

# Villagers flee communal fighting in Benue, Taraba

**A** growing stream of villagers are fleeing border areas between Benue and Taraba states after an upsurge of deadly clashes between ethnic Tiv and Kuteb communities over a protracted land dispute, residents and officials said yesterday.

Over 200 people have arrived in the town of Katsina-Ala, about 30 kilometres from the fighting, since the latest reported attack on July 19 in which local militia fighters opened fire on a crowded minibus, killing nine passengers, Rufus Achege, a local government official, said.

Dozens of people have been reported killed since the resurgence of fighting in early June in the Katsina-Ala and Takum districts spanning Benue and Taraba states.

"Most of the displaced people arriving in the last week are coming from areas around Dogon Gawa and Kwaghando villages where we had the most recent fighting," said Achege. "They generally find refuge with relations and friends."

More than 700 people died when violence peaked in the area in October 2001, most of them massacred when troops launched re-

prisal attacks on Zaki Biam town and surrounding villages after a local militia killed 19 soldiers deployed in the area to quell the violence. More than 500,000 people fled their homes at the time.

Teena Yankev, a farmer and father of five, who fled Dogon Gawa with his family, said he feared being caught up in a repeat of the 2001 violence.

"I know my farm will suffer in my absence but life is more important," Yankev told His wife has taken his children to her relations in Katsina-Ala while he is staying with

a friend.

Benue State Governor Geabriel Suswam on 24 July held a meeting with traditional chiefs from the affected districts and the police to work out measures to contain the unrest.

"We condemn the recent clashes between the Tiv and Kuteb," Suswam told reporters. "We have also taken a stand on the part of government and the traditional institutions that the police would be given full support and cooperation to arrest these criminals creating problems for us along the borders," Suswam added.