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Institutional Legacy as Trigger of Armed Violence Against the Police: Manifestations and the Underlying Factors in African Countries

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Armed violence targeting police personnel and police facilities has conspicuously emerged as one of the dominant challenges confronting many police agencies in Africa. Consequently, police officers in African countries are increasingly becoming vulnerable to violent deaths and attacks in the line of duty. In view of this prevailing situation, this paper critically interrogates the nexus between institutional legacy and armed attacks targeting the police in African countries. Tom Tyler’s theory of procedural justice was employed as the conceptual framework for the discourse (Tyler, 1990; 2003). The paper argues that the negative labelling that is generally associated with policing and police image in both colonial and post-colonial Africa confers the oppressor identity on police officers and makes them attractive for violent attacks by separatist groups and terrorist organisations. Therefore, it is pertinent for law enforcement agencies in African countries to strategically work on their public legitimacy to effectively mitigate the problem.

Keywords: Armed Violence, Police, Police Image, Institutional Legacy, Oppressor Identity, African Countries

Introduction

Globally, armed violence targeting police officials and police facilities is among the major problems confronting law enforcement agencies (Batista, 2005; Collard-Wexler, Pischedda & Smith 2014; Freilich & Chermak, 2009; Gibbs, 2013; Gibbs, 2018; Kumar, 2010; Pape, 2005; Schouten & Brennan, 2016). The magnitude and intensity of the problem were particularly demonstrated in the 2014 report of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) which reveals that terrorist attacks directed at police personnel and police infrastructures accounted for 13% of the 125,148 terrorism incidents recorded worldwide between 1970 and 2013. In Africa, the prevailing situation in many countries indicates that armed violence against the police and police facilities is increasingly being embraced by secessionist groups, terrorist organisations and separatist movements as part of their overall agitational strategies and modus operandi (Beek & Gopfert, 2012; Kilatya & Kavivya, 2021; Ojedokun, 2014; Reuters, 2014; Zubairu, 2020). Consequently, police officials in African countries are increasingly becoming vulnerable to violent deaths and attacks in the line of duty (Atta-Asamoah, 2008; Bakamana, Magera & Majara, 2021; Reuters, 2019, Sahara Reporters, 2021).
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The pervasive problems of poverty, hunger, minority marginalisation and socio-political exclusion amongst others in African countries are increasingly culminating in the emergence of terrorist organisations and secessionist groups pushing for independence. Indeed, the continent has become synonymous with armed conflicts and insurgency as it is daily characterised by ravaging war and violent conflicts (Abioye, 2019; Bøås & Dunn, 2017; Tar & Mustapha, 2017; Thomas & Falola, 2020). Notable examples of terrorist groups and separatist movements that are actively carrying out violent attacks in the continent include the Boko Haram Group (Nigeria); the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) (Nigeria); the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (Senegal); Tuaregs (Mali); Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Mali); the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC); Al-Shabaab (Somalia and Kenya); the National Liberation Movement of Western Togoland (NLMWT) (Ghana); the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) (Kenya); the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGovC) (Cameroon) amongst others (Olagunju, 2016; Bøås & Dunn, 2017; Reuters, 2019). In January 2023, four Malian police officers were killed while three others were grievously injured when ambushed by Jihadists in western Mali (Voice of Africa, 2023). Also, in the year 2021 alone, over 112 Nigerian police officers were reported to have lost their lives within 10 months to armed attacks launched by separatist groups and terrorist organisations (Sahara Reporters, 2021). Furthermore, hundreds of police officers have been killed by the Anglophone separatists in Cameroon following the activation of their armed campaign which began in 2016 (Business Standard, 2017; Human Angle, 2021).

The public legitimacy of the police as a law enforcement institution is strongly dependent on the extent to which citizens are willing to accept the authority of individual police officials (Hinds & Murphy, 2007). Thus, the actions and inactions of police officers have a huge impact on either enhancing or lowering public opinion about police image and the legitimacy of police institution (Reiss, 1971). Moreover, the perceptions of police use of unfair procedures in exercising their power can bring about alienation, dissatisfaction, malcontent, defiance and non-cooperation from the public (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). Furthermore, the model of policing that is embraced by the police at any given point in time constitutes a set of symbolic tools which people frequently use to describe and discuss their social environment, their perceived place within it, and their hopes and fears for the future (Girling, Loader & Sparks, 2000). Therefore, the sensibilities of public members towards the police are typically characterised by issues bordering on authority, social order and security (Loader & Mulcahy, 2003).

Armed violence by separatist groups and terrorist organisations against the police has become commonplace in many African countries and has multiple deleterious socio-economic and political consequences. This situation signifies a breakdown of social order and calls to question the legitimacy of the police as a formal agent of social control. Moreover, it constitutes a threat to human security and political stability, breeds a cycle of violence, fosters human rights crises, and frequently culminates in the loss of material resources and critical infrastructures. Although some extant studies have examined the issues of police-community violence and police homicide in the line of duty in African countries (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000; Baker, 2007; Gopfert, 2012; Ojedokun, 2014), there is a lack of scholarly research specifically focusing on how institutional legacy is motivating armed violence against the police. Therefore, the central concern of this essay is to critically interrogate the nexus between institutional legacy and armed attacks targeting police personnel and police facilities in African countries.
Theoretical Framework
This discourse was theoretically guided by the propositions of procedural justice theory of Tom Tyler. The theory was developed in 1990. It essentially posits that peoples’ cooperation with legal authorities and their compliance with society’s laws is contingent on experiencing procedural justice in their interactions with legal authorities and their recognition of the moral legitimacy of these authorities to perform their duties (Tyler, 2003). Procedural justice theory also states that people will most likely view those in authority as legitimate and respect them more if they feel they are being treated in a procedurally fair and just way (Tyler, 1990). The major elements of procedural justice theory are essentially premised on four key principles which include: giving people a voice (this means that people need to have the chance to tell their side of the story and to feel the authority figures will listen and sincerely consider this before making a decision); neutrality in decision-making (this connotes that people need to see authority figures as neutral and principled decision-makers, who apply rules consistently, transparently and who do not base their decisions on personal opinions and bias); respect (which suggests that people need to feel respected and treated courteously by authority figures while also believing that their rights are considered equal to those of others and that their issues will be taken seriously); and demonstrating trustworthy motives (which means that people need to see authority figures as people with trustworthy motives, who are sincere and authentic, who listen and care and who try to do what is right for everyone involved). Thus, procedural justice theory argues that people are more likely to obey the law and cooperate with law enforcement efforts if they believe the system and its actors are legitimate (Tyler, 1990). In this context, armed attacks against the police by terrorist organisations, secessionist movements, and separatist groups in African countries not only call into question the legitimacy of the concerned police agencies but also symbolise a challenge to the legal authority of the governments which they represent.

Methodology
This article employed the case-study approach to analyse how institutional legacy is triggering armed attacks on police officers and police facilities in African countries. Data were essentially generated from a variety of sources including media reports, police bulletins, Internet materials, government reports, and related extant literature. These data sources were carefully searched, read, and content-analysed for specific themes that are relevant to the subject matter, particularly about the reported cases of armed violence that were directed at police officers and police facilities by separatist groups, militias, and terrorist organisations in African countries; the genesis of such armed attacks; the situational and contextual factors sustaining the occurrence of armed violence targeting police personnel and police facilities; and the human and material costs that are associated with armed attacks targeting law enforcement officials. The adoption of this method facilitated an in-depth insight into the indices that are associated with the nexus between institutional legacy and armed violence targeting the police in African countries.

Institutional Legacy as Trigger of Armed Violence against the Police in African Countries
In this section, how the institutional legacy of the Police in African countries is contributing to the orchestration of armed violence by terrorist organisations and separatist groups against police personnel and police facilities will be carefully examined. Although the policing systems in African countries are by no means entirely uniform in terms of their historical geneses and socio-political contexts, the fact that the Police in most African states began as instruments for colonial domination and control makes them share many things in common (Alemika, 2009; Baker, 2007; Beek & Gopfert, 2012; Gopfert, 2012; Marenin, 2009).
One major institutional legacy commonly shared by police agencies in African countries is the brutality and high-handedness on the part of their personnel when dealing with members of the public. The pervasiveness of police brutality and police highhandedness have consistently bred deep-seated resentment and mutual distrust between police officers and the members of the public. Police brutality is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, it is a problem that dates back to the period of colonialism when colonial administrators created consular guards and native guards to use them to harass, intimidate and force people within their administrative colonies to comply with their own selfish socio-economic and political agenda (African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2008; Alemika, 2009; Francis, 2012; Marenin, 2009). The involvement of police personnel in different acts constituting human rights violations such as extra-judicial killings of citizens, excessive use of force, unlawful detention of people, and arbitrary arrest amongst others are the critical institutional problems that are associated with policing in most post-independent African nations. Due to this ill-treatment that people routinely suffer at the hands of law enforcement officials, many members of the public usually nurture pent-up anger against police personnel and the agencies they represent. Thus, this institutional legacy of the police often informed the decision of separatist groups and secessionist movements in some African countries to target them and their facilities in the course of their armed struggles. For instance, the violent crackdown on the separatists in the English-speaking region of Cameroon by law enforcement agents was said to have played a significant role in their decision to resort to armed struggles against the police and the state (Business Standard, 2017; Human Angle, 2021). This situation is similar to what obtains in south-eastern Nigeria where secessionists seeking the independence of the zone from the Nigerian state have been killing police personnel and destroying police facilities as a response to the alleged acts of extra-judicial killings and human rights violations involving personnel of the Nigeria Police Force (Africa News, 2023; Akpan, 2021). Procedural justice theory asserts that the likelihood of people to see those in authority (including the Police) as legitimate and respecting them is closely dependent on their belief as to whether or not they are being treated in a procedurally fair and just way (Tyler, 1990).

Another commonly shared institutional legacy of police agencies in African countries that makes them attractive for armed attacks is their elitist nature of policing. The primary function of the police as a formal agent of social control is to maintain social order and preserve the dominant political values and socio-economic structures of society as enshrined in the law. However, police agencies in African countries are generally more concerned with protecting the interests of the political class and elites in society, which is often at the detriment of the interests and fundamental human rights of the masses (Alemika, 2005; Baker, 2007; Hills, 2000). Indeed, police agencies and police officials in Africa are not only willing tools in the hands of the political class in the perversion of the democratic process and the violation of the rule of law (by collaborating with them to rig elections, suppress dissent, and detain opposition figures), their roles in assisting the ruling class to engender underdevelopment and manipulate public consciousness is also obvious in the economic and political sectors (Marenin, 1982; Francis, 2012). This negative reality has frequently played out in countries like Malawi, Nigeria, Niger Republic, Togo, Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe amongst others. In October 2022, 12 Kenyan police officers were charged with crimes against humanity over a deadly crackdown to quell post-election protests that erupted in the country in 2017 where 94 deaths and 201 cases of sexual violence were reported (The Guardian, 2022). Similarly, the violent crackdown on the citizens by security personnel in Egypt following the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi from power in 2013 led to armed violence against police personnel and police facilities in the country (Vice News, 2016). Furthermore, Alemika (2005) has similarly observed that the widely practised system of regime security policing in African
countries typically breeds a repressive policing system which usually births the enthronement of a culture of impunity and the widespread violations of the rights of citizens. The neutrality in the decision-making component of the procedural justice theory argues that people need to see authority figures to be neutral and principled decision-makers who apply rules consistently and transparently and who do not base their decisions on personal opinions and bias.

The unlawful exercise of authority by police officers in African countries is another universal institutional legacy that is triggering armed violence by separatist groups and terrorist organisations to attack them. Indeed, abuse of power and professional misconduct are common unethical practices among police personnel in the continent (Hills, 1996; Chirambim & Nare, 2018; Ojedokun, Ogunleye and Aderinto, 2021). Police officers routinely use the power and the privileges which their occupation confers on them in society to further their own selfish and personal gains. It is common knowledge in many African countries that police personnel usually engage in the extortion of members of the public; carry out illegal searches on individuals and houses; demand and receive bribes from suspects; aid and abet crime suspects to escape from lawful detention; steal from suspects; sexually harass female suspects; and escort contrabands amongst other wrongdoing (African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2008; Diallo, 2019; Francis, 2012). The involvement of law enforcement officials in unethical conduct negatively impacts their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Thus, police officials in most cases are seen by the people as privileged criminals. For instance, the October 2020 nationwide violent protest that was staged against a detachment of the Nigeria Police Force, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which resulted in the killings of 22 police officers and the destruction of over 205 police stations, was fueled by the alleged involvement of personnel belonging to the unit in different acts of professional misconducts (Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto, 2021). Similarly, the escalation of armed attacks against the police by terrorists in Uganda has been linked to pervasive police abuse of power in the country (Segawa & Namara, 2022). Asiwaju and Marenin (2009) and Baker (2008) have separately submitted that police are widely recognised to be among the most corrupt government institutions in African states. In the same vein, Marenin (2009) identifies the shared police culture values in African countries as including the view that force is an appropriate tool to confront suspects or the public; the acute awareness that being a police officer provides the opportunity to engage in graft; a sense among lower ranks that the police need to protect themselves and each other (‘the blue curtain’); and the knowledge that the public does not trust, appreciate or want anything to do with them. Consequently, the negative historical legacy of the police often makes separatist groups and terrorist organisations see them as attractive targets in their armed struggles against their nation-states. Furthermore, this submission also buttresses the ‘respect’ aspect of procedural justice theory which opines that people need to feel respected and treated courteously by authority figures, believe their rights are considered equal to those of others and that their issues will be taken seriously before they would be willing to defer to authority figure.

Police culture of unaccountability is also among the institutional legacy that is triggering armed attacks against the Police in African countries by separatist groups and terrorist organisations. It is a common practice for reported acts of police professional misconduct against members of the public to go unpunished because erring officials are often shielded by their police agencies. There are usually some established internal mechanisms that are specifically put in place by police agencies to make their officers accountable for their actions, however, victims of police acts of impunity and police abuse of professional power hardly get justice for the harms suffered. Indeed, the public’s perception of the Police as unaccountable is increasingly generating mass protests against law enforcement agencies in recent times in countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Tunisia, Senegal, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan,
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South Africa amongst others (Montclos, Ukoji, & Alqali, 2021; Ojedokun, Ogunleye, & Aderinto, 2021; Yesufu, 2021). For example, the decision of Boko Haram, a terrorist group operating in Nigeria, to take to insurgency against the police and the Nigerian state was partly informed by the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Muhammed Yusuf, in police custody and the perceived unwillingness on the part of the leadership of the Nigeria Police Force to make culpable officers accountable for their misdeed (Onuoha, 2012). Equally, Hills (2000) and Marenin (1982) have also separately pointed out that the lack of institutional accountability is among the major sources of the crisis of legitimacy that is associated with the Police in both colonial and post-colonial African countries. Thus, the pervasive culture of unaccountability on the part of the Police as well as the frequently experienced blocked access for victims of police abuse of power to get justice often present separatist groups and terrorist organisations with ‘justifiable reasons’ to target police personnel and police facilities for their armed attacks. Marenin (1982) opines that the impact of police behaviour on legitimacy lies precisely in how they exercise their discretion, whom they prosecute and whom they let go, and how they treat members of various groups. Furthermore, the police culture of unaccountability also negates the ‘demonstrating trustworthy motives’ principle of procedural justice theory, which posits that people need to see authority figures as people with trustworthy motives who are sincere and authentic, who listen and care and who try to do what is right for everyone involved.

Situational and Contextual Factors Underlying Armed Violence against the Police in African Countries

The situational and contextual factors underlying armed violent attacks against the Police by separatist groups and terrorist organisations in African countries are discussed in this section. A major factor motivating armed violence against the Police is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the continent. Arms proliferation and illegal possession of weapons by non-state actors is a common problem that is confronting many African countries (Adejoh, 2005; Laurance, 1998; Ojo, 2021; Soetan, 2017). Indeed, it has been estimated that over 100 million small and light weapons (SALW) are in circulation and illegally in the hands of non-state actors in Africa (Enuka, 2012; Oghuvbu, 2020). Due to this situation, separatist groups, terrorist organisations, and militias carrying out armed struggles against their countries usually have easy access to an assorted cache of weapons and ammunition such as handguns, shotguns, rifles, submachine guns, squad automatic weapons, personal defence weapons amongst others, which they are frequently deploying against police personnel and police formations. Marenin (2009) and Baker (2008) have also mentioned that police personnel in Africa are routinely confronted with violent attacks owing to civil strife, insurgency movements, and outright chaos because African countries are generally flooded with small arms that are widely available to anyone looking for a weapon. Therefore, the relatively easy access to sophisticated ammunition is a strong precursor to the frequent violent attacks on police personnel and police facilities by separatist groups and terrorist organisations in some African countries.

Weak intelligence gathering capacity is another factor exposing police personnel to armed violence in African countries. Generally, the reactive policing which essentially entails enforcing the law only after it has been breached is the dominant policing practice on the continent (African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2008; Francis, 2012; Hills, 2000). This policing model is typically ineffective as it attaches little importance to crime prevention, technological assistance, environmental surveillance, access control, visibility patrol, and strong police-public partnerships. Thus, it is always very difficult for the Police in Africa to gather useful intelligence that can aid them in proactively predicting and promptly responding to crime risks and other security threatening situations (including those targeting them and their
facilities) before they occur (Alemika, 2009; Muchwa, 2021; Mugambi & Michotte, 2021; Ojedokun, 2014). Consequently, a large percentage of armed violent attacks that are being launched annually against the Police across African countries by separatist groups and secessionist movements are usually carried out successfully and frequently result in monumental losses in terms of human and material resources.

Saboteurs’ conspiracy is also among the main factors that are promoting armed violence by separatist groups and terrorist organisations against the Police in African countries. Ethno-religious conflict is a pervasive problem in the continent owing to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of most of the nations. Therefore, people typically hold stronger allegiance to their ethnic groups and religious associations than their nation-states (Aluko, 2002; Otite, 2000). A particular case of armed attack that was targeted against some police officials in Nigeria in 2014, which resulted in the death of close to 70 police officers by members of Ombatse cult group, had been linked to activities of saboteurs within the Nigeria Police Force (Ojedokun, 2014). Due to this commonly shared situation, there are usually saboteurs within Police organisations in African countries who are sympathetic to and strongly believe in the ideologies and objectives of groups involved in armed struggles against their nations (Barrett, 2014; Ojedokun, 2014). Thus, saboteurs within the Police usually aid members of separatist groups and terrorist organisations with classified information and critical logistic assistance that are essential for carrying out violent attacks. Schonteich (2003) and Atta-Asamoah (2008) have similarly observed that saboteurs’ conspiracy is among the major problems in the anti-insurgency and counter-terrorism efforts in some African nations.

Also, separatist groups’ access to protective charms is among the key factors motivating them to launch violent attacks on the Police. Despite the popularity and domination of Christianity and Islam as the two major religions in African countries, many people still have a very strong belief in the spiritual power that is widely believed to be embedded in spiritual charms. Protective charms otherwise known as African bulletproof or African insurance are a major product of the indigenous knowledge system that is widely believed among Africans as being useful for repelling, protecting against and/or neutralising the harmful impacts of lethal objects (such as guns, machetes, knives etc.) when exposed to violent attacks or threatening situations (Ojedokun & Dinne, 2022). Thus, the access of separatist groups and militias to the local custodians of the indigenous knowledge system who are fortifying them with assortments of spiritual charms that they are deploying to protect themselves and/or evade arrest is among the major factors that are emboldening some of them to target law enforcement personnel for armed violence (Bakamana, Magesa & Majawa, 2021; Kassibo, 1992; Kyed, 2014; Ojedokun & Dinne, 2022). Indeed, charm usage by separatists and secessionists has been documented in Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Nigeria amongst other countries (Arrey-Mbi, 2020; Francis, 2017; Lekunze, 2023).

Equally, the shrinking legitimacy of the political leadership in many African countries is a potent driver of armed violence against the Police. Due to the twin problems of poor governance and inequitable distribution of state resources, there is a high rate of social exclusion and the marginalization of many people on the continent. Consequently, the majority of the populace is experiencing absolute poverty, hunger and destitution (Duursma, 2020; Ofuho, 2000). These prevailing precarious conditions which obtain in many of the countries have significantly reduced the legitimacy of the political administrators in the eyes of the public and are engendering resentment, tensions, the eruption of violent demands, and the emergence of rebels and armed groups. Therefore, seen by the people as an instrument of violence and the symbol and strong arm of state authority, police officers are frequently considered suitable
targets for armed attacks by secessionists, separatists and terrorist groups as a way of expressing resentment and discontent against their national governments. In this instance, police officers are not the major target of attacks but rather are collateral victims. For example, the 2019 report of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) attributed the escalation of terror acts and armed attacks targeting police personnel in Tunisia to the nation’s economic troubles, the citizens’ degrading quality of life, and structural inequality. Similarly, the October 2020 nationwide violent protest against police officers and police facilities in Nigeria has also been linked to the dominant harsh socio-economic climate in the country (Aniche & Iwuoha, 2023). Marenin (1982) rightly observed that police officers are very crucial in the life of the state not only because they are one of the basic links between the state and society but also because police behaviour is state power since the police make real, by what they do or fail to do, the intentions and interests of the state and of those groups that attempt to control the state. Indeed, procedural justice theory argues that people are more likely to obey the law and cooperate with law enforcement efforts if they believe the system and its actors are legitimate.

Conclusion
The preceding analysis established that the frequent violent attacks that are being targeted against police personnel and police facilities by separatist groups and terrorist organisations in African countries cannot be wholly divorced from the institutional legacy of the Police. Indeed, the problem is closely tied to the apron strings of the negative labelling that is generally associated with policing and the police image in both colonial and post-colonial Africa, which therefore confers the oppressor identity on law enforcement officials and consequently makes them attractive for violent attacks by separatist groups and terrorist organisations. Furthermore, it was also demonstrated that armed violence targeting the Police is impinging on the socio-economic development and political stability of African countries.

Therefore, the following recommendations are put forward as useful steps for effectively addressing the problem. First, it is pertinent for the national police agencies in African countries to strategically work on their public legitimacy by making sure that they are being guided by the principles of procedural justice and the dictates of the rule of law in their policing operations; by embracing the culture of accountability; by being neutral in decision-making; by respecting peoples’ fundamental human rights; and by being people-centred in the discharge of their constitutionally-backed mandates. The systematic adoption of these principles will go a long way in improving police-public relationships and simultaneously reduce the risk of frequent armed attacks on the Police by secessionist groups, terrorist organisations and separatist movements.

Second, the governments of African nations should continuously engage in strategic collaborations and partnerships at the state, regional and continental levels to develop effective intervention roadmaps and policy intervention measures through which the proliferation and circulation of SALW can be adequately controlled. The relatively easy access of non-state actors to illicit weapons has been identified to be among the major drivers of armed violence against the Police in the continent. Therefore, a significant reduction in the illicit circulation of such weapons is capable of dramatically bringing down the scale of armed attacks that are annually launched against national police forces in the continent.

Finally, governments of African countries need to provide adequate logistics and financial support for their police agencies to enable them to effectively respond to armed violence by secessionists, separatists and terrorists against police officers. Generally, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism are cost-intensive activities which constantly require a strategic
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combination of human and technological inputs. Therefore, the national governments should provide logistic and financial support for their law enforcement agencies to enable them to adequately train their personnel as well as procure essential modern policing equipment and vital resources such as functional vehicles, drones, CCTV cameras, helicopters, surveillance recorders, bullet-proof vests, communication gadgets, sophisticated ammunitions amongst others that are necessary for their terrorism emergency response and also important for strengthening their intelligence gathering and surveillance capacities. The availability of these types of equipment is not only capable of boosting the counter-terrorism responses of police officers, but it will also go a long way in ensuring their safety in the line of duty.

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