

Environmental Disasters since 1980s: A Historical Interrogation of the Nigerian Armed Forces Roles in the Mitigation

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 4 | 2026 | Article Number: 080

Accepted: 05 September 2026 | Published: 10 September 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)

 Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-NX538XX5>



Obeya N Bernard¹, Joseph E Obuje²

¹Department Of History, Nigerian Army University Biu, Nigeria,

²Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Lafia, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Correspondence: Obeya N Bernard, bernardobeya@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper titled “Environmental Disasters since 1980s: A Historical Interrogation of the Nigerian Armed Forces in the Mitigation” is an investigation into the gradual changes that began to occur in the natural ecosystem resulting from global warming and the effect of climate change. Findings reveal that this development was due to unnecessary interference and intercourses that took and still taking place between man and the ecological system occasioned by the outbreak of the industrial revolution beginning from Europe and the North-America. Gradually, as from the 1980s the reality started dawning on Africa and Nigeria which informed the researchers to benchmark the dating to the 1980s. These environmental disasters are all natural disasters that occur on the planet earth. For the purpose of the paper, disasters are mainstreamed to the Nigerian context namely: Landslides, floods, erosion, and desert encroachment amongst others. Interestingly, all these disasters occur with their attendant multiplier effects that usually contribute to national security questions. These National Security issues always attract the attention of the Nigerian Armed Forces as one of their core mandates globally. The paper chronicled most approaches the Armed Forces of Nigeria have adopted to mitigate the effects on Nigerians which is known as ‘Disaster Response and Management’ (DRM). The methodology harnessed in the development of this paper is the multi-disciplinary approach in historiography. Conclusively, the creation of the Armed Forces underscores their invaluable responses to both environmental and man-made disasters as an integral responsibility of the force. The paper is a value addition to the ongoing evaluation of the Armed Forces in peace and conflict times.

Keywords: Environment, Disasters, Mitigation, Nigerian Armed Forces

Introduction

The environment is sacrosanct to the existence of man on earth and generally to the biotic components of the ecosystem. The evolution of man and other living organisms in the earth started gradually and the process is still evolving till the present time. Amongst the biotic or the living component of the ecosystem man is the champion and the chief determinant of the process of intercourses and interfaces that affects the other biotic communities and the abiotic or the non-living components of the environment.

When life started on earth about 8 to 6 million years ago, experts reveal that almost all the factors and components of the abiotic in particular, were in perfect condition. For instance: Until the outbreak of Industrial Revolution in Europe in the nineteenth century the ecological system was still in perfect condition, this observation was seen across the globe and particularly, Africa's ecosystem was in superb conditions. The collapse in the environment is ascribed basically to man's activities as 'man-made'. Some of the environmental disasters experienced in Nigeria within the period under review include: flood shortage, drought, unwanted felling of trees, air pollution, degradation of the environment, biotic disappearance, desert encroachment, climate change and the attendant internal human conflicts amongst others.

Similarly, the outbreak of Industrial Revolution in Europe is one of such many activities which later spread to the American Continent of North and South and the Asian Sub-Continent or the Far-East spearheaded by Japan (now China and almost all the Indo-China, Indian and Pakistan). Consequently, this discovery began the gradual disappearance of the near-perfected environment and the climatic conditions across the globe. The condition of the earth worsened after the global war and especially, the Second World Wars (1939-1945). The United States of America unleashed the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki Islands in Japan which eventually ended the Second World War in the Asian fronts and the Japanese stubbornness. Consequently, the development and innovations that greeted the world, the intensification of the arms race occasioned by the Cold World War era (c. 1945-1991). These developments led to some unscreened human activities against the ecosystem notably from the industrialised North America, Europe, Australia and the most parts of the Far-East aggravated the damaging ecosystem particularly in the mid-twentieth century which UN determination to save the globe led to the first Conference as 'Earth Submits' in Stockholm, Switzerland in 1972 and the followed up Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The world leaders have never looked back on this 21st century struggle to restore some natural biomes and reduce unnecessary environmental degradations¹. Nigeria as a sovereign independent nation has joined the campaign actively after the illegal dumping of refuse and toxic wastes on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean in Koko town in the then Bendel State (now Edo State) in 1983².

This paper brings to the fore some of the prominent and pragmatic roles the Nigerian Armed Forces otherwise known as the military has played in minimising the impacts of environmental disasters since the period under review and other ways of protecting the environment in the face of its collapse in the twentieth-first century.

Conceptual Clarifications

In addressing this topic, it is pertinent to look at the meaning of some key words that are central to the paper and these include: Environment, Disasters and Nigerian Armed Forces.

¹Johnson, S. P. *The Earth Summit; the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)-International Environmental Law and Policy Series*, (London: Graham and Trotman/Martinus Nyhoff, 1993), 2

² Magnus, K. "Profiling Poverty in Nigeria and its Implication for Potential impacts of Climate Change" presented at the National Conference on the National Assembly Conference on the Nigeria Environment, organized by the Senate Committee on Environment and Ecology, Abuja: Nicon-Hilton, 13th -15th September, 2005) 1

What is the environment? These areas are the external factors affecting the living organisms on earth and could be living organisms also called the biotic factors like plants and animals. The others are the non-living components of the environment and they include: rocks, highlands, valleys, sun, rainfall, mountains, moon, stars, rivers, oceans, seas and other waters, winds, soil types amongst others. The sum total of these living factors are also called the biodiversity which are the species of all creatures and their habitations. It has been investigated that there are over 100 million species of biotic community on earth. In essence, environment is the sum total of the immediate man surroundings and there are both living and non-living things³. Disasters are caused by nature and by man within the environment.

Disaster in natural form according to this source is:

Seen as a sudden accidental event that causes many deaths and injuries. Most disasters also result in significant property damage. Common natural causes of disasters include, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and typhoons, tornadoes, Tsunamis also known as tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, landslides and avalanche ranks among others⁴.

On the other hand;

Man-made or artificial disaster include all disasters which involve the product of man's interference or excessive man's dialogue with the natural environment or ecosystem and the results are seen in the modern times like building collapse, bridges, tunnels and mines, automobile accidents, airplane crashes, ship wrecks, wars and terrorism⁵ etc.

Taking x-ray of the two definitions side by side, it may be deduced that the central connecting character to the two is man. From the first definition, natural occurrence will not be a disaster to man except man's interference. The latter are completely the applications of the former wrongly and the results are disasters in many forms and these are hazardous to man and other living organisms within the ecosystem. For simple understanding, all disasters are caused by man and not nature or better still; there are no natural disasters but rather man made

Disaster Management: Deals with the coordination and integration of all necessary activities with the aim of building, sustaining and improving the capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to and recover from threatening or actual natural or man-made disasters.⁶ As a deliberate act of combating unplanned events or accidents is cross- sectored and multidimensional, all hands must be on deck to defeat the ugly and anti-development incident, disasters. The multidimensionality of it underscores the relevance of the military as a specialised unit in the nation's institutions to mitigate when it occurs.

Be that as it may, opinions are divided on the relevance of the military in disaster intervention especially when it concerns environmental issues. The contention is basically between pro and anti-disaster management factions within the military and the humanitarian actors. The research report titled "Military Disaster Response: Strategy, Leadership and Action", Colonel Kenneth Ring of the US Army College in Pennsylvania argues that, the army lacks a clear, effective and coordinated response and capability despite its supports in disaster management enterprise⁷. On the contrary, Air Commodore Akubge Iyamu, of Nigerian Air Force notes that: "Disaster management across the world cannot be carried out without the

³ <http://www.ncdc.nasa.gov/01/reports/billionsz.html>. Retrieved on 16th March, 2021

⁴ <http://www.ncdc.nasa.gov/01/reports/billionsz.html>. Retrieved on 16th March, 2021.

⁵ <http://www.ncdc.nasa.gov/01/reports/billionsz.html>...

⁶ *National Disaster Framework; Understanding the Framework*, <https://www.preventionweb.net>.

⁷ *Disaster Response: The Role of a Humanitarian Military*, <https://www.army-technology.com>.

support of the military”⁸. Colonel Kenneth and Commodore Iyamu’s arguments showcase the contentions in the military camp. Favourites of humanitarian actor raise serious concerns about the involvement of the military in disaster engagement against the backdrop of the delays, inefficient, inappropriate, expensive and other related challenges associated with the civilian perception of the Army contrary to the humanitarian agenda⁹. Plethora of factors such as improving the image of the military and provide training, diversifying the role of the military in the face of budget cuts, containing the overstretched capacity of humanitarian organizations, among others, underpins its growing interest¹⁰. Harbottle cited in Anderson seems to have cleared the air and saved the military from the crisis of irrelevance in disaster endeavours, in his argument thus:

It is doubtful if any of the Armed Forces of the world would deny that they have the capability for making a constructive, sometimes vital, contribution to the conduct of disaster relief operations¹¹.

Therefore, whatever is the dimension of disaster, the role of the military in search and rescue operation, debris removal, medical support, construction of bridges and dam, and clearing of road, demolition of unsafe structures, building of temporary structure tent, and information dissemination cannot be overemphasized. In short, it is the military that ought to clear the way for civilians and not be treated as resort and contained in some headings and headlines. The Army and the entire military in particular thus, remain crucial elements in the conception, articulation and consummation of disaster management projects of every nation.

Nigerian Armed Forces and Natural Disasters

This section of the paper examines the engagement of the Armed Forces in environmental disaster management in Nigeria. The section has a simple task of providing answers to the following questions: Should the military be treated as a last resort in disaster management ventures? What are the typologies of disasters? What has been the contribution or are the efforts of the military in disaster control in Nigeria? The section finds out that the military being an essential part of the society with the mandate to secure it from external attacks and internal corrosion occupies a central place in disaster management exercise. It further finds that Nigerian Armed Forces have over the years been engaged and contributing greatly to disaster management through search, rescue and combat operations. The section concludes that given the multi-sector, multidimensional and multidisciplinary nature of the enterprise all hands must be on deck in the conscious efforts towards mitigating disaster in the 21st century, and strongly recommends, the military be involved in the conception, articulation and consummation of disaster control plan and not be treated as last resort to be called upon when civilian and humanitarian efforts appear overstretched and exhausted.

Natural disaster as it is known today is basically caused by bad natural reactions causing damages to the earth surface and within the territorial lands and waters of Nigeria. When it occurred and reported as a national disaster the Federal Government normally swung to action as an emergency. These disasters classified in Nigeria as national disasters include: Gully or heavy erosions, floods, wind storms, and fire outbreak as Nigeria has had the favour of nature. She has never experienced earthquake, volcano¹², and hurricanes, which are more devastating natural disasters often viewed on global televisions in Nigeria.

⁸ NEMA, *Military Collaborate on Disaster Management, Response*, <https://leareship.ng>.

⁹ C A. Hofmann and L. Hudson, *Military Responses to natural disasters: last resort or inevitable trend?* <https://odihpn.org>. The concretion between humanitarian /international aid workers and the Nigeria army is a clear contention that stands on the relevance of the military in disaster management.

¹⁰ C A. Hofmann and L. Hudson, *Military Responses to natural disasters....*

¹¹ E W Anderson, “Disaster Management and the Military” in (*Geo-Journal*, 1994, <https://www.jstor.org>).

¹² This is true because, evidence of volcanic eruptions in the Nasarawa and Abuja axis in the North Central Nigeria, Adamawa and the Biu axis of the present North East predated the occupation of Nigerians settlements in the areas.

Sequel to these occurrences, the Federal Government established the National Emergency Agency (NEMA) as an agency charged with the responsibility of combating this natural menace when it occurs.

Disaster is one of the major themes in world history that societies across cultures and time have not been able to eliminate completely, but developed means on how to contend and live with it. The field of disaster management becomes incredibly famous in the 21st century, because as societies get sophisticated and urbanized, chances of experiencing disasters heighten. This underscores the ideas that man is the center and maker of the story directly and is indirectly involved in whatever shades of disaster the society experiences be it man-made or natural.

This is not to say all disasters are man-made, but even the so-called natural ones are to some extent triggered by man. Given the inevitability of it, the government has been alerted to either prevent its occurrence or escalation; while the former has been near impossible, the latter aims at minimizing losses occasioned by the phenomenon. Whichever direction it goes; the role of diverse actors comes into play in containing natural disasters. In the case of this section priority is only given to the efforts of the Nigerian Armed Forces led by the Nigerian Army in disaster management in Nigeria.

Nigerian Armed Forces in Combat and Social Activities in Disasters

While the subject of military engagement in disaster or relief operations is not new (as witnessed in the case of the Berlin airlift of 1948-1949), it has grown since the early 1990s. For instance military resources were deployed in cyclone Bangladesh in 1991, Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, UK military flood engagement in Britain in 2007, Chinese troops in Sichuan in 2008, international military officers' deployment of humanitarian helicopter airlift seen in response to Earthquake in Pakistan in 2005¹³ Arising from the importance attached to disaster management the Nigeria Federal Government established National Emergency Management (NEMA) as stated elsewhere in the paper in 1999 by an Act of Parliament (Act 12, as amended by Act 50 of 1999) as coordinating agency for disaster management¹⁴.

The Governing Board of NEMA consists of Ministers and Directors-General of relevant ministries, departments and agencies. It is through partnerships in this platform that the Armed Forces participate to contribute their quota to disaster mitigation in Nigeria. In Sokoto the Nigerian Army on behalf of the Military has risen to occasion whenever called upon. During flood in Sokoto, the Nigerian Army Engineers constructed emergency bridges to facilitate evacuation of the Internally Displaced persons (IDPs) to safety zones¹⁵. The same was the experience of Taraba State when part of it was chopped-off. In the events of the unfortunate air crashes in the past the Nigeria Air Force was actively involved in the Search, Rescue and Identification (SRI) of crash sites. To enhance response to air disaster, Total Radar Coverage of Nigeria (TRACON) was established in the military arm¹⁶. The same way, the Nigerian Army, Navy and the Air Force were involved in the search and rescue in the flood areas of River Benue during the 2012 flood disasters in Benue and Kogi States respectively¹⁷.

The Nigerian military especially the Army has been drawn to the theatre of numerous political, ethno-religious, communal violence and Farmer-Herders conflicts in Kaduna, Lagos, Kano, Plateau, Bauchi, Borno, Taraba, Benue, Delta, Anambra, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, Zamfara amongst others, since

¹³. Hofmann, C.A and. Hudson, L, *Military Responses to natural disasters: last resort...*

¹⁴. Odeh, G. O, *A Historical Glimpse at National Security Challenges in Nigeria and the Need for Disaster Professionals*. Being a text of the lecture delivered at the induction ceremony of the Institute of Disaster Management and Safety Science, held at (Nigerian Army Resource Centre, Aso Drive, Asokoro-Abuja, Saturday, 14 September, 2019) 7-8.

¹⁵ "The Nigerian Army Engineer Corps Brief", AHQTS, Abuja 2015-2021. Restricted.

¹⁶. Oga, P, *Law and Security in Nigeria: The Role of the military*, <https://nairamatics.com>.

¹⁷ "The Nigerian Army Engineer Corps Brief", AHQTS, Abuja 2015-2021. Restricted.

2000¹⁸. The humanitarian response in the North-East since 2009 after the emergence of the *Boko Haram* insurgency with the Nigerian Army not only controlling the entire Borno State, NEMA, SEMA and other international humanitarian actors joined hands in this drive to hurt the terrorists¹⁹.

The conditions in the North-East are worsened by the condition of about 800,000 people who are not accessible by the humanitarian workers. The role of the Armed Forces in the management of disasters such as seashore erosion, cultism and community clashes in Ahoada-East Local Government Area of Rivers State has been rated very high underscoring the significant role the Army plays in containing disaster in Nigeria²⁰. Towards mitigating the spread of global scale diseases the Nigerian Armed Forces in 2013, developed the Pandemic Contingency Plan, which is still relevant in the face of *Covid19* pandemic. As response framework its objectives are as follows: Contribute to an effective national response to a severe global influenza pandemic; Reduce influenza related morbidity and mortality; Minimize disruption of critical social and medical services during a pandemic; Mitigate pandemic related impacts on critical infrastructure; Support post-pandemic recovery operation; and Coordinate with the armed forces of neighbouring countries through ECOWAS to plan synchronization and mutual support in response operations during a pandemic²¹.

Armed Forces Medical Personnel involvements in Disasters and Hazard

These core objectives of the plan are predicated on the planning assumptions that: Pandemic influenza will affect multiple communities across Nigeria simultaneously; Susceptibility to pandemic influenza virus will be universal among all population, groups and including military personnel; Efficient and sustained person-to-person transmission of a novel virus signals an imminent pandemic (a novel virus being one that has not been previously found in the human population and therefore one which humans have little, if any inherent immunity; The clinical disease attack rate will be 25 per cent or higher in the overall population, including military personnel, during the pandemic. Illness rates will be highest among school-aged children (about 40 per cent) and decline with age.

Among working adults, an average of 25 per cent will become ill during a community outbreak; some persons will become infected but not develop clinically significant symptoms. Asymptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals can transmit infection and develop immunity to subsequent infection; of those who become ill with pandemic influenza virus 50-60 per cent will seek outpatient medical care, but due to enormous demand for health care resources, most infected persons will be treated at home. This will require families to provide in-home care for ill family members; Pandemic related anxiety will cause increased psychogenic and stress-related illness, compounding the strain in health care facilities; Risk groups for severe and fatal infections will include infants, the elderly, pregnant women, and persons with compromised immune system, and /or chronic medical conditions; Once a pandemic influenza virus is identified, it will take from four to six months to produce an initial vaccine and longer to produce and distribute sufficient quantities to effectively impact the pandemic; Once produced, the vaccine will be distributed in accordance with planned and guidance developed by WHO; Lack of access to anti-viral medications and vaccines and perception about inequitable distribution is a potential cause of public

¹⁸National Disaster Framework; *Understanding the Framework*. Oluronfemi F B and Adebimpe, R U. , Sustainable Disaster Risk Reduction in Nigeria: Lessons for Developing Countries” *African Journal*..., <https://www.ajol.info>. Curbing Violence in Nigeria (1): The Jos Crisis, Africa Report No196-17 December, 2012, International Crisis Group Working to Prevent Conflict World Wide, <https://www.crisisgroup.org>west-africa>.

¹⁹ Roiron, V, *A Square peg in the round hole: the politics of disaster management in the north-eastern Nigeria*, <https://odihpn.org>.

²⁰ Chukwu-Okeah, G.O, J J.Ebubechukwu and Okemini, E.B. “Analysis of Military and Public Participation in Disaster Rescue Operations in Ahoada East Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria” *Asian Journal of Advanced research and Research*, 6(4), <https://journalajarr.com>.

²¹ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Assessment report on mainstreaming and implementing disaster risk reduction measures in Nigeria*, www.uneca.org.

concern or even social unrest; Work place absenteeism will depend on the severity of the pandemic. In a severe pandemic absenteeism attributable to illness, need to care for ill family members and fear of infection may be 40 per cent during the peak weeks of a community outbreak.

Certain public health measures (for instance: Closing schools and child care facilities, quarantining household contacts of infected individuals) are likely to increase rates of absenteeism; In an affected community, a pandemic outbreak, “wave” will last about six to eight weeks. These outbreaks will occur and reoccur multiple times within a community; Most governments will not close their borders or severely limit travel, although significant entrance and exit screening will be mandated at border entry and exit locations and will cause significant travel delays; Commercial air transportation will be limited as a result of flight cancellations due to airline crew availability, pandemic-related infrastructure limitations and fiscal challenges.

Flights to some countries may be completely unavailable; During severe pandemic wave, local availability of food, health care, fuel and other everyday items will be limited owing to hoarding and pandemic-related impact on distribution and transportation of systems; and Movement of populations both within nations and across international borders will significantly impact societies, altering the requirements for health care, shelter, food, and security.²²

From the above it does appear the Armed Forces foresaw the *Covid19* pandemic and put into practice the draft which no doubt positioned the military on top of the novel corona virus challenges. The nation and other sectors too appear to have benefits from the plan. Similarly, for effective engagement response, the Disaster Response Units (DRUs) have been established in the Army. In 2018, due to flood red alert in the country in conjunction with NEMA, NAF 671 and Nigerian Army 81 battalion both in Ibadan collaborated to assess gaps in areas of assistance.²³ Since then as noted, the Army has consistently risen to occasions as a formidable institution established and prepared for risk management.

Conclusion

The paper has considered efforts of the Armed Forces in disaster management in Nigeria. Conceptual issues that concern it have been discussed. Typologies of disaster and some contributions of the military to its management also known as mitigation have been analyzed. As argued in the paper, the role of the military cannot be emphasised and having the mandate to defend the territorial integrity of the nation-state and protect lives and property of Nigeria. While military engagement cannot be down played in a civilised society its role of search, rescue and combat operations must be done within the provisions of the law of the state. Given that the phenomenon is largely multi-sectored and multidimensional in nature, it thus demands all stakeholders be involved since the task of disaster is not a one-man task. The paper concludes that with the engagement of civilised Armed Forces the narrative of disaster management would change for good in the twenty-first century to human advantage as the role of military in disasters is inseparable.

References

- Chukwu-Okeah, G.O, J J.Ebubechukwu and Okemini, E.B. “Analysis of Military and Public Participation in Disaster Rescue Operations in Ahoada East Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria” *Asian Journal of Advanced research and Research*, 6(4), <https://journalajarr.com>.
- Johnson, S. P. “The Earth Summit; the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development” (UNCED)-*International Environmental Law and Policy Series*, (London: Graham and

²² United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, *Assessment report...*

²³ NEMA, *Military Collaborate on Disaster Management...*

Trotman/Martinus Nyhoff, 1993)

Magnus, K. “Profiling Poverty in Nigeria and its Implication for Potential impacts of Climate Change” presented at the National Conference on the National Assembly Conference on the Nigeria Environment, organized by the Senate Committee on Environment and Ecology, Abuja: Nicon-Hilton, 13th -15th September, 2005)

Odeh, G. O, “A Historical Glimpse at National Security Challenges in Nigeria and the Need for Disaster Professionals”. Being a text of the lecture delivered at the induction ceremony of the Institute of Disaster Management and Safety Science, held at (Nigerian Army Resource Centre, Aso Drive, Asokoro-Abuja, and Saturday, 14 September, 2019)

Oga, P, *Law and Security in Nigeria: The Role of the military*, <https://nairamatics.com>.

The Nigerian Army Engineer Corps Brief”, (AHQTS, Abuja 2015-2021. Restricted).



© 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)