

***Adediran Daniel Ikuomola***

Adekunle Ajasin University

## **Foreign cartels and local accomplices: Criminality and deforestation in the Nigerian forest belts**

### **Abstract**

Criminality and deforestation of forests' zones are often associated with rural dwellers and local communities in agricultural research, neglecting the involvement and equipment of the inhabitants of this region by foreign machineries located within and outside the country. This study, from a green criminological perspective examined the dynamics of foreigners' activities, deforestation, and criminality in Nigeria's agrarian communities. It also highlighted the security lapses and manoeuvring strategies of suspects and arrested foreigners held in custody, in the Nigerian Criminal Justice System for violating forest laws. Data collected for the study was basically qualitative, among fifty-five (55) respondents in selected forest belts in South/South-western Nigeria. It was discovered that a strong network of syndicates, often foreigners with local accomplices capitalized on the prevailing economic recession and high level unemployment in the country to lure the young, and able-bodied men and women into criminal survival strategies, by equipping and exposing the local communities to search and indiscriminately fall precious economic trees that are not matured for international market consumption. These activities have often overwhelmed security personnel, while few foreigners caught; often find their ways out of the net of the Nigerian criminal justice system. The study concluded that there is the urgent need for security operatives to intensify their searchlights on illegal activities of foreigners in the Nigerian forest belts to curtail green crime.

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**Keywords:** foreign cartels, green crime, forest protection, criminal justice system.

### **Introduction**

There are quite a number of criminal activities involving transactions of illegal products, illegal acts, and/or illegal practices conducted in protected areas that have a significant impact on the environment in Nigeria and Africa generally (Nellemann, Henriksen, Raxter, Ash, Mrema, 2014; UNODC, 2016; International Union for Conservation of Nature, (IUCN) Red List, 2016), however these realities are often overshadowed by research focusing on deforestation, loss of vegetation, urbanisation

and industrialisation and its implication on agriculture. Criminological research (specifically green criminology) has often undermined criminal activities in the forest belts due to the difficulties and dangers therein in getting first hand information from the field. Secondly the abundance of forest reserves and the economic dependence on forests, mostly on small scale subsistence farming in Nigeria and Africa have also not enhanced criminological research. An overview of the economic dependency on agriculture shows that over 70 percent of the population rely on the forest and aquatic produce for survival (Ruhl, 2001). Rural and urban unemployed youths account for about two-thirds of the entire population relying on the forest and agriculture for their daily bread (Patterson, Okafor & Williams, 2006; Rademeyer, 2012; Ikuomola, Okunola and Akindutire, 2016). Since the 1980s, when the nation's economy took a turn for the worse as world petroleum prices tumbled, the Nigerian currency became devalued, so also have criminality and deforestation soared (Ikuomola, et al., 2016; Isamah & Okunola, 1997; NYA24, 2018). Research has portrayed the forest belts in Nigeria as a safe haven and a saving grace for youths who are unemployed as well as for criminally minded opportunists, due to the unregulated entry and exist therein to fend and escape poverty. Similarly the inadequate security of the forest allows individuals and foreigners to venture into illegal economic activities as evident in the illegal logging of woods, indiscriminate falling of economic trees and poaching of wildlife in the country (Akintoye, 2008; INTERPOL-UN Environment, 2016; Ikuomola, et al., 2016).

Available data shows that in Africa, countless plants and animals fall victim to trafficking yearly. It is estimated that an astounding 70,000 animals have been poached every year on average for the illegal market between 2000 and 2016 (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017). Of which about 20,000 African elephants and 1000 rhinos were killed for their body parts. The astronomical prices paid for these products on the black market make illegal trade in endangered species extremely lucrative. Together with illegal logging and other environmental crimes, wildlife crime is the fourth largest offense in the world after trafficking in drugs, counterfeit products and in persons. Global revenue generated solely from the illegal sale of wildlife is estimated to be USD 9–23 billion annually (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017).

The demand and supply, vis-à-vis the availability of black markets encourage poaching, illegal logging and wildlife trade, which deprive the communities of their natural resources and their economic value. Studies, for example, have shown that elephants lost to poaching represent a tourism value of USD 25 million a year—revenue potentially lost for the African tourism sector (Trump & WWF Germany, 2017; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014). Global Initiative, (2013) report buttressed the fact that illicit trade in wildlife is often linked to other crimes, corruption in particular. It is well evident in situations where security agents attempts rescuing illegal forest activities that constitute environmental crimes, only for corruption (corrupt officers) - collusion of authorities in crime, and political connections undermines the work of committed officers; and often means business as usual for criminals – the most powerful among them (individuals from the cities and foreigners) are rarely apprehended (Gray, 2012; Ikuomola, et.al., 2016; INTERPOL, 2013; New York Times, 2013). The New York Times, (2013), noted that the nature of corruption makes it difficult to assess the quantum of deforestation

and criminality taking place in the forest zone, which is one of the reasons why Transparency International as an organisation often deals with the perception figures/index of empirical data from Africa:

Corruption generally comprises illegal activities, which mainly come to light only through scandals, investigations or prosecutions. It is thus difficult to assess absolute levels of corruption in countries or territories on the basis of hard empirical data (Transparency International, 2012).

The effect of corruption on food production and deforestation is an issue to contend with. In areas that are rural or semi urban with abundance of forest trees and produce (agricultural zones), the forest is readily available to be explored and exploited not only by locals but also by foreign syndicates (Martin & Vigne, 2011). Most worrisome is the activities of illegal traders of forest produce, through the aid of foreigners who are in dire need of rare and hard species of woods for European and American markets. Thus with the security lapses on the part of the law enforcement agents, the wanton destruction and felling of trees on communal and individual farmlands is unavoidable (Egbewole, Ogunsanwo, & Omole, 2011; Rademeyer, 2012).

The increasing rate of forest depletion in the country is no doubt alarming; with statistics showing that Nigeria experiences a 3.5 percent annual rate of forest depletion. Forest reserve estimated to cover about 10 million hectares in 2012 accounts for more than 10% of land area, of approximately 96.2 million hectares; 923,768 km square expected to serve a population of about 198million (Federal Department of Forestry, 2012; National Population Commission, 2018). Notwithstanding the fertile landmass for agriculture the nation is bedevilled with an average unemployment rate of 18.4 percent; hosted by widespread poverty, underemployment and criminality (Ikuomola, et al., 2016). Nigeria used to have about 20% of its area covered with natural forests but, this has been reduced to about 10%. It lost about 60% of its natural forests to agricultural encroachment, excessive logging and urbanization between the 1960s and the year 2000 (FAO 2001; SFM Tropics. 2005).

The socio-economic loss to the nation is quite unquantifiable especially on some endangered species in the South-west and Mid-west forest zones in Nigeria, comprising states of Oyo, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, Ekiti, and Edo and Delta states. The impressively fast deforestation and criminal activities cum urbanization processes experienced in Nigeria together with the increasing rate of unemployment, persistent poverty, inequality, inadequacy of social services, the consolidation of trans-national crime organizations, the wide spread drug use and drug trafficking, ill equipped security officials and forest guards; infiltration of the forest economy, by foreign cartels and criminals; emergence of clandestine markets and sawmills for rare forest products, have further intensify the number of youths seeking for opportunities in forest businesses and the proverbial greener pastures (Pretty, et al., 2013).

The ultimate question therefore is to know how the cartel and accomplices operate in the forest belts. How do they go unreported, often unnoticed and scot-free in the criminal justice system? Deviant activities no doubt are bound to flourish

in such a scenario, especially in the agrarian communities (Okunola & Ikuomola, 2010; Ikuomola, et al., 2016). The diversity and dynamics of criminalities in the forest zones in Nigeria thus cuts across several agencies both indigenous and foreign machineries. It is in this regard that this study examined the dynamics of foreign and local involvement in the deforestation and criminalities taking place in selected agrarian communities in Nigeria, with emphasis on highlighting the security lapses therein.

## Methodology

This article reports on a purely qualitative and exploratory study in Edo and Ondo States located in the mid-west and south-west forest' belts in Nigeria. The forest belt in the two states is located between 6<sup>o</sup> East of the Greenwich Meridian and Latitude 7<sup>o</sup> North of the Equator along the Benin-Owena River Basin in Nigeria (see [beninowena.gov.ng](http://beninowena.gov.ng)). These are two neighbouring states. A purposive sample with a convenience population was utilized. The sample comprises of fifty-five (55) respondents (Security personnel, community heads, forest guards, and youths) in the selected forest belt. Specifically the sample comprised of 28 forests scavengers, 15 forest guards/security officers and 12 community leaders. The age of the respondents was between 18 and 54 years. A comprehensive face-to-face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted by the researcher and 5 field assistants in English and pidgin mixed with local dialects; all interviews were audio recorded. Interviews averaged one hour. The shortest interview was 50 minutes and the longest lasted just over one hour and 30 minutes. The variability in interview duration was a product of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, as well as variation among individuals in terms of knowledge, experiences, and involvement in the forest space, and most importantly the desire to discuss personal experiences with a relative stranger. The discussion was limited to issues related to foreign cartels involvement in the forest space, local accomplices' collaboration and contribution to deforestation and environmental criminality within the Nigerian forest belts (specifically illegal logging) in the communities. During data collection, I took extensive field notes on any interactions and observations relevant to the study of illegalities taking place in the region. All issues were transcribed and translated by the researcher. After data collection was completed, I identified and sorted themes apparent in respondents' narratives through line-by-line analysis. Once initial memos were written and links between themes became clearer, I returned to the full body of data to begin focused content analyses. Focused content analysis helped me to ensure that the themes that emerged from the initial subset of the data were both relevant to and appropriately configured for the full set of data. Data analysis followed the iterative process that often characterises grounded theory in particular, and qualitative research more generally (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Wengraf, 2001). The principle of anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were maintained. This informed the use of pseudo-names in the transcription, sorting, and analysis of responses. In the paragraphs below, I present the content and structure of these themes.

## Empirical findings and discussion

### Dynamics of involvement: Indigenes, state officials and foreigners

Respondents' narratives revealed that there are quite a number of people involve in forest crime with particular references to the corrupt practices that foster the illegal trade in log. State officials were mentioned in the illegal logging and lumbering of woods (classified as precious wood). Logging of precious and uncommon woods, are often restricted in geographical habitat and its natural quality and scarcity thus increases the price whenever it is logged. In terms of the quality, rarity and desirability of precious woods, the demand is often higher because of its limited availability. Jenkins (2012), in his study on illegal precious woods noted the slow-growing rate of hard woods and how often too much pressure to cut them before they reach their optimum size as trees has characterised the business of logging. This explains its demand and scarcity. Precious woods are anecdotally cited as being harvested on a tree-by-tree basis rather than from formal concessions. This type of harvesting is more difficult to control than in well-delimited concessions and are often illegal (Alamu & Agbeja, 2011; Eman, Mesko, & Fields, 2009; IUCN, Red List, 2009; Ikuomola, et al., 2016). This illegality of felling precious woods was discovered to be driven by a syndicate of foreigners, mostly Asians (Indians, Chinese and Lebanese), who export them to manufacturing companies overseas for boat building, coachwork, firearms, and ceremonial objects. There are quite a number of research regarding the dynamics of crime and events of corruption practices permeating every aspect of environmental crime, most especially poaching of animals which is often widely mentioned compared to other agricultural products in Africa, most especially in East and South Africa (Trump, & WWF Germany, 2017; White, 2008; 2011; 2013).

This is well captured in a generic flow chart of illegal activities in the forest belt as posited by WWF/Dalberg, (2012), as shown in figure 1. the involvement of a significant number of actors across the various phases of source, transportation, processing and sale; including poachers, intermediaries to facilitate the local and international smuggling (established companies, corruption of authorities, etc.), couriers, logistics specialists, traders and wholesalers: A community head noted that:

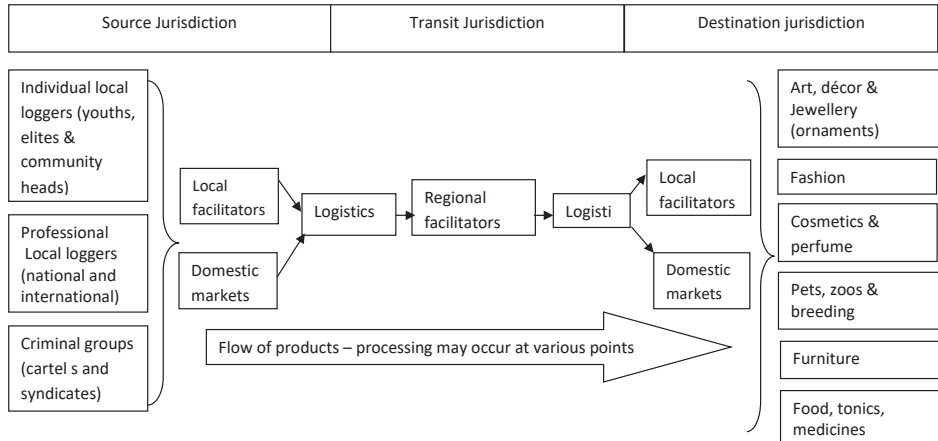
Our big time customers are the Whites guys, mostly Lebanese, Chinese and Indians who come to the village in search of precious woods and other forest resources. They come with pictures of their needs, specific trees, measurements and sizes of what they want. Sometimes they drop with us the album of forests products that are in demand. And when there is less security personnel on ground, they even go with us to the forest to identify their needs (Youth/Owo/Ondo State).

While another noted that the foreigners come under different guises, and that some are more sincere than others regarding their mission (illegal logging of woods) and wildlife for ankle bracelet and interior decorations:

The come under different missions, there are those who tell you strictly- 'we have come to do business' others will ask 'what have we got to sell'. How mature is the wood you have in stock? They are particularly interested with the sizes of log. The bigger, the

better the bargain; we in the community are concerned with the amount of foreign exchange they are willing to drop (Youth leader /middleman/32 years/Edo State).

Figure 1. Generic flow of the illegal supply chain of forest produce



Responses also revealed that there are those who come with the intention to exploit the forest and the community’s wildlife without involving, or readily willing to part with money. They disregard the stakeholders such as the youths and community heads, and rather prefer to align with corrupt security operatives (the police and forest guards). They narrated that these sets of foreigners connive with security operatives under the guise that they are researchers or contractors, working for state or federal government; to develop the community. This is well captured in a focus group discussion in Ozalla-Sabongida-ora in Edo State, and Ifon-Sobe axis in both States.

There are those who come into the forest in search of rare species of woods, bigger breed of antelopes and wild-dogs (mainly for their furs, teeth and skulls), but pretend that they are researchers in search of medicinal plants. They use the opportunity to explore the availability of matured woods. What they do is to obtain fake licenses from the ministry of agriculture and forest departments. They keep on employing so many tricks. We are getting to know their ways (Community head/ Male/56years/Sabongida-ora a/ /Edo State).

Akerele a stake holder in Ifon-Sobe axis in both Ondo and Edo States echoed thus:

There was a time in the 1990s, a group of Asians came into the community, clearing and expanding the roadsides between Ifon and Sobe, the community was very happy with the thought that it was a government project, they came with heavy duty machines such as tractors, motorised-saws, and pale loaders, they open up a portion of the forest while still working on the major road for about four to six weeks, they were carting away hard wood such as tick, obeche, iroko and mahogany trees. By the time the community became suspicious of their activities as fake contractors they were already gone leaving

behind some of their spoilt and condemned equipments (Male/62/Agent/Sobe/ Edo State).

Another noted that

When they (foreigners) go into the bush, they pretend as if they are going to excavate soil from some portions of the forest to level the surface of the cleared road. But that is usually not their intention! It was later realised that at midnight they uproot and cart away matured and hard woods. The presence of uniformed men (supposedly members of the Nigerian police and forest guards) did not make the community to express their doubts, in no time the contractors were gone with all their functional heavy-duty machines. The community was not completely ignorant they started asking questions, though it was late (Female/Agent/53 years/Owo/Ondo State).

Yemi (a local vigilante in Elegbeka) pointed out the conspiracy that fosters criminality in the forest cuts three major stakeholders, the foreign cartels, youth and security operatives in the community. thus making crime reporting a futile exercise. He revealed that the above incident involving the Asians was reported to the divisional police department for necessary investigation and action, but the community was rather blamed for not reporting early enough while the foreigners were still around, buttressing further he said:

in no time the case was dead. It was later discovered that it was only possible for the contractors to succeed because of the conspiracy that existed among the police, the forest guards and some of the youths in the community, who assisted in identifying the portions of the forest where the woods were (Male/37years/ Agent/Elegbeka/Ondo State)

### **Criminality and deforestation in the Nigerian forest belts: Foreign cartels and local accomplices**

Despite the suspicion, accusations and counter accusations of security operatives involvement in illegal logging of woods, wildlife and environmental crime, directly or indirectly as revealed by the community heads, cases brought to the police department are often disregarded and at best treated with kid gloves. This a security officer in Nifor-village, debunked, noting that forest security is much more complex than securing the city or township:

There are so many escape routes in and out of the forest. Community leaders are involved in the activities, big construction firms are involved, and furniture companies from the big cities and townships are not left out, there are those whose businesses are strictly to export logs, but also cut corners. There are forest cartels and syndicates everywhere. If we are to go after them in this zone as they are, we will not have time for other pressing security issues such as kidnapping and drug peddling in the same communities and the states generally (Police Officer/Female/45 years/Nifor/Edo State).

In an interview with a federal patrol team assigned to man the two states, a mobile police officer reiterated the difficulties in prosecuting some of the criminal cartels and suspects arrested in the past:

It is true that foreigners are involved in the criminal activities taking place in the forest, but we have had course to make some arrests in occasionally. The problem is that they are often complex to deal with, they have all the necessary connections with registered companies (some multinationals), and some even have links with top government officials. There are times the consular or ambassador of their countries intervene. When it gets to these interferences, it becomes 100 percent clear that they will be discharged and acquitted. Thus it seems as if we are not doing our jobs as expected (Mobile Police/ Male/ 39years/Molenge-Elegbeka/Ondo State).

There are several narratives alluding foreigners, companies and their personnel from different consulates involvement, not only in the mediating the escape route for their nationals but also in the criminal business of illegal lumbering of woods and wildlife exploitation in the country. There were accounts of foreigners conniving with the teaming number of unemployed youths, registered and unregistered saw-millers and government agencies. Forest guards and security operatives were said to be involved in the issuance of fake permits with the cooperation of other officials in the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Both the forest guards and officials have also been alleged as conniving (and giving consent) to foreigners through local agents to exploit the forest illegally. For some of the sincere forest guards who are up and doing in their jobs, many have lost their lives as a result of forest criminals getting tip-offs about planned checks and raids. In one of the interviews with a youth leader (and an accomplice) in Elegbeka, Ondo State, he emphasised that the activities of foreigners and local accomplices have been on for long in the Nigerian forest belts, though he was of the opinion that the cartel of foreigners, do not come directly to the forest, rather they have agents, who are mostly educated elites and chiefs in the local communities:

The reality is that illegal logging of woods has been on for long. It is a family business The foreign cartels engage us in sourcing and delivering of specific woods that are difficult to come by, like iroko and mahogany, obeche, which are often in high demand by foreigners who export them. For instance around November 2011, I was introduced to a Lebanese man, all he wanted was (10) ten thick and matured mahogany and obeche woods (un-saw), He was ready to pay close to N250, 000 for each. I was able to engineer some boys around to search the forest from Ifon in Ondo State to Nifor in Edo State, it took us about 6 weeks to make the delivery because the woods were needed in full length and not in pieces or bits. And ever since we have been in business I have made money; but it is a risky business! Going in and out of the forest is easy, but it becomes difficult when it has to do with illegal logging and lumbering for business purposes. (Male/32 years/Elegbeka/Ondo State).

Taking into account the amount this particular respondent and his group made, it is worth saying that they must have made over five million Naira (about \$16,000) after delivering the woods. The consequence, this will have on the continuous deforestation and unwholesome exploitation of forest reserves in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. A female respondent noted that their customers do come from faraway places within and outside the country and negotiate with them directly for business, she noted that customers and patrons cut across, ‘...from local contractors



in Ondo and Edo States to Abuja (federal capital territory), Lagos, local saw millers from the different states to foreigners based in and outside major Nigerian cities'. The foreign buyers are usually Lebanese, Chinese and Indians who have other legitimate businesses in Nigeria but are also involved in buying rare hard woods from locals. The foreigners were described as their 'preferred customers' because they often pay on delivery. However issues bordering on incessant kidnappings of foreigners and local elites for ransom in the two states were described as negatively affecting patronage; resulting to a reduced bargaining power doing business with individuals who act as middlemen and agents to the foreigners. A female interviewee in Uhumora, Edo State echoed 'we now have to pay smugglers to deliver the woods to the foreign customers, worst of all foreign currencies are no longer in circulation as it used to be'.. This was not the case many years ago when security was much better'. For another respondent in one of the focus group discussions in Ifon, the notion that foreigners also make use of chiefs and elites in cutting down precious woods was never in dispute. This was highlighted thus:

...we are not the only ones in this business, just because we are small peasants, we are targeted, known and can be pointed out at any time as illegal dealers in woods, but the truth is that the chiefs and community leaders are also involved and do partner with us. They also collect money in hard currency (US dollars) from the foreigners and their agents, only for them to negotiate in local currency (Naira) with small dealers like us. Often we are short changed (Female /27 years /dealer/ Ifon/Ondo State).

In Uzeba community in Edo State, an incidence involving a young, street smart, middleman from Ozalla was narrated. He was portrayed as fronting for an Indian firm in Lagos and wanted to swindle the community. He was said to have collected \$5,000.00 from the Indians, only to remit \$1,200.00 to the chiefs for cutting and selling of about 15 mahogany and 10 Iroko trees, all rare hard forest woods. For fear of the name of the company being exposed as well as the Indians involved, the company representative quickly came to settle the difference by paying off the balance and resolving the case between the chiefs and the police, who wanted to make it public. A probe revealed that the villagers came to know about it months later when the Indians returned to the community the second time, for another transaction. This time, the middlemen were sidelined; they went directly to negotiate with the chiefs for a new deal. The involvement of foreign companies who specialize in sourcing for woods for furniture, exterior and interior decorations has also contributed a lot to the illegal exploitation of forest products (Martin & Vigne, 2011). The Indians and Lebanese companies who operate in major cities in Lagos, Benin, Port-Harcourt, (River States); Owerri, (Imo State); Ibadan (Oyo State) and Warri (Delta State) were described as culprits. A number of research have shown that despite some of these Asian companies licensed to do business in Africa, they also venture into illegal businesses, especially in the exportation of wildlife and woods for wealthy clients and marketers overseas (IUCN Red List, 2009; South & Wyatt 2011; Ola-Adams, 1983). It further implies that most of the woods out there in the open market are illegally brought out from the forest without proper documentations.

**The forest, easy entry and easy exit: Delinquent opportunities and youth involvement in the train of local accomplices**

The active involvement of youths in the corridors of forest was well emphasised in the community. Put differently, a male discussant buttressed the fact that youths are very active in sourcing for foreign cartels and transportation of illegal logs under the watchful eyes of the local elites, who are the stakeholders and link between the security operatives and corrupt government officials. As accomplices, they often engage in double dealing, misleading or cooperating with the security operatives depending on how the bargain goes. Instances where foreigners and agents are given permission by community leaders to fall trees, after collecting huge amount of money, only for them to go behind reporting to the forest guards and security officers on the highways that illegal loggers are within the community; and at certain locations in the forest, was voiced as also common. Other narratives in both forest zones buttressed the constant arrests and disturbances by forest guards and security operatives when bargains (agreed sum of money) are not remitted. They constitute majority of the suspects in the police custody not necessarily for crime related to illegal logging but for drug related offences. Nevertheless when caught they often see no reason or hindrance to desist from illegal logging as a business. Youth leaders in Sobe, Uhumora, Elegbeka and Ifon captured their fearlessness with the following words:

“We do not need to stop this business because of the police or forest guards’ arrests (Male/ 42years/Elegbeka/Ondo State).

They are always after us; we are also after them, we know how to settle them and they know how to settle us and set us free (Male/41years/Ifon/Ondo State).

When the coast is not clear, or they prove difficult we also know how to change our tactics, especially when new officers are deployed to the zone (Male/Uhumora/Edo State).

If luck runs against us and we are caught with the logs, we bail ourselves and buy it back from them. The security men also need money. It is a give and take situation (Male/ 34years/Sobe/Edo State)

In terms of security, forest guards complained that they are just like ‘boys scout’, ‘our guns are less sophisticated’, ‘patrol vehicles are not enough and the few ones are not often in good state’, ‘it makes the work boring and hectic in pursuing forest criminals in and out of the forest’. Thus it is easy for everyone to get in and out of the forest without any fear of security concerns. Observations during the course of the study revealed that there are few forest patrol vehicles plying Akure – Owo, Ifon-Benin axes in Ondo State, down to Ekpoma and Owan-east and Owan-west in Edo state. The constant surveillance and patrol of the forest belt was said to be mainly focused on drug peddlers in the forest and less attention to illegal logging of woods and wildlife in the two states. This is because Ondo and Edo States are the major routes and sources of cannabis cultivation and other addictive substances in

Nigeria (Mustapha, 2018). According to Nigerian Drug Law and Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), officers in Nifor and Owo, drug mafia and cartels is the major mandate in the region:

...the two states remain among the leading six states in the country with a very fertile landmass of thick forest favourable for the cultivation of cannabis. And also the forest gives a protective cover and a comfortable hideout for criminals.. .... Most of the suspects and convicts are teaming unemployed youths and community elites (men and women) who venture into farming and peddling of marijuana because of the huge sum of money they get from the sales across the country (Male/NDLEA, officer/Owo/Ondo State).

Another buttressed further that

Albeit illegal logging is much more common than poaching of animals in this zone, nobody gives a damn to wildlife crime here. The presence of animals is minimal compared with states like Cross-rivers and Akwa-Ibom located in the South-South zone; where there are several cases of poaching of wild monkeys and chimps. However in Ondo and Edo State apart from forest criminality, there are other crimes such as kidnapping and drug peddling that have overshadowed environmental crime at least in the past five years.

It is important to emphasize that the forest zones in Nigeria have well been linked as hideouts for criminals who engage in kidnapping, be it for political or for economic gains (Abdulkabir, 2017; NYA24, 2018). The NYA24 Global Trend report for 2017 shows that Nigeria is one of the three countries in the world with the highest number of reported incidents of kidnapping (second behind India and above Pakistan), with the worst record of foreign nationals being kidnapped in Africa, ahead of Libya and Somalia in Africa (NYA24, 2018).. In combating this menace, search and rescue operations are constantly taking place, in hideouts located in the forests' zones. Thus a number of forest route and space are gradually being opened up in the process of searching for the whereabouts of kidnapped victims and the kidnapers. By implication, security operatives in Nigeria (unintentionally) are also contributing their own quota to the rapid deforestation in the zones at least in recent times. Narratives from security officers show that kidnapping as a social problem has seriously diverted attention away from other traditional crimes in the country, most especially in communities between Benin-Owo axes. On the other hand respondents in the communities (local cartels) revealed that it has also deprived a number of foreigners from going into the forest directly to negotiate their bids. Over 70 percent of the interviews and discussants where of the opinion that 'kidnapping has created a fearful atmosphere for foreigners to freely visit the forests unlike in the past years when they could walk into the community to inspect and search the forest for their specific needs' as captured by a youth leader in Nifor/Benin (Male/37years). Narratives below highlight the influx of middlemen and women as front for foreigners as well as security operatives' collaborating with courageous and relentless foreigners in the business, undermining the current trend of kidnapping:

It is not business as usual. The situation has changed the way business is done. There are now a lot of middlemen and women within and outside the zones, who front for the foreigners. And this has seriously affected the cost of dealing in log and other associated businesses. The middlemen pay far lesser than the foreigners who sometimes pay us in foreign currencies. It was not uncommon to see us doing business with Dollars and Euros. It is gradually becoming scarce (Male/43years/Ozalla/Edo State)

This is not to say that all the foreigners have ran away from the business. There are a number of courageous foreigners most especially the Indians and Lebanese who have stayed long enough in Nigeria to understand the criminal justice system and the terrain; as well as having strong ties with the security operatives and community leaders (Male/40years/Agbanikaka/Edo State).

With the help of corrupt police officers, paid vigilante and militia groups who serve as guards, few foreigners occasionally find their ways into the forest, but not in their numbers as it was in the past decade (Male/Ifon/35years/Ondo State).

## Conclusion

This study highlights unemployment, poverty and the need for survival as major reasons deforestation and criminality have soared in the forest belts in Nigeria. The forest needs to be well preserved and guarded against wanton destruction of wildlife and economic trees. It is important to state clearly that the forest is an economic venture which must be regulated by the state and her security agencies to wade off both local and foreign accomplices who capitalise on the current security lapses and ill-equipped personnel in charge of forest management in the country. The accentuation of illegality in logging activities in the forest belts of Edo and Ondo States as depicted in this study is worrisome, as it contributes more not only to the continuous deforestation taking place in the country, buy also directly to the kidnapping menace which has remained particularly elevated in Nigeria, where both criminal groups and pirate gangs remain highly active, targeting individuals perceived as affluent or having a higher ransom value. As serious as the unemployment situation is in Nigeria, this should not give room for criminal cartel mostly of Asian origin to lure Nigerian youths and community chiefs into the habit of fetching hard and precious woods from the forest without license and proper permission from the appropriate authorities. The long time effect of foreign incursion and exposure of local communities to foreign currencies will further breed criminality, insecurity and threats to genuine forest vendors who are capable of diversifying the country's economy away from its present state of over reliance on crude oil export for foreign exchange; to agro- allied economy as an alternative and/or complementary source of national income.

Lastly the Nigerian government and civil society groups should seriously examine the manifestation of criminality and disorder along the forest belts in Edo and Ondo States, in any determined manner, to ensure adequate security of the forest zones; emphasis should be placed on equipping the security agents, revitalization of

the criminal justice system, and efforts geared towards alleviating the most pressing economic disparities (unemployment and insecurity) which condemn vast sections of the Nigerian society to a poverty level – a situation which forces a number of youths and community heads towards crime and misdemeanours in collaboration with foreign cartels. With regards to the narratives emanating from the fields, diversity of opinion and the plurality of views, this study argues for more attention to be given to environmental and ecological issues, which is the hall mark of green criminology.

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