



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

14 February 2006

### NGA101051.E

Nigeria: Bakassi Boys; leadership, membership, activities, and treatment by authorities (January 2005 - February 2006)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### Bakassi Boys

The Bakassi Boys were created in 1998 by traders in the Nigerian city of Aba (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 1) who wanted to protect themselves from armed robbers (SAS May 2005, 18; *WAR* 2002, 5) and "hoodlums" (ibid.). Having had success in reducing crime in Aba, the Bakassi Boys became "in high demand" (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 4), and their activities spread to other cities in eastern Nigeria (ibid., 4; HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 9).

According to 2004 and 2005 reports, the vigilante group is active in the southeastern states of Imo, Abia, and Anambra (SAS May 2005, 333; International Alert Mar. 2004, 39; *Nigeriaworld* 14 Jan. 2005). The Bakassi Boys are officially called the Imo Vigilante Services (IVS), the Abia Vigilante Services (AVS), and the Anambra Vigilante Services (AVS) (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 8; International Alert Mar. 2004, 39; AI 19 Nov. 2002) in the three states in which they are most active.

### Leadership

The Bakassi Boys are described by one source as a "highly structured organisation with a defined chain of command" (COAV 30 May 2005, 249). The leader of the vigilante group is the national chairman (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 5), who in 2002 was also the state chairman for Abia State. State chapters are autonomous, yet "cooperate with one another ... and make routine consultations with the national headquarters" (ibid.). State chairmen coordinate branch activities; branches are led by branch chairmen (ibid.).

According to a 2005 Children in Organized Armed Violence (COAV) report,

[a]lthough the Chairman may be considered as being in control of every major operation, this can vary in certain situations as some operations may be carried out under the command of youth members (COAV 30 May 2005, 255)

A 2005 news release identified "Kingsley Chimezie" as the leader of the Bakassi Boys (*This Day* 30 Aug. 2005). In November 2005, *Vanguard* reported the murder of a "Kingsley Chimeye," along with nineteen other persons, by alleged members of the Bakassi Boys (18 Nov. 2005).

The executive director of the CLEEN Foundation, a Lagos-based (CLEEN n.d.b) non-governmental organization (ibid. n.d.a) that "promote[s] respect for human rights and cooperation between civil society and law enforcement agencies throughout

Nigeria" (ibid. n.d.c), was unable to confirm the identity of the leaders of the Bakassi Boys (CLEEN 9 Feb. 2006). In his February 2006 correspondence to the Research Directorate he stated that

[t]he Bakassi Boys were disbanded ... in 2002 though their activities did not completely stop. What they rather did was to go underground with the identities of their leaders difficult to know. So, I am not in a position to say or confirm categorically who are currently in charge of the body at the national, state or local levels (ibid.).

No further information on the leadership of the Bakassi Boys could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

## **Membership and Recruitment**

Members of the Bakassi Boys are primarily of Igbo ethnicity (COAV 30 May 2005, 248). They are generally "young, able-bodied men in their twenties or thirties" (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 11), although there are reportedly some members under the age of eighteen (COAV May 2005, 251). Members are usually drawn from traders of various commercial markets; commercial markets are divided into zones "from which six vigilantes are selected" (ibid., 249). New members receive two months of training on the rules of the Bakassi Boys prior to participating in the group's operations (ibid., 249).

According to research conducted by COAV in 2005, members of the Bakassi Boys join the organization voluntarily (30 May 2005, 254). Formal recruitment generally takes place at the age of seventeen, although many members are involved as informants at around the age of sixteen (ibid., 254).

The Bakassi Boys initially had about 500 members (WAR 2002, 5), but have since grown to approximately 3,500 members (COAV 30 May 2005, 249).

According to Amnesty International, members of the local community believe that members of the Bakassi Boys have "magic" powers (19 Nov. 2002; BBC 20 May 2002) and carry charms that make them "invincible" (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 3). Members of the group use "magic" to determine the guilt of alleged criminals (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 24). The "most infamous" of their techniques involves a machete "imbued with powerful magic charms" (BBC 20 May 2002): the machete is placed on the suspected criminal's body and turns red if the person is guilty (ibid.; AI 19 Nov. 2002, Sec. 3). The Bakassi Boys are known to mutilate (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 24), dismember (ibid. 24; *This Day* 3 Feb. 2006) or decapitate (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 24), and burn their victims (ibid., 24; BBC 20 May 2002; *This Day* 3 Feb. 2006).

## **Activities**

There have been reports of the Bakassi Boys carrying out extra-judicial killings (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 16; Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005; *Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 3), arbitrary arrests (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 16; Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005), and torture of suspected criminals (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 16). *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2004* notes that the Bakassi Boys "sometimes killed suspected criminals rather than turn[ing] them over to police" (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 1.a).

In August 2005, the Bakassi Boys allegedly "rounded up" (Global Insight Daily Analysis 19 Aug. 2005) thirty-seven suspected criminals in the city of Aba, Abia State (ibid.; AFP 16 Aug. 2005) and detained them in an "illegal and poorly ventilated cell" (ibid.). Twenty-seven of the detainees reportedly died of suffocation (*This Day* 30 Aug. 2005; AFP 16 Aug. 2005).

In November 2005, the Bakassi Boys were suspected in the "extra-judicial murder" of twenty people in Aba, Abia State (*Vanguard* 18 Nov. 2005). The victims were allegedly "butchered to death" by members of the vigilante group (ibid.).

In addition to such vigilante activities as described above, the Bakassi Boys have also reportedly been used by politicians to "target perceived political opponents" (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 35). The vigilante group has also become involved in the settlement of disputes in civil matters (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 9-10; HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 34) as a result of the public's general lack of trust in the court system and law enforcement agents in Nigeria (*Journal of Democracy and Development* 2002, 9-10). However, members of the general public have "expressed their disappointment over the outcome of disputes, [and] ... have actually accused the Bakassi Boys of killing innocent citizens" (ibid. 10).

Funding for the vigilante group's activities was initially provided by the traders' associations in the states in which the group operates (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 11; COAV 30 May 2005, 250); however, state governments have "taken over this role" (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 11). Traders, businesses, local governments and other organizations also continue to contribute towards the funding of the Bakassi Boys, although not always willingly (ibid.; SAS May 2005, 333).

It has been suggested that, while the vigilante group may have the support of some community members, its "arbitrary" and "brutal" methods (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 15) have resulted in community members' having feelings towards the group that are "characterized by fear and helplessness" (COAV 30 May 2005, 250; HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 15). According to a Human Rights Watch and CLEEN report, the

Bakassi Boys have dealt ruthlessly with individuals who have dared to criticize or denounce their methods, or refused to make financial contributions to them (May 2002, 33).

*Country Reports 2004* reported that "[a]lthough some killings continued, the influence of the Bakassi Boys and other vigilante groups in the Southeast diminished" during 2004 (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 1.a).

## **Treatment by the Authorities**

In 2002, the Bakassi Boys were allegedly disbanded (CDCMS 2003, 43) following a federal government move to prohibit vigilante groups (Global Insight Daily Analysis 19 Aug. 2005; AFP 16 Aug. 2005; *This Day* 2 Feb. 2006). However, state governments continued to "covertly condone" their existence, allowing the Bakassi Boys to carry on their operations (Global Insight Daily Analysis 19 Aug. 2005). In Imo, Abia, and Anambra, the state government has provided the Bakassi Boys with salaries as well as offices, uniforms and vehicles, bearing the names of the vigilante groups (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 12). In January 2006, the governor of Abia State passed into law a bill to legally recognize the operations of the Bakassi Boys, despite the earlier federal legislation prohibiting such vigilante groups (*Vanguard* 31 Jan. 2006; *This Day* 2 Feb. 2006).

The relationship between the Bakassi Boys and the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) has been described as "tense" (HRW and CLEEN May 2002, 36), given the "[c]onflicts of interest" (ibid., 37) and "competition" between the two groups (ibid., 36).

According to a 2002 HRW and CLEEN report, the Nigerian police have also been "almost powerless in curbing the excesses of the Bakassi Boys, [and] even less [effective] in re-asserting their authority over them" (ibid. 38). Nonetheless, there were reports in 2005 and 2006 of members of the Bakassi Boys being arrested (AFP

16 Aug. 2005; *Vanguard* 3 Dec. 2005) and tried (ibid.; *This Day* 3 Feb. 2006) for vigilante activities.

In August 2005, the Nigerian police arrested and "put on show" seventeen alleged members of the Bakassi Boys for suspected "vigilante involvement" in the deaths of twenty-seven persons in Abia State earlier in the month (AFP 16 Aug. 2005).

In December 2005, fourteen suspected members of the Bakassi Boys were brought before a federal high court on charges of "unlawful killing" and "illegal possession of firearms" (*Vanguard* 3 Dec. 2005). The men allegedly killed a trader in Abia State in November 2005 (ibid.).

In February 2006, four members of the Bakassi Boys were sentenced to death by hanging by the Umuahia High Court for the 1999 murder of two persons suspected of being armed robbers (*This Day* 3 Feb. 2006). The two victims, including a police officer, were dismembered and burnt (ibid.).

According to a November 2005 *Vanguard* news release, a panel of the Supreme Court was created by the Nigerian federal government in 2005 to investigate the extra-judicial murders of twenty persons in Abia State by suspected members of the Bakassi Boys (18 Nov. 2005). The Attorney-General of the Federation, on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria,

disclosed that the Federal Government would henceforth deal ruthlessly with all ethnic militia and lawbreakers, engaging in multifarious human rights abuses in the country, in the name of vigilante groups (*Vanguard* 18 Nov. 2005).

No further information on the treatment of members of the Bakassi Boys by the Nigerian authorities could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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### **Additional Sources Consulted**

**Oral Sources:** The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response. A professor from the Department of International Affairs, Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria provided the Research Directorate with published documents.

**Internet sites, including:** ECOI.net, Freedom House, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), United Kingdom Home Office Country Report, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations - Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNHCHR), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

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