

POLICE BRUTALITY, YOUTH BULGE AND THE #ENDSARS PROTEST IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the human rights abuses during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. Originating as a youth-led movement against police brutality, it evolved into a demand for broader institutional reforms. The objectives of the study are to analyze the political dimensions of the protest and its wider impacts on youth consciousness to right abuses in Nigeria. The article explores how social media fuelled nationwide resistance against the Nigerian political system. Using content and discourse analysis of secondary data, the study draws from media reports. Findings reveal extensive human rights violations by the police's SARS Unit, prompting protests organized via Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The protest led to the dissolution of SARS, establishment of a judicial commission, significant economic losses, and social media regulation. Recommendations include police and security system reforms, youth political engagement, and compensation for victims of police abuse.

Keywords: #EndSARS protest, police brutality, political perspective, youth bulge.

Introduction

Nigerian youth have long been at the forefront of challenging colonial legacies and advocating for political reform in the country, particularly regarding military disengagement from politics (Mohammed, 2018). Despite the transition to democracy in 1999, which promised expanded freedoms, justice, and economic opportunities, the situation for young Nigerians has remained challenging. With over 70% of the population under 30 years old (National Bureau for Statistics, 2020; Soyinka, 2020), unemployment rates among youth have soared from 9.71% in 1999 to 17.72% in 2020 (O'Neill, 2023). Out of 21.7 million unemployed individuals, 13.9 million are under the age of 24 (NBS, 2020; Soyinka, 2020). Economic hardships, compounded by factors such as high inflation, population growth, and declining oil prices, have pushed many young people into social crimes like fraud, armed robbery, and online scams (Mohammed, 2020), further straining the country's economy and global reputation.

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was established to combat kidnapping and armed robbery, but its history of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, led to widespread condemnation (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Amnesty International, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and a prolonged strike by the Academic Staff

Union of Universities exacerbated the challenges faced by Nigerian youth, providing fertile ground for organizing the #EndSARS protests. These rallies, which took place across 25 states and six geopolitical zones, demanded social justice, youth inclusion in governance, and overall good governance (ACLEDE, 2021).

The catalyst for the #EndSARS protests was a viral video showing a SARS officer shooting a young Nigerian, followed by another incident where a rapper, Daniel Chibuike, was killed by a SARS officer (Deji, 2020). These events sparked nationwide outrage under the hashtag #EndSARS, leading to massive demonstrations. Although the government announced the disbandment of SARS and the formation of a new unit, the protests persisted, demanding broader police reforms and accountability (Amnesty International, 2021). Tragically, the protests were marred by violence, with reports of security forces shooting unarmed protesters, including at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, where 12 people were allegedly killed (Amnesty International, 2021). Media outlets broadcasting these events faced government censorship and shutdowns.

This paper examines the evolution of the #EndSARS protest from online activism against police brutality to a broader movement advocating for institutional reforms and youth participation in governance. It will delve into the youth bulge thesis as an analytical framework, the methodology used in the study, the dynamics of the #EndSARS movement, and the legal implications of protest in Nigeria, including its international ramifications.

A Literature Review of the EndSARS Protest

The genesis of the #EndSARS movement traces back to 2017, as documented by Vega (2020), when Nigerians turned to social media platforms to vent their grievances against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Instances of extortion, harassment, torture, and unlawful detention by SARS officers prompted widespread outrage among citizens. However, it was not until 2020 that this online activism transitioned into street protests, driven by the realization among young Nigerians of the need for direct action to compel government action on SARS reform. The movement gradually gained momentum within Nigerian society until it reached a violent climax in 2020.

In contrast to regular police officers, SARS operatives were granted leeway to employ aggressive tactics in tackling organized crime, as highlighted by Midenda (2017). However, multiple accusations of extortion, kidnapping, rape, and extrajudicial killings tarnished the unit's reputation, as documented by Mutum (2018). Despite its mandate to maintain public order, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) has faced criticism for its failure to curb the excesses of SARS officers, reflecting a systemic abuse of authority (Abiodun et al., 2020).

The #EndSARS protesters, as reported by Kazeem (2020), Olasupo (2021), and Van Dunem (2021), presented a list of demands to the Federal Government of Nigeria. These included the immediate release of detained protesters, justice and compensation for victims of SARS brutality,

establishment of an independent body to investigate police misconduct, psychological assessment of disbanded SARS officers, and improved remuneration for police personnel. Unfortunately, the government's response fell short of meeting these demands, fueling speculation of potential future protests by #EndSARS activists.

The oversight of law enforcement in Nigeria falls under the purview of the Inspector General (IG) of Police, appointed by the President, as outlined by constitutional provisions. Similarly, the Federal Ministry of Police Affairs is tasked with administrative oversight of the Nigerian Police Force. In response to the #EndSARS protests, Lagos State convened an investigative panel, including protester representatives, to examine incidents of SARS abuse. However, despite these efforts, systemic reforms within the Nigerian police force have been slow to materialize.

The pivotal role of social media, particularly Twitter, in mobilizing and amplifying the #EndSARS protests cannot be overstated. Amnesty International (2021) attributes the success of the movement to Twitter, which served as a platform for organizing demonstrations and fostering public discourse on governance issues. Users shared firsthand accounts of police brutality, galvanizing support for the cause and propelling the movement to national prominence. The #EndSARS protests underscored the power of social media in shaping public opinion and driving societal change in Nigeria. Despite initial strides in raising awareness of police brutality, the movement's long-term impact hinges on sustained efforts to address systemic issues within law enforcement and ensure accountability for human rights violations.

The Youth Bulge Thesis: A Framework for the Discourse of the #EndSAR Protest

The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria serve as a poignant illustration of how the Youth Bulge Theory (YBT) intersects with socio-political movements. Coined by German social scientist Gunnar Heinsohn in the mid-1990s, the YBT gained prominence as policymakers began to recognize the security implications of burgeoning youth populations, particularly in regions where high unemployment rates among young people could lead to social unrest (Sommers, 2010; Behner, 2007; Goldstone, 1991).

Heinsohn (2008) contends that historical periods of social unrest often coincide with youth bulges, characterized by a surplus of young, unemployed individuals vying for limited economic opportunities. Recent estimates from the International Labour Organisation project a substantial disparity between job seekers and available employment opportunities in developing countries, exacerbating tensions among youth cohorts (Kebede, 2018). Furthermore, countries undergoing demographic transitions, transitioning from high to low fertility and mortality rates, are particularly susceptible to civil unrest and social violence (Heinsohn, 2008; World Bank, 2007 & 2012; Council on Foreign Relations, 2007). PAI research indicates a strong correlation between youthful populations and civil conflicts, with a significant majority of recent conflicts occurring in nations with sizable youth cohorts (PAI, undated).

Mesquida (2003) underscores the heightened risk of civil war in countries with a youth bulge, where high rates of unemployment and disenfranchised youth contribute to recruitment by rebel or terrorist groups. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in regions with weak political institutions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, southern Asia, and the Middle East.

Against this backdrop, the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria emerged as a response to entrenched issues of police brutality, exacerbated by the frustrations of a youthful population grappling with high unemployment rates and limited economic opportunities. The targeting of young individuals involved in cybercrime and other illicit activities by law enforcement agencies further underscores the application of the youth bulge concept in understanding the dynamics of social unrest (PAI, undated). The economic challenges exacerbated by recession and inflation in Nigeria have led to a surge in youth unemployment, driving many into various forms of criminality as a means of survival. The #EndSARS demonstrations, which swept across Nigeria, served as a manifestation of the pent-up frustrations of young people grappling with systemic failures to address their socio-economic grievances.

Methodology

In conducting this study on the #EndSARS protest, a qualitative approach was chosen to delve into the complexities of the movement and its impact on Nigerian society. The methodology primarily relied on the collection and analysis of secondary sources through documentary research. This decision was motivated by the extensive media coverage and documentation surrounding the protest, which made secondary sources a rich and accessible pool of data for analysis. The data was collected by gathering secondary documents from diverse sources, including official reports, government records, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, institutional memoranda, personal diaries, conference papers, respected journals, stories from national dailies, and records from non-governmental groups. These sources provided a comprehensive view of the #EndSARS protest, capturing its genesis, evolution, and aftermath from various perspectives.

The analysis of the gathered data adopted a qualitative method, characterized by its descriptive, interactive, interpretive, and historical nature. This approach unpacked the multifaceted dimensions of the #EndSARS protest to understand its underlying dynamics within the socio-political context of Nigeria. Through descriptive analysis, the study sought to identify key themes, narratives, and trajectories within the protest movement, shedding light on the motivations, grievances, and aspirations of the protesters. By systematically examining and interpreting secondary sources, the study provided a nuanced understanding of the #EndSARS protest phenomenon. It explored the interactions between protesters, government authorities, security agencies, and other stakeholders, examining how the protest unfolded, the responses it elicited, and its broader implications for governance, social justice, and democratic participation in Nigeria. The qualitative methodology adopted in this study offered a comprehensive exploration of the

#EndSARS protest, drawing insights from diverse secondary sources and employing descriptive analysis techniques to unravel its complexities and significance within the Nigerian context.

Political Perspective and the Dimension of the #EndSARS Protest

The #EndSARS protest, viewed through a political lens, reflects a convergence of citizens' political rights, concerns over police brutality, and broader demands for structural reforms in Nigeria's governance system. Political perspective, as conceptualized in political theory, examines how individuals' values and beliefs shape their responses to significant civic issues (Verba & Almond, 1963). Milbrath (1965) and Barnes & Kaase (1979) suggest that participating in or organizing protests against undemocratic policies or human rights violations constitutes political engagement.

The roots of the #EndSARS movement trace back to systemic issues of police brutality that have persisted for nearly three decades in Nigeria. Moreover, calls for constitutional reforms and restructuring, particularly regarding the establishment of State Police, have been echoed not only among ordinary citizens but also within the political elite (World Economic Forum, 2020). Understanding the socio-cultural and regional political dynamics at play is crucial in comprehending the nuances of the protest.

The immediate catalyst for the #EndSARS demonstrations can be traced to viral online videos depicting instances of police violence, including the unlawful killing of suspects in Delta and Rivers States (Deji, 2020; CNN, October 22). These incidents, widely circulated on social media platforms such as Twitter, ignited public outrage, prompting widespread calls for the abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and broader police reforms.

Organized primarily by Nigerian youth aged 18 to 35, who have been disproportionately affected by police brutality, the #EndSARS movement quickly gained momentum, leveraging social media platforms to amplify its message (World Economic Forum, 2020). Amnesty International (2021) characterizes the demonstrators as the "Soro Soke" (Speak out, in Yoruba) generation, reflecting their determination to effect change. The movement's decentralized structure, facilitated by online helplines, legal aid, and crowdfunding initiatives, contributed to its widespread reach and impact (BBC, 2020, October 24).

The government's response to the protests further escalated tensions, transforming the #EndSARS movement from a domestic issue into an international concern. Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, framed the protests within a political context, alleging that they aimed at effecting regime change and were supported by both domestic and foreign actors (Premium Times, 2020, November 24). This assertion, made during a meeting between South-South regional leaders and a delegation from the Nigerian Presidency, underscored the government's apprehension regarding the protests' political implications.

Following a meeting held in Kaduna State on November 2, 2020, the Northern Governor's Forum, spearheaded by Governor Simon Bako Lalong of Plateau State, released a statement addressing the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, with a specific focus on their implications for the Northern region. Premium Times published excerpts from the resolutions pertaining to Forum Items 5–6, noted:

The meeting rejects and condemns the subversive actions of the #EndSARS change protest. The superlative agitations and other change-regime actions outside the ballot box will soon take advantage of the peaceful protests to push for their separatist agenda. The meetings endorse the indivisibility, indissolubility, and oneness of the Nation. The meeting took note of the devastating effect of uncontrolled social media on spreading fake news. Therefore, there are calls for major control mechanisms and censorship of social media practises in Nigeria (Northern Governor's Forum, Premium Times, 2020).

In a contrasting response, the Southern Governors Forum continued its efforts to reshape the country. Prince Uche Achi-Okpaga, acting secretary-general and national publicity secretary of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, criticized Northern leaders, asserting that any attempts to protest against police brutality, extrajudicial killings, extortion, and ethnic biases associated with the #EndSARS movement would ultimately fail. Similarly, the Middle Belt Forum distanced itself from the views expressed by Northern governors and traditional leaders regarding Nigeria's unity and the #EndSARS protests, advising the public to disregard them. In a separate statement, the proscribed group encouraged #EndSARS demonstrators to persist, emphasizing that "this struggle to free Nigerians from bondage and Fulani subjugation is reaching a critical juncture." Emma Powerful, IPOB's media and publicity secretary, affirmed as revealed by an interview granted to Punch (2020):

In an interview with one of our correspondents in Jos on Monday, the National President of the Middle Belt Forum, Dr. Bitrus Porgu, noted that those who attended the meeting failed to acknowledge the need for a positive turnaround in the affairs of the country. According to him, this shows that the Northern Governors and traditional rulers are together with the President in the mess going on in the country (Punch, 2020, November 3).

During an interview with Arise TV on July 10, 2021, Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, asserted that the #EndSARS protest aimed to remove him from office (Buhari, 2021). The #EndSARS movement intensified and highlighted existing national tensions in Nigeria, including the North-South regional divide, Muslim-Christian divides, and tribal politics rooted in post-independence dynamics. Addressing the unrest in Lagos State, the Council of Patriotic Yoruba Youth (CPYY) accused IPOB leader Nnamdi Kanu of endorsing arson and the destruction of the Yoruba economy and nation.

The leader of the proscribed terrorist organisation, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, on online interactive radio, actively coordinated the attacks by miscreants on Wednesday. He gave the names, identities, and locations of the people to be attacked. Those leading the attacks provided updates to Kanu, who urged them to carry out more

attacks. Go and look for weapons and arm yourselves... Build weapons; if you don't have a gun, construct one; even an ordinary catapult, build one; go and use it and destroy them. Anywhere you see Sanwoolu, you attack him. Tinubu's hotel must be burned down. True to Kanu's directive, the Igbo mob went to town and destroyed property they believed to belong to Tinubu and Sanwo-Olu, including the magnificent Oriental Hotel, whose ownership has never been proven to be Tinubu's. Other Yoruba-owned assets were thoroughly vandalised, including the Palace of the Oba of Lagos. What played out was the fulfilment of IPOB's long-standing threat to deal with the Yoruba because of their political tolerance of Northern Nigeria (Blueprint, 2020, October 23).

Prominent Nigerians, including musicians and human rights activists, spearheaded the demonstration and utilized various social media platforms to amplify its message. Personalities such as Wizkid, Davido, Naira Marley, Burna Boy, Tiwa Savage, Estelle, Falz, Runtown, Deji Adeyanju, Itodo, and Sowore were among the influential figures involved (CNN, October 22).

From Local Grievances to the Internationalisation of the #EndSARS Protest

Segun Awosanya, a Nigerian human rights activist, initiated the #EndSARS protest through online activism in 2016. Utilizing Twitter, a widely popular social media platform among young people globally, Awosanya introduced the hashtag #EndSARS. Examining the key figures behind the protest is crucial to grasp and assess its political impact on a global scale. Notably, celebrities from various countries, particularly the United States, played a significant role in amplifying the protest's message across platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These influential figures include human rights activists, musicians, and athletes, predominantly of Black or African American descent. Examples include Beyonce, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rihanna, Kanye West, Puff Daddy, Big Sean, Drake, Lewis Hamilton, Trey Songz, Odion Ighalo, Marcus Rashford, and Mesut Ozil, along with Twitter founder Jack Dorsey.

These celebrities utilized their influence to raise funds through crowdfunding and garner support for #EndSARS demonstrators in Nigeria. Additionally, businesses and philanthropic organizations provided aid to protest victims. Noteworthy contributions were made by Flutterwave (148 million Naira), Gatefield (25 million Naira), Bundle Africa (1 million Naira), Quidax (500,000 Naira), BudgIt Nigeria (500,000 Naira), Empawa (1 million Naira), Adam Bradford (\$10,000), and Scale My Hustle (1 million Naira), with payments made in cryptocurrencies and Nigerian Naira. In response to allegations of financing terrorism, the Central Bank of Nigeria froze over 20 bank accounts (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The #EndSARS protest resonated globally, with demonstrations held in numerous countries, including the United States, Canada, Germany, Hungary, South Africa, Ghana, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Social media platforms facilitated the coordination of demonstrators worldwide through shared protest footage.

Foreign governments also reacted to the unrest. On October 20, the United States issued a travel advisory warning its citizens against traveling to Nigeria and advised avoiding protest zones in

Lagos and Abuja. The US Consulate General in Lagos was closed due to reported attacks by hoodlums. The US government expressed concern that the initially peaceful protests had been hijacked by hoodlums who attacked police stations and private buildings. The Nigerian security forces' response to protesters drew condemnation from the United Nations and the European Union, urging against the use of excessive force. In 2020, the United Nations, the EU, and the US Mission in Nigeria all called for reforms to Nigeria's police and policing systems.

The #EndSARS and the Position of the Law on Protest

In Nigeria, democracy is upheld, allowing citizens to exercise their right to free speech. This includes the ability to organize marches, rallies, and public protests either in support of or against government actions. Legal expert Falana (2017) emphasized the importance of Nigerians rejecting any attempts by the police or security services to disrupt public gatherings and demonstrations, as these activities are protected by law in Nigeria. The rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and protest are enshrined in Sections 39 and 40 of the 1999 Constitution as amended, as well as Article 11 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights Act (Cap A9) Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004.

The urban coalition in Nigeria, comprising diverse groups of people in metropolitan areas, often channels their energy into expressing their discontent with government policies through protests. Such protests serve as a form of nonviolent expression aimed at drawing the government's attention to matters of public concern (Mohammed, 2018). Falana, a prominent human rights activist, referenced the Subsidy Protest incident to defend protesters, highlighting that according to the Public Order Act (Cap P42) Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, governors of the respective states have the sole authority to regulate public meetings, processions, and rallies nationwide.

As stipulated in Section 1 of the Act, no police officer, including the Commissioner of Police, is authorized to grant a permit for a gathering or rally without the governor's consent. In essence, without the governor's approval, no police officer can issue or revoke permits for public assemblies or protests (Falana, 2012). Despite government threats and violence, this legal framework forms the basis for organizing and conducting protests like the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The #EndSARS protest has sparked significant changes in Nigerian politics and governance, influencing both immediate actions and long-term discussions. While the initial focus was on addressing specific issues like the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the protest evolved to encompass broader demands related to government expenditure, restructuring, social justice, and job creation. Despite some immediate successes, many of these broader demands remain unmet, indicating the ongoing challenges in Nigerian governance.

One of the most notable outcomes of the #EndSARS protest is its impact on Nigerian youth. The protest served as a catalyst for mobilizing young people and fostering a sense of community and collaboration among them. This newfound unity among Nigerian youth has empowered them to demand systemic change and hold the government accountable for addressing their concerns. It underscores the power of collective action in shaping the country's political landscape.

In response to the protests, the National Economic Council, under the leadership of former Vice President Professor Yemi Osibanjo, put forward several recommendations aimed at addressing the underlying issues highlighted by the protest. These recommendations spanned a range of areas, from regulating social media platforms to establishing mechanisms for investigating police brutality. Additionally, the protests reignited discussions on broader issues such as Nigeria's governance structure, the need for regional security outfits, and youth engagement in policymaking. Moving forward, the #EndSARS protest has opened up avenues for dialogue and reform in Nigerian politics. It has brought attention to longstanding grievances and galvanized efforts to address them. However, the ultimate impact of the protest will depend on the government's willingness to enact meaningful reforms and address the underlying issues driving social unrest. As discussions and initiatives continue to unfold, it remains to be seen how Nigeria's political landscape will be shaped in the aftermath of the #EndSARS movement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined the #EndSARS social movement and its transformative impact on Nigerian society, particularly among the Soro Soke generation, comprised of young individuals aged 18 to 35. The analysis aimed to delve into the political ramifications and dynamics of the protest within Nigeria. Despite the tragic loss of 56 protestors, the demonstration ultimately led to the disbandment of the notorious SARS unit, known for its egregious human rights abuses, and its replacement with the SWAT team. The economic toll of the 12-day protest was substantial, with Nigeria's economy suffering an estimated loss of approximately 1 trillion Naira.

Beginning in 2016 and gaining momentum in subsequent years, activists directed their efforts towards combating police brutality, culminating in widespread condemnation and demonstrations across 25 of Nigeria's 36 states in 2018. Utilizing social media and digital technology, the #EndSARS movement effectively organized and mobilized online, leveraging the speed, anonymity, and messaging capabilities of social media platforms to disseminate information and rally support nationwide. Notably, crowd-funding initiatives by youth-led start-up businesses and endorsement by celebrities, both domestically and internationally, played pivotal roles in amplifying the movement's reach and impact.

From a political standpoint, the protest represented a form of civic engagement and resistance against police brutality and human rights violations. However, the federal government perceived

the demonstration, occurring in the aftermath of the 2019 general elections, as a destabilizing force aimed at instigating political change. The varied perspectives on the #EndSARS protests among Nigerian groups, including youth organizations, civil society groups, and religious and traditional leaders, underscored the widespread calls for reform within Nigeria's police and policing systems. International entities such as Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations echoed these sentiments, urging the Nigerian government to exercise restraint and refrain from excessive use of force against protestors.

Looking ahead, the #EndSARS protest has far-reaching implications for lasting change in Nigeria. In response to the demonstration, the Federal Government implemented several measures, including the dissolution of the SARS unit, social media regulation, establishment of a judicial commission of inquiry for #EndSARS victims, and creation of a youth engagement committee by the Governors Forum and traditional leaders. However, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the movement lies in the collective realization that, within a democracy, the power of the people supersedes that of the government officials. As Nigeria navigates its path forward, the #EndSARS protest serves as a poignant reminder of the potential for grassroots activism to effect meaningful and lasting change in society. Arising from the discussion regarding the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria and its implications, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Comprehensive Police Reform:** Given the central role of police brutality in sparking the #EndSARS protest, the Nigerian government should prioritize comprehensive reform of law enforcement agencies. This reform should include revising training programs, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and establishing independent oversight bodies to ensure adherence to human rights standards and prevent future instances of abuse.
- **Youth Engagement in Governance:** Recognizing the significant involvement of Nigerian youth in the protest, efforts should be made to actively engage young people in governance processes. This could involve creating youth councils or advisory boards at local and national levels, providing opportunities for youth leadership in decision-making, and investing in youth development programs to address unemployment and foster civic engagement.
- **Judicial Accountability:** The establishment of a transparent and independent judicial commission of inquiry, as recommended in response to the #EndSARS protest, should be expedited to investigate cases of police brutality and ensure accountability for perpetrators. Strengthening the judiciary and upholding the rule of law are essential to rebuilding public trust and confidence in the justice system.
- **Media Freedom and Digital Rights:** Efforts to regulate social media platforms should be balanced with the protection of freedom of expression and digital rights. Legislation should be enacted to safeguard journalists, bloggers, and online activists from harassment

and censorship, while promoting responsible use of social media. Protecting digital rights is crucial for preserving democratic principles and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance.

- International Cooperation and Human Rights Monitoring: The Nigerian government should engage constructively with international partners, including the United Nations and regional organizations, to address human rights concerns and promote democratic governance. Collaboration on capacity-building, technical assistance, and human rights monitoring can support efforts to implement reforms and uphold international standards of human rights.

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