*The following is an excerpt from an article written by Innocent Chukwuma for* Human Rights Dialogue *in December 2002. Chukwuma is the founder and executive director of the Centre for Law Enforcement Education in Lagos. This excerpt has been modified for the classroom.*

**How should a transitional democracy ensure law and order? A look at Nigeria in 2002.**   
The transition from military dictatorship to elected civilian government in Nigeria has brought in its wake a surge in crime and disorder that threatens to undercut public support for democracy. Since the inauguration of the Obasanjo government on May 29, 1999, safety and security have become scarce commodities.

In spite of the government’s promises to tackle crime, Nigeria continues to have high rates of armed robbery, political assassinations, ethno-religious killings, and other forms of violent crime. From the Niger Delta, where restive youths fighting environmental despoliation and decades of neglect had perfected the act of abduction and hostage-taking of oil company workers, to the southwest, where ethnic militia from the Odua Peoples Congress swore to defend Obasanjo (whom they did not elect), the common language was violence in its goriest form. In the northern and eastern parts of the country, Sharia violence in Kaduna and its reprisals in Aba and Umuahia have left hundreds, if not thousands, dead. Furthermore, violent robbery and rampant theft have left Nigerians in every community feeling unsafe.

Frustrated by the inability of the police to respond adequately to their safety and security needs, citizens have resorted to self-help measures. The most controversial of these is the formation of militant vigilante groups—some of which have made lynching and torturing criminal suspects their stock in trade.

Public opinion of vigilante groups is divided. A part of the public argues that vigilante activities should be regulated and closely supervised by the national police. Another part calls for outright disbandment of vigilante groups and trial of their operatives, who take delight in judging potential offenders without trial and in administering brutal punishment—and who are undermining our progress toward democracy.

I am sympathetic with this view. Yet it is also a fact that the police alone cannot adequately protect citizens’ safety and security without the involvement of neighborhood watches, community guards (ndi nche), or even vigilante groups. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the Nigeria Police Force and justice system as presently constituted could fully enforce the disbandment of every vigilante group in the thirty-six states of Nigeria and bring their operatives to trial. Even if the police were able to outlaw vigilantism, it would be tantamount to telling inner-city communities and rural areas, often not protected by police patrols, that they have no right to organize and protect themselves against criminal attacks.

1. Should vigilante groups have a role in transitional democracies where law the police force is inadequate?
2. What could be done in order to create law and order in a new democracy?
3. How does the lack of adequate police protection and vigilantism in 2002 relate to Nigeria's current security problems?