

Three cops arrested as Abia youth dies during interrogation

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| By Our Reporters

The Abia State Commissioner of Police, Danladi Isa, has confirmed that three policemen have been arrested and are under interrogation following the death of a young man, identified as Wisdom Okorie Akobundu, during interrogation at the Bende Divisional Police headquarters on Friday night.

PUNCH Metro gathered on Sunday that Isa's disclosure was against the backdrop of the tension that erupted on Saturday in Bende town in the Bende Local Government Area of the state following Okorie's death in the police custody during interrogation.

Our correspondent learnt that the deceased, who hailed from Ozuitem but resident of Bende, was invited by the police for questioning over undisclosed allegations, tragically died while in custody, having been allegedly brutalised and beaten to death by police officers attached to the Bende Division.

A community source, who spoke with *PUNCH Metro* but pleaded anonymity because he was not permitted to speak with the media, said the deceased was invited for questioning by the police, and he willingly went on his own, only for information to filter out that he had died under interrogation on Friday night.

Described as “a quiet and good man”, Okorie’s death resulted in the Bende town youths and women taking to the streets to protest, threatening to burn down the police station located near the LGA headquarters.

Following the tension, the Abia State police boss quickly paid a visit to the scene to calm down the situation.

Isa, who arrived with senior officers, appealed for calm and assured the protesting youths that a proper investigation would be carried out, including an autopsy to ascertain the cause of his death.

“I want to assure you that justice will be done. As I am talking to you, all the policemen involved in the interrogation have been moved to the Criminal Investigation Department for questioning.

“I want to plead with you, since I came to this state, I have never covered any policeman who has done the wrong thing. I have arrested some of them, charged some in court, and some are in prison today. Because of that, I decided to personally come to talk to you to reassure you that, as my responsibility, in my honour, justice will be done for you. As I talk to you, all the policemen involved in the interrogation (of the deceased) are under arrest. Justice must be done,” Isa said.

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A police source who pleaded for anonymity told our correspondent that the deceased was not beaten as alleged, but rather slumped when he was told he would be detained in the station.

Sources and videos seen online indicated that the area was like a war front as the police squad sent to protect the station fired bullets in all directions to scare away the protesters, while the suspected police officers were whisked away for safety.

Meanwhile, the family of the deceased, in a statement by his elder brother, Festus Okorie, expressed sadness over the “cruel” death of his sibling, adding, “Let it be known: the story being circulated by the police is false. My brother had never been involved in any police case or admitted to any hospital before this tragedy.”

Festus stated, “I speak with deep pain and anger over the cruel and conspiratorial death of my brother in police custody. Evans Onyeka, a police officer, invited my brother to the Bende Police Station, and he went there alive, strong, and without trouble. Hours later, we were told he was dead.

“I was called and told my brother was in police custody, but before I got there, they had already taken him to the hospital without any notice to me or any member of our family. More painfully, from what we’ve gathered and seen, the whole scene clearly shows that my brother, Ako, died right inside the police station before they hurriedly went to get a bus to take him to the hospital. Any attempt to twist or hide this story will not stand.

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“Officer Evans and Austin, who has served in Bende for a long time and knows both of us very well, were there. Yet, he never called me or any of my family members. That silence is suspicious. We demand answers. The DPO, DCO, Inspector Evans, Austin, and every officer on duty that day must provide what killed Ako, my brother, my blood, a peaceful and responsible young man. They should not cover this. The truth must come out, and justice must be served.”

Reacting, the Executive Chairman of Bende Local Government Area, Hon. Uwabunkonye Bassey, expressed his deep sadness over the incident, stating, “According to preliminary reports, the late Mr Wisdom Okorie was accused of an offence and invited for questioning. Sadly, during the interrogation, he reportedly slumped and, despite being rushed to a hospital, was confirmed dead.”

The protesting youths lamented that the Nigeria Police Force, Bende Division, had taken the law into its hands by allegedly brutally “beating and killing our son, Okorie Akobundu Wisdom,” saying that Okorie, before his death, was a quiet young man who had never displayed any questionable character, let alone fight with anyone in the town. We were told that the police are our friends, but no, they are our killers. We demand justice for the death of Akobundu. We are tired of sexual harassment, illegal arrest, molestation, embarrassment, and humiliation by the Police Force in Bende. We are calling on the Federal Government and the state to look into this matter decisively and bring justice to the deaths of Ako and Bende people.”

Reacting further, the CP denied the torture allegation. He said, “There was nothing like torture, according to an eyewitness account. It was a reported case of stealing of iron rods. Three suspects were arrested and were being interrogated at the station. One of them tried to escape. He was pursued and arrested, collapsed, rushed to the hospital and died. Three policemen and the other two suspects were personally taken to the CID and are presently undergoing interrogation. Two of my escort vehicles were stoned, damaged, and one of my personnel was injured. The police are on top of the situation”.