

ACTION GROUP ON FREE CIVIC SPACE

#ENDSARS/ENDSWAT: Violent Attacks on Peaceful Protesters Must Stop!
WEDNESDAY: OCTOBER 21, 2020

The ACTION GROUP ON FREE CIVIC SPACE strongly condemns the shooting spree at the Lekki tollgate on Tuesday night in Lagos where scores of protesters have been reportedly killed and injured. We make bold to state that the Lagos State government has **FAILED** in its obligation to protect the lives and properties of citizens. We regard the taking away of the CCTV cameras at the Lekki toll gate before the shootings as evidence of a premeditated attempt to use extreme force to quell the protests and inflict grievous bodily harm on protesters. This is a sad proof of a closed civic space in Nigeria.

Background to the Protests

What started as peaceful protests across the country by young protesters demanding accountability and an end to the brutal policing operations of a unit of the Nigerian Police Force, known as Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), has degenerated into a free-for-all. In the last two days, the [Closing Spaces Database](#) has tracked numerous incidents involving violent attacks on protesters in Lagos, Jos, Kano, Delta, Abuja, Ogun, Ekiti etc; a jailbreak in Benin, arson targeted at police stations and a hospital in Edo and Lagos states respectively; destruction of public and private properties across 18 states, especially in Lagos, Jos and Abuja; teargassing and indiscriminate shooting of protesters resulting in over 10 deaths across the country. [#ENDSARS focus was added to the Database](#) in the wake of the peaceful nationwide protests that started on October 8 following the shooting of a young man in Delta state by a SARS officer. The video of the killing went viral on the internet, sparking outrage and anger by many young Nigerians who have for several years, endured wanton arrests, harassment, extortion, detention, torture including killings by SARS operatives.

Images culled from various social media sites on the database signpost the use to extreme force and cruelty to quell peaceful protests across the country. In Jos, Plateau State, North Central Nigeria, security forces were seen firing live ammunitions at protesters, while scores of expended bullets were picked from the protest ground. In Ojoo, Ibadan, Oyo State, South West Nigeria, a protester was gunned down as he was fleeing from the sporadic gunshots. In Lagos, shots were fired at protesters camped at the Lekki toll gate on Tuesday night hours after a 24-hour curfew was imposed in the city. Some persons were reportedly killed while private hospitals opened their doors wide to treat wounded protesters. In Onitsha, Anambra State, the Niger overhead bridge which serves as the major entrance into the entire south eastern region was blocked with a dangerous deity, causing fear, chaos and total movement restrictions. In a joint press statement top music stars and producers from the south east region—Flavour, Phyno, Zoro, Kcee and Mastercraft—issued on behalf of the protesters in Enugu State, South-East Nigeria, they accused the Enugu State government of hiring thugs to threaten peaceful #End SARS protests in Enugu. The killing of a young man by security operatives in the Kofar Mata in Sabon-Gari area of Kano State, North West Nigeria, sparked further protests by enraged local youths.

The #ENDSARS Protests Were Largely Peaceful, Well-Coordinated and Innovative

Established in 1992 to combat armed robbery and other violent crimes, the victims of SARS brutality are predominantly young people who are often profiled as criminals for looking too handsome, wearing expensive dresses, tattoos and dreadlocks, and for owning I-phones, laptops and driving expensive cars. Justifying the SARS-targeted attacks on young Nigerians, [Vandefan Tersugh, a former commander of the dissolved special anti-robbery squad \(SARS\)](#), announced on national television that it raises suspicion for a young Nigerian to have a car worth N7 million. The anger spread from digital assemblies trending the #ENDSARS hashtags to offline demonstrations on the streets across state capitals.

#ENDSARS protests have been largely described as ‘different’, ‘innovative’ and excellently coordinated. For the first time ever, the countrywide protestations against systemic dysfunction were purely youth-led and citizen-led, without any arrowheads. Also, protest venues were characterized by solid arrangements for food, water, private security, non-stop entertainment, sanitation and standby medics. Nigerian celebrities added color

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to the demonstrations through their direct participation in the protests and lending their voices to the demands. [Protesters even cleaned up the venues at the close of the daily demonstrations.](#)

... And the Protests Degenerated

Street action persisted after the government failed to honor protesters' demands for SARS to be scrapped. Bowing to the pressure, the Nigerian government indeed dissolved SARS, but immediately replaced it with a new outfit known as Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT). No official investigations were launched into the reported atrocities perpetrated by SARS officers and nobody was tried and punished for those crimes. Officials of the defunct SARS were simply ordered to report at the Force Headquarters, Abuja *for debriefing, psychological and medical examination*. As a result, the protests intensified across the country, with the youth demanding far-reaching reforms. Last Thursday, Nigeria's army signaled it was prepared to assist the government maintain law and order. From then on, the whole tone of the demonstrations began to degenerate, with demonstrators coming under attacks either by the police or thugs, followed by a jailbreak in Benin, and the eruption of violent crimes in many parts of the country in the bid to discredit the peaceful protests. The state and federal authorities failed to take steps to rein in these thugs, some of whom were spotted in video clips being ferried across the city in government-owned vehicles. The attacks on protesters reached its peak when security operatives comprising a combined team of policemen and soldiers opened fire on #EndSARS protesters at the Lekki tollgate around 7p.m. All of these point to a rapidly-closing state of civic space in Nigeria.

Half of Nigeria's nearly 200 million population consist of people under 30 years of age. With the widening youth bulge and youthful population who are mostly tech-savvy, Nigeria may have deployed maximum force to disperse protesters, but it probably hasn't seen the last of a digitally-coordinated resistance movement like #EndSARS. This is to be expected as #ENDSARS now transcends demonstrations against police brutality and extrajudicial killings, but represents the accumulation of pent-up anger towards institutionalized corruption, unemployment, official policies and programs that have unleashed mass suffering and high cost of living on the vastly poor populations. The bravery and heroism displayed by the living, the dead and the injured victims of #EndSARS protesters are testaments of great faith and hope for a greater future in Nigeria.

Our Demands

The right to protest, a concomitant of the freedom of expression is guaranteed under section 39(1) of the 1999 Constitution. Nigeria must obey its own laws, and uphold the civic freedoms enshrined in its own constitution. Therefore, the Action Group on Free Civic Space is calling on the Nigerian government to:

- **We demand an explanation from the Lagos State government regarding what happened on Tuesday at the Lekki toll gate, and to take immediate steps to remove the army from all streets.**
- **Honor the various list of demands presented by protesters, all of which center on the improvement of social and economic conditions and respect for civil liberties;**
- **Compensate families of all slain protesters across Nigeria; investigate their killings and bring their killers to justice;**
- **Promote an enabling environment for citizens to exercise of their civil liberties by specifically emulating Oyo State governor, Seyi Makinde who launched Operation Burst to continue to protect genuine protesters and at the same time, arrest thugs planning to hijack the protests for other nefarious ends.**
- **Provide all those who have lost properties and homes as a result of the protests with immediate humanitarian assistance, including adequate temporary shelter while long-term solutions are in process.**

SIGNATORIES:

- **Victoria Ibezim-Ohaeri | SPACES FOR CHANGE**
- **Ngozi Iwere | Community Life Project**
- **Fyneface Dumnamene | Youth and Environmental Advocacy Centre**
- **Samuel Akpologun | ACE & VANGUARD legal practitioners**

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- Ngozi Nwosu Vision | Springs Initiative
- Chinwe Onyeukwu | Women Africa
- Emmanuel Acha | Entrepreneurship Initiative for African Youth (EIFAY)
- Ogechi Ekeh | Citizens Centre for Integrated Development and Social Rights (CCIDESOR)
- Juliet Okeiyi | Open Arms Initiative for Sustainable Development
- Okechukwu Nwanguma | Rule of Law and Accountability Advocacy Centre (RULAAC)
- Mike Utsaha | Cultural Communication and Legal Resource Centre
- Joy Ngwakwe | Center for Advancement of Development Rights (CEADER)
- Vicky Uremma Onyekuru | Child Health Organization (CHO), Lagos
- Tony Ayoka | Habitat Care & Protection Initiative
- Oche Onazi | Network of Probono Lawyers
- Kingsley Godwin | World Impact Development Foundation (WIDEF)
- Nnanna Nwafor | Foundation for Environmental Rights, Advocacy & Development FENRAD Nigeria.
- Emmanuel Ikule | NOPRIN Foundation
- Elixir Foundation
- South East Social Accountability Network (SESAN)
- Centre for Community Empowerment and Poverty Eradication (CCEPE)
- Juliet Okeiyi | Open Arms Initiative
- Phillip Jakpor | Corporate Accountability & Public Participation
- Sehinde Ebiesuwa | Communities Alliance Against Displacement
- Albertiqs Extra Helping Hands Foundation (AEHFF)
- Tijah Bolton-Akpan |Policy Alert