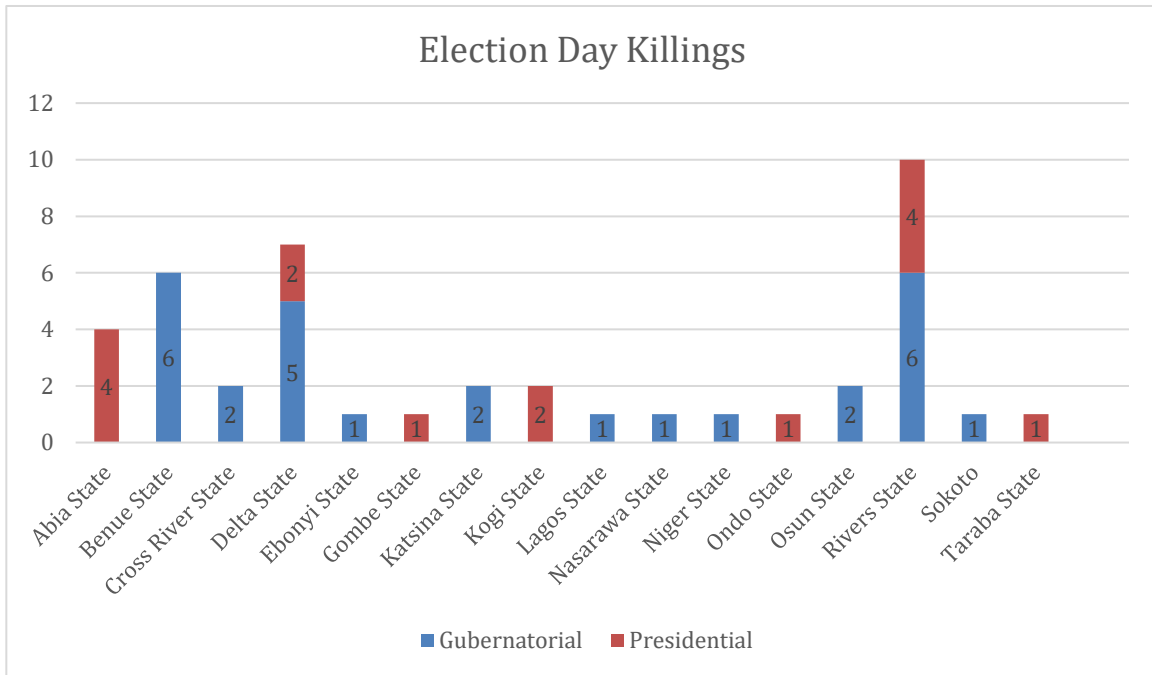
### **Preamble**

The Community of Practice Against Mass Atrocities in Nigeria, deployed an Incident Centre for Election Atrocities (ICEA) to track election-related atrocities, including physical violence, hate speech, and associated crimes from the commencement of the election campaigns until the week after the governorship and state level elections. The Centre had tracked atrocities across 10 states including Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos Katsina and the FCT. The Centre also worked with local partners in other contiguous states such as Rivers, Edo, Kano, Kaduna, Zamfara, Taraba, Ogun, Nasarawa, Benue and Plateau due to the heightened threats of large-scale hate and violence in the run-up to the 2023 general elections. The analysis of this exercise revealed that the general elections which were held on February 25, and March 18, 2023, were fraught with irregularities and were by no means the freest or fairest that the nation could have had. The most prominent forms of atrocities noted through the electioneering process were the weaponization of voter suppression through violence, hate speech, fake news and ethnic bigotry. Below are highlights of the atrocities trend documented throughout the electioneering period.

### **Fatalities**

ICEA verified and documented at least **137** election-related killings and **at least 57** election-related abductions between December 20, 2022, and March 20, 2023. Of this number, **at least 38** election-related killings (**10 during Presidential elections and 28 during gubernatorial elections**) and **at least 27** abductions were documented on the election days of February 25 and March 18.

Election day fatalities were recorded in Rivers, Benue, Delta, Osun, Katsina, Cross River, Nasarawa, Ebonyi, Sokoto, Lagos, Taraba, Kogi, Ondo, Gombe and Abia states.



On March 20, 2023, Bashir Shagari, the Electoral Officer, together with the Returning Officer for the Zamfara State governorship election in the Maradun L.G.A were both kidnapped on a bridge near Maradun town on their way to the collation center. Alhaji Dahiru Abba, the village head of Maigari in Rimin Gado L.G.A, Kano State was killed by gunmen when he was attacked at his residence just a few days before the gubernatorial election.

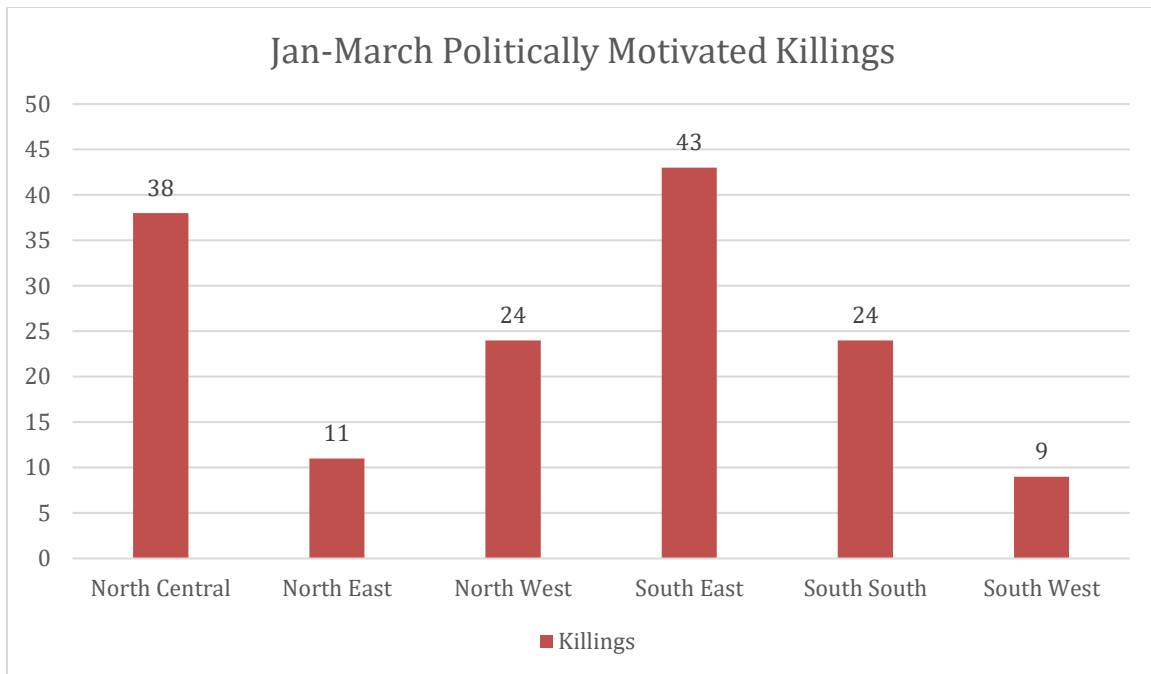


Halliru Lafka was killed at Maigatari Local Government Area of Jigawa State. The death occurred after a clash between supporters of the PDP and APC during the campaign rally of the PDP in the state. Just a day after the presidential elections, HRH, Eze Igboke Ewa, the traditional ruler of the Umuezeokaha community, was killed at his residence in Ezza North LGA of Ebonyi State by yet-to-be-identified gunmen. On February 1, 2023, David Uche, the chairman of the Young Progressives Party (YPP) in Ibeme ward, Isiala Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State was killed in front of his house. On March 11, 2023, Mr Ogbonnaya Ugwu, the Councilor representing Echara Ward2 in Okposi Community, Ohaozara local government area of Ebonyi State, was attacked and killed by gunmen. Five days before the gubernatorial and state House of Assembly elections, Chukwudi Ogbonna, the Accord Party candidate for Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni L.G.A Constituency 2 in the Rivers State House of Assembly was abducted at Rumuigbo, near Port Harcourt, Rivers State. One person identified as Muhammad Abdullahi was killed while 15 other people were injured during a violent clash between supporters of PDP and APC at a gubernatorial campaign rally in Duguri, Alkaleri L.G.A Bauchi State.

### **Atrocities on Election Day**

State security agencies failed to provide adequate security to protect INEC staff and voters who sought to exercise their franchise, on both election days particularly at polling units as they were in several instances, left to the mercy of political thugs. State security agents, especially the police appeared ill-prepared for the forms of aggression and attacks that occurred on both the federal and state election days. For instance, voting activities were brought to a halt in Ward 12 Emohua LGA, Ubimini Rivers State when Ruth Osah, a pregnant woman, and a man, Mark Orduize, were killed near a polling unit, causing other voters and INEC staff to flee. In Ebonyi state Peter Nweke, PDP's Chairman in Ezza North local government, sustained fatal injuries when political thugs attacked him during the governorship elections. He died the day after. In Jalingo, during a heated argument, a yet-to-be-identified man was shot dead by soldiers enforcing a no-movement rule at a checkpoint at Gadan Karofi (Karofi bridge) along the CBN bye-pass in Jalingo, Taraba state. Ojochenemi Akayaba was shot dead after allegedly snatching ballot boxes during the elections at Agwu- doko area in Anyigba, Kogi state. Akinlabi Akinnaso was also shot dead by security operatives as he attempted to disrupt collation at a ward collation centre in Idanre Local Government Area of Ondo State.

As noted in our [February 2023 Monthly Atrocities Report](#), the Southeast recorded the highest number of election-related deaths in the months leading up to the 2023 general elections.



### Disruption of Voting

The brazen use of violence to disrupt voting and vote counting, including the vandalism of electoral materials and attacks on electoral officers, polling agents and voters<sup>1</sup> led to the cancellation of already polled votes in several places, and the resultant disenfranchisement of citizens in such locations. Threats of violence were also openly used to discourage voters in several locations from coming out to vote<sup>2</sup>. Our analysis reveals that Lagos, Kogi, Edo, Rivers, Kano, Enugu, Abia, Zamfara, Delta, Niger, Ebonyi, Taraba, Gombe and Benue states recorded the highest levels of voter suppression and disruptions occasioned by organized violence.

### Attacks on Journalists and Election Observers

There were also several reports of attacks on election observers including journalists at polling units while they had attempted to take footage of violent incidents on election day. Journalists were attacked by security personnel and political thugs while carrying out their duties on election day<sup>3</sup>.

Dayo Aiyetan, the Executive Director of the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) was attacked at the Agwan Fulani Town Hall, Gwagwalada town, FCT while he was

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legit.ng/politics/1521942-tension-thugs-raid-polling-units-gun-voter-kogi/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://punchng.com/nigeriaelections2023-gunshots-rock-bayelsa-deputy-govs-ward-two-injured/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://humanglemedia.com/nigeriadeclides2023-attacks-on-journalists-make-election-coverage-dangerous/>

covering the Presidential and National Assembly elections<sup>4</sup>. Six other journalists, Akam James, Daily Post's State Correspondent, Princewill Sede, the Publisher of Upfront News Magazine, Jeany Metta, the Managing Editor of Upfront News Magazine, Joe Kunde Reporter of TVC and the Cameraman, Mr. Miebi Bina were assaulted by thugs who attacked the Ebelebiri community Ward 05 unit 19 in Bayelsa state<sup>5</sup>. Adebola Ajayi, a Lagos metro beat reporter at the Peoples Gazette was manhandled and had his phone temporarily confiscated for attempting to take footage when thugs attacked a polling unit in the Oshodi area of Lagos state. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that at least 28 journalists were obstructed, harassed, beaten or attacked while covering gubernatorial and state assembly elections across Nigeria on March 18 and 19<sup>6</sup>.

## **Fake News**

The weaponization of fake news to skew the electorates' perspectives was prevalent throughout the electioneering season. For instance:

1. A manipulated video showing that President Muhammadu Buhari voted for the presidential candidate of the Labor Party, Peter Obi, on February 25 became viral on social media. This was fact-checked and identified as fake as screenshots from the video showed that the president voted for the All-Progressives Congress candidate. The authentic versions of the pictures were later found.
2. A bloodied image of Labor Party House of Assembly candidate Olumide Oworu which claimed that his wounds were a result of an attack on his campaign council ran viral on social media on March 16. The image was later confirmed as fake as the bloodied image of Mr Oworu was from an old movie shoot and not due to an attack on his campaign team.
3. On March 18, social media users spread a letter claiming that the Lagos state Labor Party gubernatorial candidate, Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour had been replaced with another candidate by the party. This was however debunked by the party as fake.
4. On March 17, a former senator, Mr Dino Melaye shared a video of a session in the UK parliament featuring the caption, "Game over for the APC as UK parliament confirm elections was rigged." This was actually disinformation as what transpired in the video, was a member of the UK parliament saying some members of her constituency and the European Union have expressed "concerns of serious failures of technology, security and communication in the presidential election." There was no mention of rigging or any political party.
5. There was a video of an alleged attack on a man wearing the campaign shirt of the Presidential Candidate of the Labour Party by some gunmen who insisted on no political campaign in the South East. This video was later confirmed to be a doctored video with a voiceover on another incident.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.icirnigeria.org/icirs-executive-director-dayo-aiyetan-attacked-during-poll/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://dailypost.ng/2023/02/25/2023-election-journalists-assaulted-cameras-broken-as-voting-begins-in-bayelsa/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cpj.org/2023/03/at-least-28-journalists-harassed-beaten-denied-access-while-covering-nigerian-state-elections/>

## **Hate Speech, Ethnic Profiling & Violence Directed at Ethnic Groups**

The Centre observed widespread and deliberate weaponization of threats, acts of hate and identity politics propagated by desperate politicians as a voter suppression strategy. Utilized alongside these were the unrestrained use of hate speech, including ethnic slurs, and sectarian bigotry by politicians and their supporters. This compromised the safe exercise of citizens' franchise and compromised their security as reported in our [Preliminary Post-Election Statement on the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly Elections](#). Several incidents of open threats of violence directed at voters at polling units, particularly those who fail to vote for the particular political party supported by the disruptors were documented. We noted particularly in some neighbourhoods in Lagos, voters who were suspected of supporting particular political parties or were from certain ethnic groups were denied access to polling units.

Perpetrators were further emboldened by the inaction of security agents. examples of specific instances, in which threats were publicly made and law enforcement failed to follow through with investigating and apprehending the culprits include when the head of the Lagos State branch of the National Union of Road Transport Workers Mr. Musiliu Akinsanya, popularly known as MC Oluomo, threatened to resist any person of Igbo descent who attempted to vote at his polling unit. He was recorded<sup>7</sup> saying *“Any Igbo wen dem born well, make e come vote again; me I dey here”*<sup>8</sup> while a yet-to-be-identified man in Lagos state, captured in a viral video, had equally threatened that *“If you no fit vote APC for here, go your house. Nobody forced you come here. I go come check am. If I see you vote another party, you go enter one chance. We no come joke for here.”*<sup>9</sup> In another development, the Baale of Gbara in Jakande, Eti-Osa Local Government Area of Lagos State, in a leaked audio published by Sahara Reporters, was heard threatening to deal with residents if they fail to vote for his party, the APC. He was caught on tape saying “Vote for My Party, APC Or Stay Away from My Community”<sup>10</sup>. Also, a few days before the gubernatorial elections, Anthony Otuonye, the Director-General of Abia State Signage & Advertisement Agency in the company of other supporters of the Abia State PDP Gubernatorial candidate threatened to kill any visitor in Ngwaland who attempts to vote against their candidate and drink the person's blood, stressing that they are all prepared to either use diabolical means to frustrate any person or group of persons that will go against their will.

These acts of aggression clearly violate the provisions of **Sections 92 and 93** of the Electoral Act, 2022 which prohibits religious, ethnic or tribal profiling during campaigns, and **Section 128** which prohibits *the use of, or threats to make use of any force, violence or restraint* as a tool for voter suppression. Law enforcement agencies' seeming acquiescence through silence and non-action in

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<sup>7</sup> <https://publish.twitter.com/?url=https://twitter.com/SavvyRinu/status/1629449495883702272>

<sup>8</sup> Meaning: Anyone from the Igbo ethnic group that is stubborn enough should attempt to come vote at the polling unit

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.icirnigeria.org/mc-oluomo-caught-on-camera-intimidating-discriminating-against-non-indigenes-of-lagos/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://saharareporters.com/2023/02/11/leaked-audio-vote-my-party-apc-or-stay-away-my-community-lagos-monarch-threatens>



holding perpetrators of this form of violence to account, emboldened others in the weeks running up to the elections and on election day. We also noted that in several instances, hate speech, ethnic profiling and brazen physical violence occurred in the presence of law enforcement officials and electoral officers, or had been brought to their attention.

### **Vote-Buying Instigated Violence**

Our field monitors documented several cases of vote buying across all focal states both during the February 25 and March 18 elections. There were documented reports of attacks on the operatives of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) by suspected vote buyers in places like Kaduna. In a reversed form of aggression in some other locations, there were mob attacks against persons that attempted to buy votes.

We commend the operatives of EFCC for their proactiveness in the days running up to the elections by the reported arrests of certain individuals caught with a large sum of money suspected to be deployed on election day for vote buying, as well as the arrest of individuals attempting to buy votes on election day.

Specifically, Dr. Cletus Tyokyaa, the Director-General of the PDP governorship campaign council in Benue who curiously is also a lecturer with the Sarwuan Tarka University (formerly known as the University of Agriculture), Makurdi, was arrested by EFCC at the RCM Polling Unit in Daudu, Guma Local Government Area of Benue state with the sum of N306,700 in various denominations stashed in his car. The EFCC also arrested a man for alleged vote buying with N194,000 at Gidan Zakka polling unit, Goron Dutse area of Kano Municipal Local Government, Kano State. The Kano office of the EFCC further reported the arrest of **10** suspects at Kofar Danagundi and Kwalli Primary School in the Municipal Local Government Area of the state for attempting to share items including bags of rice and semovita to influence voters during the elections. A party agent buying votes through bank transfers was also arrested in Abaji in the Federal Capital Territory, while two persons, Stanley Nsemo and Eno Amponsah were arrested in Calabar, Cross River State with the sum of \$450 (Four Hundred and Fifty United States Dollars) and N156, 800 on suspicion of alleged votes buying. Also, Maryam Mamman Alhaji, with 18 voter cards on her was intercepted in a sting operation by the EFCC at Badarwa/Malali Ward 01 and 08, Kaduna North Local Government Area of Kaduna State.

Also, On 24th February 2023, the eve of the presidential election, Chinyere Igwe, a member of the House of Representatives representing Port Harcourt Federal Constituency 2, was arrested by security operatives with \$500,000 cash along Aba Road, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

According to a report by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), operatives of EFCC apprehended over 65 persons allegedly for vote-buying and inducement across 28 states

during the Governorship and House of Assembly elections of March 18 alone<sup>11</sup>. These arrested individuals who blatantly violated the provisions of **Section 121** of the Electoral Act, 2022 must be prosecuted.

### **Attacks on INEC Facilities and Election Collation Centre**

Between December 20, 2023, and March 20, 2023, we documented **at least 8** attacks on INEC facilities in Imo, Anambra, Gombe and Plateau states including attacks on Election Collation Centres. Some of these include the attack on the INEC office in Orlu local government area on December 1, 2022, attacks on the INEC office in Oru West local government area and Isu local government area both of Imo state on December 4, 2022, and an attack on INEC headquarters in Owerri on December 12, 2022. Others include an attack on the INEC office in Ojoto, Idemili South local government area on February 1, 2023, an attack on INEC adhoc staff camp at Tundun Wada primary school in Gombe metropolis on February 24, 2023, an attack on INEC Anambra south senatorial district collation centre, Nnewi on February 27, 2023, and an attack on INEC Jos North local government area collation centre on February 27, 2023.

There was also a documented attack on INEC personnel by security operatives in a case of mistaken identity that led to the death of 1 INEC staff and severe injuries of several other staff when the bus conveying some of the staff after election day duties were shot at by security operatives after the driver of the bus allegedly failed to stop when flagged down at a checkpoint in Ukwuani local government area of Delta State.

In a bizarre twist, a major road leading to the community of the PDP senatorial candidate for Kogi Central, Natasha Akpoti, was destroyed a few hours before the commencement of the Presidential and National Assembly elections, cutting it off from the rest of the state and making it inaccessible even to election officers. Curiously, the Kogi State Governor, Yahaya Bello, admitted to destroying the major road but claimed it was to prevent terrorists from gaining access to the community. Youths from the areas and other citizens managed to fill up the wide gully dug in the middle of the road, with sand, to enable election officers and others on election duty to gain access to the area.

Alhassan Ado Doguwa, the Majority Leader of the House of Representatives was arrested by police operatives for his alleged role in the killing of several persons and burning of the secretariat of New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP). Two persons were burnt to death during the crisis that broke out as the collation of results of the Doguwa/Tudunwada House of Representatives election was being collated. It was reported that Alhassan Doguwa personally led the thugs and actually used the pistol of his orderly to fire at several persons.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.icirnigeria.org/efcc-arrests-over-65-persons-for-vote-buying-inducement-during-governorship-election/>



### **Conduct of Election Officers**

Equally, of grave concern was the breach of **Section 26** of the Electoral Act, 2022 by officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). We received several reports by citizens indicating that election officials compromised the integrity of the elections by deliberately changing and falsifying figures from the Polling Units in clear violation of the electoral provision which mandates them to *“perform their functions and discharge their duties impartially and in the interest of the Federal Republic of Nigeria without fear or favour”*. Allegations against election officers instigated mob action against some of the suspected culprits who were saved only due to the timely intervention of security agents.<sup>12</sup> For instance, an INEC adhoc staff was mobbed for alleged thumb printing the ballot at the PU 009 located at the LEA primary school Lugbe Abuja.

### **Violence Against Election Officers Occasioned by Failure of BVAS**

We noted that INEC’s failure to fully deploy the BVAS in uploading election results to iRev directly from the Polling Units during the February 25 elections as provided for in **Section 64(5)** of the Electoral Act, 2022 and the Regulation and Guidelines for the Conduct of Elections, 2022, exacerbated distrust and instigated unrest and some level of violence against election officers in some polling units by angry voters, while others were prevented from leaving the polling stations until the intervention of security forces.

### **Impact of the Frail Security Structure on the General Elections**

Nigeria’s endemic insecurity increased significantly in the months leading up to the flag-off of the electoral campaign period and impacted the electioneering processes. In a pre-election report by our international partner, Atrocities Watch Africa, in parts of Kaduna state for instance, terrorists and outlaw groups were reported to have banned election campaigns in some communities under their control, making it unlikely that the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) could safely deploy election workers in the state or conduct elections safely in much of the state<sup>13</sup>. For example, there were no elections in four wards in Birnin Magaji LGA of Zamfara State comprising about 44,000 registered voters due to the escalation of insecurity. In Arondizuogu in Ndeato North local government in Imo state, there were no elections in some polling areas particularly on the presidential elections due to the fact that a vehicle carrying armed men went around unchecked at about 3:00 AM on the election day warning people to stay indoors or pay with their lives if they attempt to participate in the elections. There were similar incidents in Amagu Ihube community in Okigwe local government area, Imo state as there were no elections in some of the polling areas due to security concerns. In Orsu local government area in Imo state, polling units were moved to makeshift locations like the stadium and IDP camps due to security concerns. Other places that recorded high levels of terrorist attacks in recent times also recorded such attacks on election day. For instance, at least 5 persons were injured when Boko Haram attacked voters in Gwoza Local

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<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/SaharaReporters/status/1629791054332305408?t=VZmU2kFcw3Fd09kgXjvSNw&s=08>

<sup>13</sup> <http://atrocitieswatch.org/publications/nigeria-2023-a-major-test-for-democracy-in-need-of-critical-support/>

Government Area. However, we noted a curious decrease in the general spate of violence across the country once electioneering kicked off, and leading to the end of the elections. Nigeria Mourns recorded 1163 deaths between January and the start of March 2023 compared to the same period last year in which **2,175** fatalities due to mass atrocities were recorded.

The South East which had been plagued with various violent atrocities and security challenges, experienced a surge in attacks on INEC personnel, security personnel, and their facilities through the election season. The perpetrators deliberately targeted security agencies to create a sense of fear and anxiety in the populace ahead of the elections, with the goal of suppressing civic engagement in the democratic process. On February 1 2023, military officers engaged Biafra agitators in a gun battle when they blocked the Eke-Ututu market road in Orsu, Imo state; that same day, in Anambra state, gunmen attacked and set fire to the INEC office at Ojoto, Idemili South Local Government Area, destroying parts of the building and some non-essential election materials. Gunmen also attacked and burnt the Anambra State Vigilante Group (AVG) office and a magistrate court at Amaichi, Nnewi South, Anambra South. On February 2, gunmen attacked Nnobi Police station at Idemili South, Anambra State, resulting in the death of a 16-year-old boy and the shooting of a young girl of about 15 years old. On February 3, gunmen attacked a joint patrol team of the Njikoka Strike Force and Anambra State Vigilante Group, Abagana, killing 2 members of the Njikoka Strike Force, a member of the AVG, Abagana along with a tricycle operator. Gunmen also attacked the divisional police station at Ihie Divisional Police headquarters, Ugwunabo, Abia state. They vandalized the DPO office and set the station and police patrol vehicle ablaze. On February 27, 7 Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) were smashed amongst other valuables as thugs attacked the INEC Anambra South senatorial district collation centre Nnewi, Anambra State.

The attacks on law enforcement and INEC officials prior to the elections not only hampered the preparations for the elections but also created a palpable sense of fear among INEC staff, voters, and observers. This violence made travel on the roads unsafe, further exacerbating concerns around the safety and security of all those involved in the electoral process.

## **Conclusion**

We commend Nigerians for their show of patriotism and courage demonstrated through their turnout and orderly conduct at the polls. The turnout of voters in the March 18 elections was significantly lower when compared to the February 25 elections. We believe that this is linked to INEC's failure to upload election results from the polling unit in a timely and transparent manner, and thus affected the confidence of the voters in participating in subsequent elections. Nonetheless, despite attempts at voter suppression through violence and ballot snatching by political thugs, Nigerians defied the odds and came out to exercise their franchise even in areas that were widely acknowledged as flash points.

We call on the President to give the appropriate marching orders to relevant security heads including the Inspector General of Police and the Director-General of the Department of State Security to as a matter of national urgency, enforce the provisions of the Electoral Act, 2022 and ensure all those who fell short of the law and deliberately circumvented the electoral provisions are held accountable for their actions. This should include the arrest of some law enforcement agents who watched as voters were intimidated and attacked by thugs on election day and did nothing to protect the citizens.

Signed on Behalf of the Community of Practice Against Mass Atrocities in Nigeria

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**About the Community of Practice**

The Community of Practice Against Mass Atrocities (COPAMA) comprises community activists, members of civil society organizations and leaders of thought including feminist groups, lawyers, psycho-social and security experts in addition to traditional human rights and governance groups working on issues of atrocities in Nigeria. COPAMA was curated to synergize initiatives for the prevention and documentation of mass atrocities across Nigeria and to coordinate advocacy around accountability and justice.