

Cattle colonies: How FG plans to end farmers-herders clash

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It is a welcome development but ... –Experts

In the last few weeks, Nigeria has gone through a lot following bloodbaths in rural communities, involving farmers and cattle herders across Benue, Taraba and Nasarawa states.

In a swift response, the Federal Government, which earlier on talked about grassing up 50,000 hectares of reserves with grass seeds from Brazil and later ranches, came up with 'cattle colonies' as the nation searches for solution to the chaos.

While a section of the country seems to buy into the idea, many see it as creating a platform for the herdsmen to colonise others. Many are still gasping to understand what a cattle colony really is.

If implemented, Nigeria would not be the first to have cattle colonies. Pakistan, so far, established more than 27 modern cattle colonies. According to the Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper, "Each colony would be set over a 200-acre area, with 75 sheds, each having capacity for 50 buffaloes. Overall, each cattle colony would have capacity for 3,750 cattle heads."

Each Pakistani cattle colony has the capacity to produce 50,000 litres of milk and provide jobs for 500 people.

Understanding cattle colonies and the facilities in it

According to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Chief Audu Ogbah, colonies are areas carved out for any specie of animal, whether by nature or human design, found in a large community sharing the same terrain.

Why are we talking of colonies? We are talking of colonies because 20, 30, or 40 ranchers can share the same colony. A ranch is usually owned by an individual or a company, sometimes with very few cattle. Some have more than 200 or 300 cattle.

"In a colony you could find 30,000 cattle owned by different herders. The reason we are designing the colony is that we want to prepare on a large scale, a place where many owners of cattle can co-exist and be fed well because we can make their feeds. They can get good water to drink. We can give them green fodder."

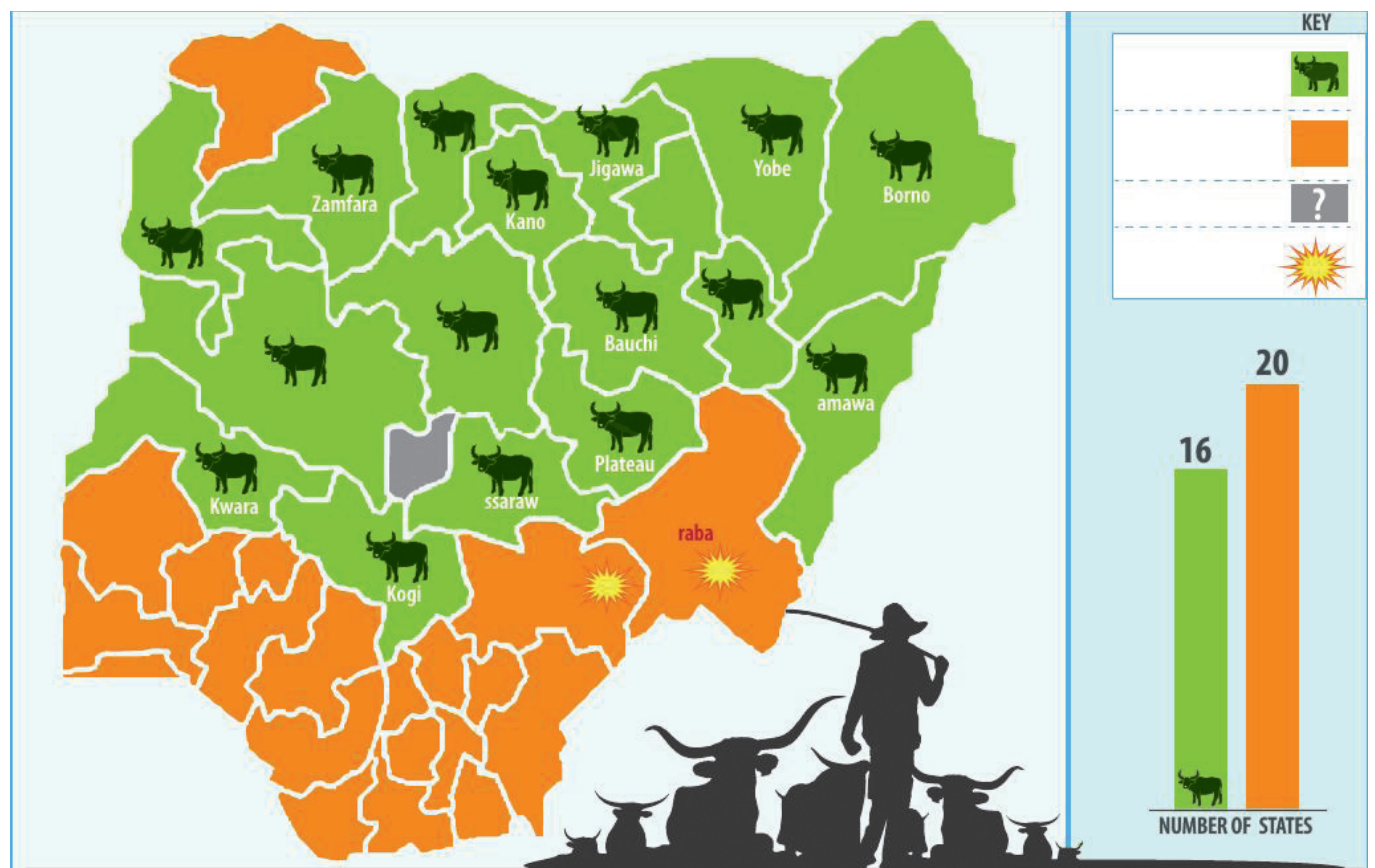
"A team from the Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria was here, and one of the professors there produces cattle feed seed. The different kinds of seed will go for cattle. We'll grow this on a large scale, harvest and feed the cattle."

"We'll give them veterinary services, and, above all, protect the cattle against rustlers. By a special design, we have to make sure that rustlers can't cross into the ranches and steal cattle and walk away. That's what we mean," the minister had said.

Once the colonies begin, he stated, "We are also going into large scale artificial insemination to improve the breed of cattle so that the yield of milk can increase."

'Cattle colony not colonialism'

Some Nigerians see this policy as a ploy to colonise their region. Announcing the policy, Ogbah recounted: "Somebody said to me in a text, very angry at this policy, that the word colony means that we are trying to use the Fulani to colonise their states, and that it reminds them of colonialism. Well, we don't really want to take anybody's land to give anybody. It's just a biological term and we're not after taking land from anybody to give anybody. But indigenes will find that keeping cattle is profitable."



"It is not a hostile policy of government wanting to take over land in any state. We have no such intention and we have no desire to do it and upset anyone; and it is not about any ethnic group."

"One of my cabinet colleagues, the minister of health, is a rancher in his state, a professor of medicine and former vice chancellor. We just gave him seeds to go and grow his grass. So you don't have to be Fulani to participate."

Who bears the cost of establishing these colonies?

On the cost of setting up a ranch, the Federal Government will join hands with state governments. The states will provide the land and Federal Government's experts will decide whether the place is suitable or not.

After this, the Federal Government will push down a few trees, remove the stumps and plant the right kind of fodder. "I emphasise again, when we first came and talked about grass, Nigerians were very angry and they called us every kind of name in the book. But there is no way you can keep cattle if you don't deal with the question of fodder, and it's not every kind of grass that cattle eat," the minister recounted.

Apart from the grass, the colonies will have feed mills which will convert agro-wastes to livestock feed.

"Much of that cost is going to be borne by the Federal Government and the state can chip in something. However, when herders arrive, individuals who want to play a part in the place will pay a small fee. By the way, the Fulani have always told us that they pay a tax

called 'jangali'. They are willing to pay because nothing is as precious to the herdsman as fodder, water and security. So they will pay. They are quite willing to pay because it totally changes their lives," he stressed.

Government will sit down with the herders and those who intend to go in and explain the modalities.

Other sources of funding

The minister said the Federal Government would look for funds to begin the process. In anticipation, they have already spoken to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The minister said the FAO was willing to help, in addition to seeking for help elsewhere. "We are going to get it and develop. Once it takes off, we'll find that many of the big timers who might find it easier to work in these colonies than set up their own ranches," he noted.

Will the herdsmen move from colony to colony?

Herdsmen will be able to move from one colony to another. "But we'll also tell the herdsmen that when passing through a state, they can only go to the colony and stay there, feed their cattle; and when they are moving off, agro-rangers will follow them and make sure they don't destroy anybody's farm."

"We can't be happy that somebody goes there and eats up farmers' crops and shoots. We should be honest brokers between them. But please, allay the fears of people. We cannot be mischievous about this because it's about making sure that there is peace in Nigeria," Chief Ogbah said.

16 states ready to start

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Already, 16 out of the 36 states in the country have agreed to release lands for the commencement of the colonies. The states are Kebbi, Zamfara, Kano, Jigawa, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Yobe and Borno states. Others are Adamawa, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, Plateau, Niger and Kwara states.

Each of the states is expected to donate 5,000 hectares of land for the project.

One of the governors who volunteered for the project, Simon Lalong of Plateau State said: "When the issue of ranching was introduced, the first request was that it was not compulsory. It is for people who have lands in their states or the government to donate land for the implementation of the programme. Many states said they didn't have lands, but in Plateau State we went back. Even as a governor, I didn't say we were seizing the land. I called the people and asked which area they would want this thing sited in their places? After a lot of consultations and explanation, in fact, in Plateau State, there was no part that said they didn't want ranching. At that time, they wanted only two portions. Now, we have more than two portions of land that were offered for the purpose of this agricultural policy."

"So, even for this colony we are talking about, we already have two settled. One belongs to government, and there are those that were donated by the people themselves. The local governments were now competing, saying, 'this is our land, and we want it'. So, I think it is all about communication and understanding of the concept, especially when you see the importance and benefit of what the Federal Government is doing to not only improve security but also the economy through diversification."

Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi also said: "Of recent, we had a peace and security meeting with some Fulani herdsmen, our communities, traditional rulers, the youth, farmers, and we agreed to live in peace. And to be able to permanently live in peace, we must look for a permanent solution, which

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