

# ACTION GROUP ON FREE CIVIC SPACE

**PRESS STATEMENT | Tuesday, March 23, 2021**

The **Action Group on Free Civic Space (AGFCS)**, with support from the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR), is pleased to share its research report: [#ENDSARS: POLICE BRUTALITY, PROTESTS AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN NIGERIA](#). This report is based on the findings of a joint fact-finding mission by members of the [Action Group on Free Civic Space](#) (AGFCS) to Nigeria's Anambra and Enugu States in the South-eastern region during the peak of the #EndSARS nationwide protests in the country. With a special focus on Awkuzu Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)—regarded as the deadliest SARS unit in the country, the AGFCS mission investigated the atrocities committed by SARS operatives in the region, identified victims of police brutality while establishing the identities of erring officers. AGFCS members that jointly conducted this research are SPACES FOR CHANGE (S4C), Rule of Law and Accountability Center (RULAAC), TheNiche Newspapers, Citizens Solutions Network, Policy Alert, Youth and Environmental Advocacy Centre and World Impact Development Foundation (WIDEF).

Amid reports of the escalating use of coercive means to dispel protesters and suppress organized dissent, AGFCS extended their coverage to other states to independently assess whether the civic space is open and enabled for civil society and ordinary citizens to speak out and participate in the #EndSARS protests without hindrance. As **Clément Nyaletsossi VOULE, Special Rapporteur on Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association**, makes clear in the preface of this report, the right to peaceful assembly guaranteed and protected by the Article 21 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other relevant international standards, is a democratic means by which individuals and groups come together to express their views or grievances and shape their future.

Structured into two parts, the first part, **#EndSARS: HISTORY, TRIGGERS AND THE ERUPTION OF PUBLIC ANGER**, merges historical analysis of police misconduct with firsthand accounts of eyewitnesses, frontliners and victims of police brutality. The second part: **#EndSARS: PROTESTS AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE IN NIGERIA**, extensively analyses the events, actors and factors that shaped the #ENDSARS protests across seven states—Abia, Anambra, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Imo, Lagos and Rivers State—in order to deepen understanding of the triggers, trends and drivers of the revolutionary changes to the dynamics of civic space in Nigeria.

In the first part, this report presents firsthand evidence and testimonies of survivors of police brutality in South East, Nigeria, detailing many egregious human rights violations committed by police officers, especially of the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad. The factfinding mission team documented twelve (12) established patterns and motivations for extreme violence by SARS operatives in Anambra, Enugu as well as other parts of the country. Interviewees repeatedly named certain politicians and police officers as the alleged sponsors of various acts of police brutality against them. The absence of accountability provided a fertile ground for the killing of suspected criminals in the name of fighting crime to continue, while emboldening the SARS officers to become deadlier, and commit more crimes with alarming lethality and intensity.

In the second part, researchers used the widespread protests against police brutality that engulfed the nation in October 2020 as a prism to examine and gauge the state of health of the civic space in

Nigeria. Amid the global outrage and heightened demand for accountability trailing the attacks on protesters—especially the October 20 shooting incident at the Lekki toll gate—state actors have pushed back, introducing numerous measures designed to deter and to punish, which include arrests, smear campaigns, travel bans, confiscation of campaigners’ travel passports, freezing of protesters’ bank accounts, cryptocurrency ban, slamming fines on broadcasting stations for their media coverage of the protests and the demolition of communities that provided eye-witness accounts of the Lekki shooting. Framed around the objective of protecting national security and countering the financing of terrorism, these measures have provided legal cover for acts that suppress dissent and violate citizens’ rights of association, assembly and expression. The securitized backlash against protesters further demonstrates how state actors are overstretching counter-terrorism and national security laws to achieve purposes unrelated to fighting the war against terror.

As the October 20, 2020 military invasion and shooting of protesters at the Lekki tollgate in Lagos demonstrates, excessive force was used to quell the protests. In the preface of this report, **Clément Nyaletsossi VOULE, Special Rapporteur on Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association**, together with a number of other UN Special Rapporteurs, expressed serious concerns to the Nigerian Government about the multiple alleged incidents of excessive use of force by police and soldiers to disperse peaceful protests reportedly leading to the deaths of protesters. Excessive use of force against protesters has a tremendous chilling effect on civic space and the willingness of individuals and organizations to assemble freely and express their views and grievances.

To merely condemn these heinous deeds is not enough, neither is replacing SARS with the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT). We acknowledge the move by the government in setting up judicial panels of inquiry across states to investigate alleged violations of human rights perpetrated by the Nigeria Police Force. However, accountability for police brutality lags behind when highly-placed persons and institutions fail to respond to judicial summons to answer to the alleged crimes. Voices stifled and silenced for campaigning against the atrocities of the police, must be ungagged.

In light of the above, we specifically demand:

- The National Human Rights Commission and Enugu State Judicial Panel of Inquiry to commit to bringing the officers and politicians named and identified by victims in this report to justice for their various roles in perpetrating and aiding police brutality. They include Ugochukwu Ozuode (Ugo SARS), late Jude Agbanijelu, Mr. Afam Nnaji (Okiti), and Honorable Nnoli Nnaji. Others include Okponton, Pele, Too-Much-Money etc.
- The Nigerian government, parliamentary oversight bodies and police authorities to investigate the alleged black-market trade of bodies murdered by SARS operatives to university teaching hospitals as cadavers for the teaching and practice of medicine in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions.
- Embark on a strict and conscious implementation of the provisions of the Police Act, 2020, to ensure security agencies operate with civility, responsibility, professionalism and restraint.
- Support and grant full access to civil society groups and watchdogs independently collecting evidence of violations, providing legal representation to victims, monitoring and documenting the proceedings of judicial panels of inquiry across states in Nigeria.

