

A city under robbers' siege

THE two-day sit-at-home protest by bankers in Aba, Abia State jolted officers and men of the state Police Command out of their very deep slumber to rise up to their duty of protecting lives and property of citizens. Bankers in the town and its environs had embarked on the action as a way of drawing attention to their plight, as armed robbers daily and hourly rob bankers, even under the nose of policemen.

That armed robbers hold sway in many parts of the country is to state the obvious. But entertaining the public with dance competition and 'spraying' cash loot like Robin Hood in the course of robbery activities are street shows exclusive to Aba. Correspondent JAYNE UCHE-UKONNE captures the bandits' recent operations in the Enyimba City, and the Police's counter offensive.

Using the case of what happened at First Bank, Ogor Hill branch, as an example of what they experience the bankers said they were no longer safe to continue with their operations because not only were banks being robbed but workers were also being killed.

On the day the Ogor Hill branch of First Bank was being robbed, bankers, who are now more united in the safety effort, went to the Central Police Station for the police to mobilise men to confront the armed hoodlums but they said the Police Officer they met advised them to get in touch with the commissioner of Police. According to an official of Bankers Association, who spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons, the bankers rushed to Eziana Divisional Police Station and could not get any help as the DPO said Ogor Hill is not within his division.

All these were taking place while the armed robbers were having a field day at the bank. Eventually, the bankers rushed to Azuka Police Station, which is a stone throw to where the robbery was taking place.

There the bankers were told there were not enough men to challenge the robbers' usually sophisticated weapons. At the end of it all, no help from anywhere came. The armed robbers carted as much money as they could into a bullion van that they had earlier snatched at gun point from a driver to one of the banks at Ogor Hill, abba.

The bullion van, according to a source, had been loaned from one of their branches in Calabar, Cross River State, to bring money to the branch in Aba. It was after the money had been discharged at the bank and the driver was driving back to Calabar that the armed robbers blocked his way and shot at him. But the driver dived out of the vehicle into a nearby bush. The robbers again shot into the bush with the aim of ensuring the driver was dead before they leave with the van for their operation.

At the end of the operation at the bank, *Daily Champion* gathered that the robbers came out to the busy Ikot Ekpeke Road, where the bank was situated, and asked Aba people who had gathered and were watching from afar to come closer if not for any other thing, to congratulate them for a job well done. True to their attitude, Aba people got closer and the armed robbers asked them *Aba, Umu oma aku kwa aka* (meaning Aba people don't you know how to clap for someone who has done a spectacular thing). At this point, the crowd started to

clap for them while the armed robbers "dashed" out some bundles of naira to them.

The armed robbery attacks were targeted at banks mostly as there was no day three or four banks were not robbed. Other targets, according to check were filling stations, super markets, big restaurants and luxury buses.



• Gov. Oji Uzor Kalu of Abia State

The armed robbers were so daring that they do not mask their faces, even though they can decide to rob a particular outlet everyday for one week. God help you if you dare call the police or alert any other person as they would make a repeat of what they had done previously.

For instance, two supermarkets situated at Compost Road/ Ikot Ekpeke Road the robbers operated in one evening. As they were leaving, the

owners of the supermarkets made phone calls to alert others of their experience. The robbers pretended as if they did not hear what they were saying.

The next day and at the exact time they operated the previous day the robbers went back to the two supermarkets and did a thorough job and then asked the owners to make phone calls to police and their friends or relations on what was going on, as they were not in a hurry to leave. The shop owners did not have the guts to make the calls and the robbers beat the hell out of them and then left. They had visited these shops more than five times.

One Saturday afternoon, the armed robbers started their operation from one filling station on Factory Road down to Aba-Owerri Road and ended up robbing all the filling stations along that route. They did same the next day being Sunday and continued on Monday without anyone, even the police challenging them.

Aba people now sleep with both eyes open. This has also affected the social life of the residents. Even though Enyimba City night life does not go beyond 9.00pm, the people rush home from 5.00pm and before 7.00pm, the streets, even the major roads, are empty.

The situation about two weeks ago was that Aba residents having found out that police were not ready to protect them resort to hailing the armed robbers whenever they operate. For instance, when the armed robbers raided one of the old generation at banks Umuocham Abayi, Aba, the people were there to cheer the robbers even to the embarrassment of police.

According to eyewitnesses, after the robbers were through with the bank, they came out to the ever busy Aba-Owerri Road, saw a record (music) shop went in an put on a Makossa Music and started dancing on the road. As they danced, they asked the crowd who had gathered to watch and judge who among them was the best dancer.

The Umuahia-Aba-Port Harcourt Expressway is another armed robbery theatre as no day passes without 10 to 20 vehicles robbed. Mostly affected in this category are luxury buses who the armed robbers most times outsmart by checking into them as passengers. As all of these were going on the city of Aba and its environs became

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tensed up. It became a common sight to see people running from one end of a street to another trying to find out if armed robbery was taking place at the other end. If it was possible for ordinary people to possess bullet proof vest and combat helmet, most residents would have purchased them.

In every situation, it needs only one person to take a giant step and bankers in Aba were courageous enough to bell the cat, by embarking on two-day protest, even though the action brought to a standstill business and commercial activities in the city.

The action of bankers was followed with a visit by the Aba Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (ACCIMA) led by its President, Chief Onoji Kalu Onoji to the Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG) zone 9, Umuahia, Mr. A. A. Aikakaive. While there, ACCIMA through the AIG sent a Save-Our-Soul (SOS) to the Inspector General of Police.

ACCIMA, which was joined by members of other organised private sector (OPS) recounted how the armed robbers had made Aba their haven. They spoke on how business and commercial activities in the commercial nerve-centre of the South East zone were grinding to a standstill, while the robbers had a field day.

They asked why police had not been able to challenge the armed robbers let alone arresting any of them, and called on the police to restore the confidence citizens have in them by flushing out the criminals.

They also called for a police-military joint patrol of Aba and its environs as a way of tackling the out-of-hand situation in the city.

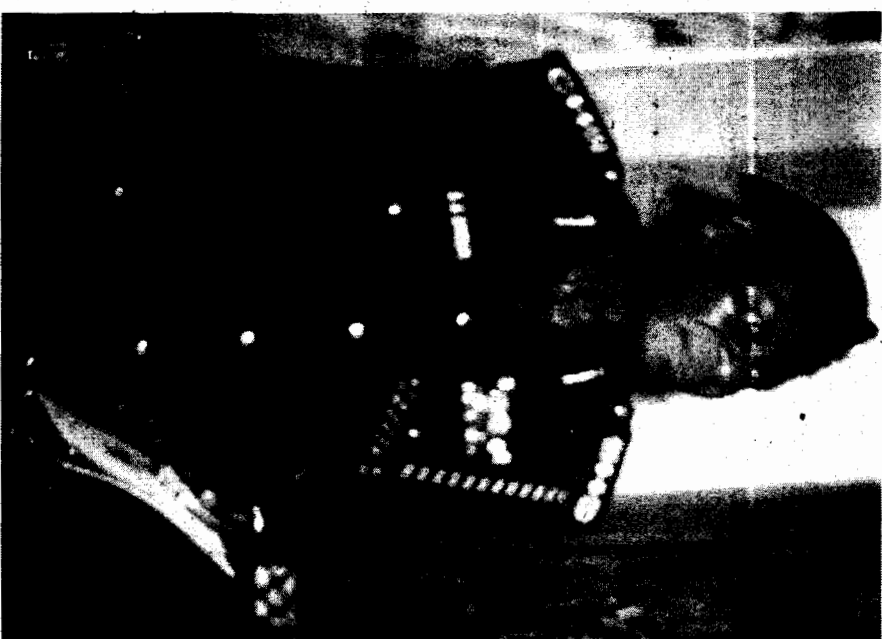
After the meeting with ACCIMA and leaders of the OPS, same day the AIG with the State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Charles Akaya met with about 16 bank managers from Aba at the officers mess, Umuahia, which was also based on security and assistance from police.

Immediately after the meeting with the bank managers, the police authorities realized that there was fire on the mountain.

The commissioner of Police, Mr. Akaya, that same day (May 31, 2006) by 2.30pm, left Umuahia to Aba. According to him, the relocation of his office from Umuahia to Aba was as a result of this "concern for what is happening here in Aba and my resolve to handle the situation headlong".

Twenty-four hours later the Police commissioner addressed journalists at the Area Police Command to intimate them of the effort they had made and the results it yielded.

He said the successes recorded by his men were that three suspects with bullet wound had been arrested and two buses recovered from them. The arrested ones had encountered the policemen of Central Police Station, Aba at Azikiwe nipping point where one corporal Ogodu



The IGP, Sunday Ehiniero

round of 7.76mm live ammunition, 15 hand sets, four locally made double barrel shotgun, one SMG magazine, one police belt, three live and two expended cartridges. Also, the sum of one hundred and sixty four thousand naira (N164,000) cash was recovered from them.

Another criminals arrested was one Michael Ucheagwu with one pump action gun and 42 rounds of live cartridges. The CP said Michael claimed to be a security man attached to Pioneer Hotel, Abaya, Aba and had been transferred to Ezeora Headquarters, Abia.

Champion on the successes police have recorded so far, "we believe God has given the kingdom of armed robbers to us, that is why we are catching them. The second one is that we have to thank the Aba residents who are now coming with useful information."

"You know that was the cry of the Commissioner of Police. Today, I tell you that people are boldly giving us information."

On how police were able to make the arrest and also killed the armed robbers, Mr. Kigigha said, "the one in white is Chinedu Okugbo (aka TEMTEM) from Ogingwa. During the last press briefing his name was mentioned as a notorious armed robber."

"We went to his house and he escaped. Information we got from his colleagues was that he was recovering. We have been trailing him. Yesterday, luck ran out on them."

"When we got to his house we got them and as they were trying to escape we shot them and on the way here, the three gave up the ghost."

The other group were shot at Okigwe Road/Faulks. They were robbing commuters of their handsets with locally made pistol. Our men who were on patrol met them and when they alighted from their vehicle the robbers took to their heels and wanted to escape. We cannot get their identities right now."

"Those one up there one is called Victor Nwala and the other is Chidiadi, that is the gang that was believed to have killed Inspector Aliemen Friday Ehinimighe at Abaya on May 30."

"We trailed them until yesterday and this morning when our men sealed up the area. They tried to escape, our men shot them and on our way to this place, they died."

"It was unfortunate they died because we wanted to hear from them on their activities because you know that since about a month now, Aba has been under siege of armed robbers. We are not mincing words."

Mr. Kigigha attributed these achievements to the cooperation the police now get from Aba residents who now voluntarily give information to them. He also pointed out that the relocation of the office of the Commissioner of Police to Aba made everybody to realise that police were serious this time around.

He added, "the public know us more than we know ourselves. The calibre of Inspector General of Police to the Commissioner, to the Area Commander and the DPO's in Aba, made the people to say they (the officers) are the people we know. I think that is one of the reasons, they now report to senior officers. For instance, they sent text messages to me very often. With this trend, I believe Aba will be very calm, and people will go back to their businesses."

Speaking on the activities of Bakassi Group, the Chief Superintendent of Police said, "Bakassi is an outlawed group and there is no way we can allow such group to operate. I don't know how we can forget what happened at Ore Okhiam."

"If we did not rescue those Bakassi had in detention few days ago

was returning with some suspects unknown persons opened fire on them and the police returned fire. In the confusion the arrested suspects attempted to escape and police fired at them and they died on their way to hospital.

Also, within 24 hours of the CP relocation to Aba, detectives from the state Criminal Investigation Department, Umuahia went to Umuahia village in Obingwa Local Government Area and arrested two persons, Achilis Kanu and Ogechi Agu who said she came from Onitsha to visit her boyfriend who is Achilis younger brother, also a suspect.

Police said LAR rifle No. 1693194, four magazines, 99 rounds of live ammunition, G3 rifle No. 69117306, three magazines, 99 rounds of live ammunition, AK47 rifle No. 24976, two magazines, 53 rounds of live ammunition, one locally made double-barrel shot gun, four live cartridges, three Echolac boxes containing wearing apparel, charms, one sharp video machine, one GH Video machine and one New Sound, four battery powered radio sets, were recovered from them.

Also, a team of 28PMF personnel arrested five men as they were trying to put tinted glass on the bus they were in and were brought to the station for interrogation.

The commissioner of Police said one of the first things he did as soon as he got to Aba was to hold a peace and security meeting with stakeholders. He said the aim was to find ways by which they could fit into the arrangement police have on the ground to control the situation.

He lamented a situation where whenever the armed robbers shot and killed policeman, Aba residents would be clapping for the armed bandits.

Four days later, Mr. Akaya called together journalists in the state to give them an update on the police efforts. He first commended Mr. Akaiye, for his magnanimity in releasing his OPS and Anti-Robbery men to complement the efforts of CP men.

He once again lamented the attitude of Aba residents towards the police. According to him, "it looks as if the Aba populace were not satisfied with the presence of the action-ready policemen."

The bank managers in Aba threatened to go on strike without minding words. The AIG ordered that there must be a meeting of all the bank managers in the state which was attended by 16 of the managers.

Their discussion was based on security and assistance, but they promised to carry the message back to their captains who will in turn give directives on what to do.

"Immediately after the meeting at the officers mess, Umuahia, I moved my office to Aba Area Command Headquarters."

"I did not rest on my oars. I swung into action by addressing the men and spurring them to action, giving the necessary information available to me, hence they went out and made a mark."

Mr. Akaya said this was why they arrested one Bode Anthony Obi from Midtown Plaza with a pump action gun with 15 rounds of live cartridges and one expended.

On Sunday before the CP's briefing, a son of a popular medical doctor in Aba left their houses at North Avenue, GRA, Aba, for an early morning mass. Unknown to him, the men of the underworld were robbing a luxury bus that just got to Aba from Lagos at the road junction. This young man ran into them and the robbers shot and killed him.

His killers according to the CP, Obiona Nwogwugu and Chidi Nwogwugu, were arrested, and on interrogation, confessed to have carried out the armed robbery attack. He said police recovered from the two suspects one G.3 rifle No. 721722 without magazine with one

of Umuahia village. Obingwa Local Government Area. Police also recovered from them AK47/35-603 were recovered from them.

On the same Sunday, police at Akamu Ngwa in Ugwunagbo were said to have engaged two armed robbers, who were operating on a motorcycle without registration number in a gun battle. While one Nnamdi, whose surname was not yet known to the police, who was said to be the leader of the gang that regularly terrorized Ugwunagbo-Aba-Port Harcourt Expressway, was hit by a bullet, Ifeanyi Nneme with AK47 rifle escaped with bullet wounds.

Still on police successes, Mr. Akaya said, "at 21.30hrs of June 3, 2006, we had information that one Chinedu Okugo aka TEMTEM had just returned from where he went and treated his bullet wounds. Chinedu Okugo is a known armed robber and his brother confirmed same information to police."

"Following this, the residence of the said TEMTEM was visited and suspects arrested included, Nwagwe Ndubusi and the said brother by TEMTEM, all of Mgboko Okpulo Village."

"One Kynco motorcycle was recovered with Reg. No. AB 3957 H belonging to Chinedu Okugo aka TEMTEM who fled."

Chison Ikedimbueme (aka Susu) who escaped arrest when police stormed his house at Umuahia Village, Obingwa LGA, had been declared wanted. He appealed to members of public to communicate to him or any nearby police station any information that could lead to Chison's arrest as a handsome reward awaits the good informant.

He gave his distress call phone number as 08033044348 for the transmission of such information.

On Friday, June 9, 2006, there was another display at the Aba Area Command, a live 'show' when the police allowed Aba residents and anyone who cared, to come and have a look at the corpses of five armed robbers that were killed during an exchange of fire. Among the five corpses was that of the evasive Chinedu 'TEMTEM' Okugo.

According to the second in command of the Area Command, Chief Superintendent of Police, Mr. Felix Kigigha, who spoke to Daily

person's life, you impose unnecessary risk, you make somebody in this land, somebody who did not commit any offence.

"We will never, never accept that. That is the problem with the Bakassi. Some people have just one plot of land in their family, they come and arrest their son, they go and sell that land N200,000.00 just to secure the release of that person. It is not good. We are all aware, let us not pretend."

"If they come out as a lawful vigilance group that will not carry arms, who will be surprised by the police, who will not have unlawful detention camps, and will not make themselves a cabal court, something you are not trained, it will be a different matter. But a situation where a motorcycle mechanic, a shoemaker, a drycleaner come together and say they are now Bakassi, and can now arrest people, pass judgement on them, is not acceptable. They should conform to societal norms."

Even as police make all these breakthrough, Aba residents cannot yet shout allahuya, we now have security. This was because as police arrest the armed robbers and killed some, the bandits still operate as if there were no obstacles on their way.

For instance, the bankers resumed work Friday, June 2, after their two day sit-at-home protest, the armed robbers struck at the UBA at Ikot Ekpete Road around 9.00am and later that day at the Osisima branch of InterContinental Bank. While they carried away some money from the UBA branch, police were able to stop them from breaking into InterContinental Bank. The Commissioner of Police told Daily Champion that information they received on time enabled police to foil the robbery attempt. He said in the robbers bid to escape arrest, they left behind at the bank premises one of the vehicles they had arrived with.

That same Friday, there was another robbery which caused violent demonstrations within and around Abia, as the residents protested the killing of young woman by the police.

Eye witnesses said trouble started when a gang of armed robbers raided some stalls at the Ariaria International Market and police failed to stop the robbers, even when the traders made distress phone calls to police about the robbery as it was going on.

They said that it was after the armed robbers had left that some mobile policemen showed up.

This so angered the traders that they started throwing stones at the policemen and also made attempt to storm the Ariaria Police Station with the intention to burn it.

It was at this stage, the eye witnesses said, the policemen started to fire at the surging demonstrators and a woman who was passing by was shot and killed. This annoyed the demonstrators the more and they put the woman's corpse in a wheel-barrow and went round the streets of Aba. As they went they made bonfire at major junctions and roads, chanting war songs.



• Suspects and their weapons