

Gunmen kill two, abduct 14 travellers on Benue highway



By Peter Duru, Makurdi

Tragedy struck on Monday night along the Utonkon axis of Benue state as gunmen ambushed a commercial bus conveying passengers, killing two persons and abducting 14 others in an ambush.

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This came barely 24 hours after nine worshippers were abducted from St. John's Catholic Church, Ojije in the same Utonkon, during a night vigil.

It was gathered that the bus, which was carrying 16 passengers from Oju and Obi Local Government Areas, was reportedly heading to the South-West when it was intercepted by armed assailants around 7:00 pm along the Utonkon–Ojapo/Okpoga Road.

A youth leader in Utonkon, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the victims had departed Iheijwo Market in Oju Local Government Area earlier that evening before running into the assailants.

“They left Iheijwo Market around 7 pm, full of hope and expectation, but unfortunately ran into kidnappers along the Utonkon road,” he said.

According to him, the assailants ordered the driver to stop, but when he attempted to drive through, the gunmen opened fire, killing two passengers on the spot.

“When the driver refused to stop, they started shooting. Two people were killed instantly, while the rest were forced out of the bus and taken into the bush,” he explained.

He added that the attackers confiscated the passengers’ mobile phones to prevent them from contacting their families or alerting security agencies.

It was gathered that the gunmen initially took all remaining 14 passengers into the forest, but two of them later managed to regain their freedom under unclear circumstances.

As of Tuesday morning, the abandoned bus was said to be at the Utonkon Police Station, while the whereabouts of the remaining twelve abducted passengers remain unknown.

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Confirming the incident, the Chairman of Oju Local Government Area, Mr. Jackson Onmiyi, said the attack occurred at the boundary between Ado and Okpokwu Local Government Areas.

“Two of the victims were rescued alive, but sadly, two others were killed by the armed men. Search operations are ongoing to secure the release of the remaining twelve persons still in captivity,” he said.

He commended the Chairman of Okpokwu Local Government Area for his prompt intervention, noting that his efforts contributed significantly to the rescue of the two survivors.

“We are doing everything possible, in collaboration with security agencies, to ensure that the abducted passengers were rescued safely,” the Oju Chairman assured.

Efforts to get reaction from the Benue State Police Command proved unsuccessful as the Police Public Relations Officer, DSP Udeme Edet, could not be reached as of press time.