



## Letter to the Editor

## Dealing with two 'SARS' outbreaks in Nigeria: The public health implications

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Dear Editor,

In the context of poor and compromised security, it is increasingly complex to implement public health interventions [1,2]. The link between insecurity and health is as complex as it is necessary. The direct impact of brutality and extreme cruelty by armed security personnel on the health of individual victims can be detrimental. These, however, are

evident in Nigeria as police brutality is perpetrated by the security operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit amid the present unprecedented novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), also known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. Undoubtedly, the country is now dealing with two 'SARS' outbreaks, and if not addressed, the outcome may be disastrous to both public health and national security.



Fig. 1. During the SARS protest in Lagos, Nigeria.

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The Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, was established in 1992 as an anti-crime unit of the Nigerian Police Force. It is among the 14 divisions formed under the Nigeria Police Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department to arrest, investigate and prosecute persons engaged in violent crimes such as armed robbery, homicide, kidnapping, hired assassinations, and other types of criminal offenses [3]. Over the years, the SARS operatives have contributed remarkably to the reduction in the rate of kidnappings and armed robberies. This was accomplished following the gallantry exhibited by the SARS operatives. However, in recent times, the modus operandi of the SARS operatives in the country seemed to have experienced a dramatic change as they are now acting beyond their judicial line of responsibility.

In Nigeria today, moving around in different hairstyles, well-designed shirts, expensive wristwatches, costly mobile devices (e.g. iPhones), and flashy cars is considered an offense by the SARS operatives as you are portrayed to be a fraudster. Consequently, if intercepted, one shall be required to pay a relatively huge amount of money to them otherwise one may be shot, jailed, robbed, or framed up at the spot [3]. While the fight against fraudsters in Nigeria is of national concern and importance, the reality is that it is never the duty of the SARS operatives, rather, that of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Due to the lack of police reform by the Nigerian government, citizens are taking several measures in a bid to address these inhumane actions by the SARS operatives. Unfortunately, Nigeria has not witnessed significant strides in containing the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic [4]. These measures taken by the citizens can potentially exacerbate disease transmission and further pose a major challenge to the containment of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Nigeria.

There have been measures put in place in Nigeria to check the irregularities of the police unit called SARS in the past. But unfortunately, regulations and measures rolled out by the government over time to curtail the SARS menace has been ineffective. In the hit of the current nationwide protests, the Inspector General of Police released a new order and directive to restrict the operations of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and others [5]. Some of these orders include forbiddance of the members of the squad to; carry out their operations on mufti, engage in unauthorized and degrading search of phones, laptops, and other smart electronics of citizens, exercising of power in a manner that violates human rights, and threatens the life of citizens [5]. These directives and regulations are not new to Nigerian citizens as such directives and orders have been passed in the past with no strict enforcement. Hence, citizens called for a total ban on this unit of police with no room for reform or regulations that will keep the SARS unit in the Nigerian security system. This call led to nationwide protests that began on the 8th of October 2020 amidst the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the country.

At the onset of the global pandemic, the World Health Organization gave some measures to mitigate the spread of the virus and flatten the curve. One of the measures apart from the use of nose mask and proper handwashing is physical distancing. But the upsurge of nationwide protests in Nigeria will potentially lead to an increase in SARS-CoV-2 cases in the coming weeks. One of the most vital elements of transmission has been observed to be present in all protest grounds – close contact and many protesters are without nose masks. SARS-CoV-2 is a dicey infection as asymptomatic patients can spread the virus to others. In large gatherings such as protests, there is unquestionably a huge risk that one person could infect a large number of people [6]. Many of the protests observed in Nigeria amidst this pandemic have some characteristics which may hinder the containment of SARS-CoV-2. In all the protest grounds, a large number of people are in close contact [Fig. 1]. Many are

agitated, chanting, and shouting and far more protesters are with no personal protective equipment. In addition, handwashing during the protest is nearly impossible. The combination of these characteristics may exacerbate the spread of the virus in the country. It is also worrisome that this national insecurity will have negative impacts on the mental health of Nigerians. Due to the immense pressure of the nationwide protests and as a result of stakeholder engagements, the Inspector General of Police disbanded the SARS unit on the 11th of October 2020 and formed the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) on the 14th of October 2020. Due to previous experiences of failed reforms and disbandment in the Police force unit of Nigeria, the SWAT team is widely perceived to be a replica of the already-disbanded SARS unit. As a result, the nationwide protests are still on the rise throughout the nation. Unfortunately, these nationwide protests led to the death of about 100 peaceful protesters throughout the nation as the armed forces reportedly opened fire on them [7]. Also, political thugs and hoodlums reportedly highjacked the protests in several states and destroyed both government and private establishments [7]. Moving on, the Nigerian government should intensify their efforts in addressing the needs of the protesters so as to avoid reversal in the hard-won progress in containing the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the country.

## 1. Conclusion

In response to the SARS menace in Nigeria, citizens have embarked on nationwide protests to agitate for a complete ban on this police force unit. Irrespective of the disbandment of the SARS unit, the protests have been on the rise in response to the newly formed SWAT team which is believed to be a replica of the SARS unit. However, these protests may make the containment of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic challenging as physical distancing protocols and other precautionary measures are left unadhered to. In unprecedented times like this, the country is betwixt fighting a disease pandemic and an insecurity epidemic simultaneously. If the country wants to witness significant strides in containing the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, there is a crucial need to seek for the intervention of the world powers and international governing bodies so as to prevent the escalation of war or insurgency in Nigeria because there is very little attention paid to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Nigeria.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declared no competing interests.

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