

PRESS STATEMENT

MUTA REJECTS INCLUSION OF BENUE STATE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S PILOT RANCHING PROGRAM

We, members of the Mutual Union of Tiv in America (MUTA), unequivocally reject the inclusion of Benue State among the states selected for the pilot implementation of the Federal Government's National Ranching Policy.

For more than a decade, communities across Benue State have endured devastating attacks, loss of lives, destruction of homes and farms, and mass displacement associated with violent herdsmen attacks. Large numbers of our people remain uprooted from their ancestral communities and continue to live under extremely difficult conditions in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

Against this painful background, the proposal to establish a federal ranching pilot in Benue State, without first resolving the displacement crisis, restoring affected communities to their lands, guaranteeing their security, and obtaining meaningful public consent, is profoundly troubling.

The first responsibility of government must be to secure the people, restore displaced citizens to their ancestral communities, and protect their land rights, not introduce a policy that could deepen existing fears of dispossession.

Following an emergency meeting on this matter, MUTA unanimously resolved to oppose the inclusion of Benue State in the pilot program and to call upon the Government of Benue State, traditional institutions, community leaders, civil society organizations, elected representatives, and all concerned citizens to pursue every lawful and democratic means available to protect the rights and ancestral lands of the people.

The circumstances inevitably raise a deeply troubling question: Why Benue?

Benue is overwhelmingly agrarian and is nationally recognized as the Food Basket of the Nation. Crop farming has historically been central to the economy, identity, and livelihood of its people. Land in Benue is therefore not an idle resource waiting to be allocated. It is the foundation of our people's livelihood, heritage, security, and future.

More troubling still, many communities affected by violence have not yet been able to return safely to their ancestral lands. Any proposal involving the allocation, designation, acquisition, or conversion of land for ranching under these circumstances naturally creates a legitimate fear that displaced communities could permanently lose access to lands from which they were forced.

MUTA therefore demands clear answers from President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and the Federal Government:

Why was Benue State selected for the pilot ranching program? What objective criteria were used, and what consultations were conducted with affected communities before that decision was made?

Were Benue communities meaningfully consulted and did they consent? A policy involving land and livelihoods cannot legitimately be imposed upon communities without transparent consultation and meaningful participation.

Who will own and operate the proposed ranches? Will they belong to Benue communities, the government, private investors, livestock owners from outside the state, or some combination thereof?

Where will the land come from? Will any land currently belonging

to displaced communities, or land from which communities have been driven by violence, be incorporated into the proposed ranching program?

What guarantees will ensure that displaced Benue people regain full possession of their ancestral lands before any ranching project is contemplated?

Why should public resources be used to establish or support private livestock enterprises on land belonging to communities whose own farmers receive no comparable allocation of agricultural land elsewhere in Nigeria?

These questions demand clear, public, and unambiguous answers.

MUTA wishes to state emphatically that Benue has no "empty land" awaiting allocation to outside commercial interests. Land that appears unoccupied because its owners have been displaced by violence must never be treated as vacant, abandoned, or available for redistribution.

Displacement does not extinguish ownership. Violence cannot become a pathway to land acquisition.

We therefore call upon the Federal Government to suspend Benue State's participation in the proposed pilot and prioritize instead the safe return, rehabilitation, compensation, and protection of displaced communities.

If the Federal Government wishes to promote modern ranching as an economic policy, such projects should be established where communities voluntarily embrace them, where suitable land is legitimately available, and where participation is based on transparent agreements rather than circumstances created by insecurity and displacement.

Benue farmers do not demand federal allocations of farmland in other states to conduct their private agricultural businesses. The same principle of fairness must apply to livestock enterprises.

Our position is therefore clear:

SECURE OUR PEOPLE.

RETURN THE DISPLACED TO THEIR HOMES.

RESTORE THEIR ANCESTRAL LANDS.

RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF BENUE COMMUNITIES.

NO RANCHING POLICY SHOULD PRECEDE JUSTICE, SECURITY, RESTITUTION, AND CONSENT.

MUTA remains committed to the unity and progress of Nigeria. But national unity cannot be built upon injustice, and economic policy cannot come at the expense of the ancestral rights, security, and dignity of any Nigerian community.

We call upon President Tinubu and the Federal Government to reconsider this decision.

Benue land is our heritage, our livelihood, and the inheritance of generations yet unborn. It must not become the price our people pay for having survived displacement.

Long live Benue State.

Long live the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

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