



Nigeria: #EndSARS Protests Against Police Brutality

October 27, 2020

Since early October, large youth-led protests against police abuses have [shaken](#) cities across Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. The demonstrations emerged after video circulated on social media purporting to show an extrajudicial killing by members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the national Nigeria Police Force (NPF) responsible for investigating violent offenses. SARS personnel previously [had been implicated](#) in extensive human rights abuses by what the U.S. State Department describes as “credible international organizations.”

In response to protesters' calls to disband SARS—a demand amplified on [Twitter](#) and other social media via the hashtag #EndSARS—President Muhammadu Buhari [announced](#) on October 11 that the unit would be dissolved and its officers retrained and redeployed as part of a new task force. Demonstrations and social media campaigns have continued, with activists criticizing SARS's dissolution as insufficient and calling for additional reforms, including accountability for past abuses and higher police salaries to reduce incentives for extortion. The government has cracked down on the unrest; since mid-October, security forces, including military personnel, reportedly have [killed dozens of protesters](#).

The Nigerian government's response to the #EndSARS protests may shape U.S. policy and assistance considerations, including with regard to aid focused on professionalizing and building the capacity of Nigeria's law enforcement and military. Some Members of Congress have [expressed solidarity](#) with the #EndSARS movement or issued [statements](#) of [concern](#) over reports of security force abuses against protesters. Successive Congresses [have focused attention](#) on human rights violations by Nigerian security personnel amid [reports](#) of widespread abuses during the Nigerian military's campaign against Boko Haram and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). As discussed below, U.S. human rights concerns periodically have constrained U.S. security assistance.

#EndSARS Protests and Responses

Protests against police brutality previously have arisen in Nigeria, as advocates and researchers have documented [extensive evidence](#) of human rights abuses by SARS officers and other NPF personnel. In a [2016 report](#), Amnesty International asserted that SARS officers routinely committed torture and other abuses against detainees—many of whom were arrested arbitrarily, detained incommunicado, and forced to “confess” or pay bribes to secure release. The #EndSARS movement [began in 2017](#), as Nigerians

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11525

shared experiences of police brutality via social media and demonstrated in several cities to call for SARS's dissolution. In response to those protests, the government [pledged](#) an "immediate re-organization" of SARS and an investigation into allegations against the unit. Reported abuses nevertheless persisted; in June 2020, Amnesty International [concluded](#) that SARS officers continued to commit extensive human rights violations and that impunity remained pervasive.

The 2020 #EndSARS protests have been noteworthy for their size, duration, and reach. Demonstrations began in early October and intensified as celebrities worldwide [expressed support](#) for the protesters and as a [government crackdown](#) on marchers in mid-October provoked further demonstrations. Many activists [deemed](#) the disbanding of SARS on October 11 as inadequate, comparing it to past reforms that broadly failed to curb SARS misconduct; some [also have called](#) for broader governance improvements. As unrest has continued, governors in several states have [imposed curfews or banned protests](#).

On October 20, army and police [reportedly](#) used live fire to disperse demonstrators in the Lekki and Alausa areas of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, killing several and injuring hundreds. Various world leaders [criticized](#) the crackdown; on October 22, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [condemned](#) "the use of excessive force by military forces who fired on unarmed demonstrators in Lagos," calling for Nigerian security services to "show maximum restraint and respect fundamental rights and for demonstrators to remain peaceful."

As reports have emerged of violence and looting by some crowds—including [attacks](#) on police stations and prisons, as well as instances of [ethnically-targeted violence](#)—Nigerian officials [have accused](#) criminals of coopting the protests and [pledged to suppress](#) further unrest. Meanwhile, activists and some opposition politicians [allege](#) that security forces have recruited or permitted armed gangs to disperse peaceful protesters.

Considerations for Congress

The Buhari administration's response to the ongoing turmoil may have implications for U.S. policy and assistance. State Department-administered aid to the NPF has included [crime scene training](#) for terrorism investigations, programs to encourage [respect for human rights](#) and support oversight of the NPF, and training in [community policing](#) and "[civil disorder management](#)." U.S. assistance also has [sought to strengthen](#) the NPF's presence in areas that the government has reclaimed from Boko Haram and ISWAP. It does not appear that SARS has been a primary recipient of U.S. assistance, but it is possible that SARS officers have participated in NPF training programs. Members of Congress may consider whether abuses by NPF officers merit restrictions on U.S. engagement with Nigerian law enforcement—beyond existing "Leahy Laws" prohibiting certain U.S. assistance to security force units and individuals implicated in gross human rights violations—or, conversely, whether such reports underscore a need for greater professionalization.

The Nigerian government's response to the protests also could have consequences for U.S.-Nigerian military cooperation. The October 20 crackdown on protesters in Lagos was not the first instance of the military using lethal force against civilians. In 2015, military personnel [reportedly](#) killed nearly 350 members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a Shia Muslim sect, during a gathering; security forces have since [violently suppressed](#) a series of IMN protests, killing dozens. More broadly, observers have accused Nigeria's military of [executing hundreds of civilians](#), [arbitrarily detaining thousands more](#), and [committing widespread torture](#) during counterterrorism operations. Impunity for such abuses remains endemic: according to the State Department's [2019 human rights report](#), "no charges were filed in some of the significant allegations of human rights violations by security forces." U.S. officials [have barred](#) some Nigerian security personnel from receiving U.S. assistance under the Leahy Laws; human rights concerns also [have impeded](#) the transfer of some U.S.-manufactured defense articles to Nigeria. For detail on Nigeria and U.S. engagement, see CRS Report RL33964, *Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*.

Author Information

Tomas F. Husted
Analyst in African Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.