

Two killed as suspected herdsmen raid Benue community



By Peter Duru

Suspected armed cattle rustlers, believed to be herders, have killed a ranch owner and a vigilante member during an early morning attack on Okpafie community in Oyilawu, Okonobo Ward of Okpokwu Local Government Area of Benue State, before fleeing with nearly 50 cows.

The attack reportedly occurred at about 1am on Thursday when the gunmen stormed a ranch in the community, shot dead its owner, identified simply as Benjamin, and rustled his cattle.

A community source said the attackers took advantage of the fact that many young people were gathered at a viewing centre watching an ongoing football match before striking.

“The armed herdsmen sneaked into the village at about 1am when many of the youths were at a viewing centre watching the ongoing World Cup matches.

“They attacked the home of Benjamin, who owned a ranch, killed him, and then moved about 50 cattle out of the ranch. The animals followed them.

“The sound of the gunfire alerted the youths and members of the local vigilante. As the attackers attempted to escape, the vigilantes confronted them, but one of the vigilante members was shot dead while the criminals fled with the cattle toward neighbouring communities. The search for the rustlers and the stolen cattle is still ongoing.”

Confirming the incident, the Chairman of Okpokwu Local Government Area, Adah Inalegwu, said about 12 heavily armed men carried out the attack.

According to him, “Some cattle rustlers came around 1am this morning to Okpafie village in Okonobo Council Ward. They were about 12 in number and were all heavily armed with AK-47 rifles.

“The owner of the cattle was asleep when they attacked him. They had made several attempts in the past, but he had always repelled them. This time, they neutralised him first before taking the cows.”

According to the Council Chairman, local residents alerted vigilantes, who engaged the attackers in a gun battle around the Okpoga-Ai-Dogodo axis, “two people sustained gunshot wounds and one later died,” he said.

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He added that security operatives had launched a manhunt for the suspects. “We are still trailing them because they are believed to be hiding in the bush. The police and the army are on their trail, and we hope they will be apprehended.

“Soldiers and other security operatives have visited the community and assured residents that steps are being taken to prevent a recurrence. We are also working towards establishing a standby security team because such a response could have helped repel the attackers.”

Inalegwu dismissed suggestions that the attackers were members of the local community saying, “They are outsiders, not people from the community. They are herders. This is the third time such an incident has occurred.

“During an earlier operation, we arrested one of the suspected cattle rustlers, who provided useful information that led to the arrest of two others. They are currently in the custody of the State Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and have admitted to involvement in cattle rustling.

“Our investigations show that the suspects usually operate through the boundary linking Ado and Okpokwu LGAs with Ebonyi State. We tracked their phone numbers to Ezza-Igbo in Ebonyi State,” the Chairman added.

The Police Public Relations Officer, DSP Udeme Edet, could not be reached as of the time of filing this report.