



MASSOB and security forces

CONSECUTIVELY this month, reports of the killing of scores of Nigerians said to belong to the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), have featured in the media.

The first report on August 15 simply proclaimed that 10 MASSOB members had been killed by a combined team of security operatives in Onitsha, Anambra state. The stated aim of the killing by men of the 302 Artillery Regiment and the Police, was, officially, to "flush out the kidnappers" holding up in Enechele, an Island enclave, who have terrorized the city of Onitsha in recent months. The corpses of the slain were reportedly recovered from the River Niger, following the clash with the security forces and men said to be kidnappers and MASSOB members.

Subsequent reports on August 16 had put the number of the dead to 22. Several arrests were also made and, according to the Mr. Fidelis Agbo, a deputy superintendent of Police (DSP) and spokesman for the Anambra State Police Command, the operation to bring an end to the activities of these kidnappers was still on. Which all simply means that the body count in encounters between alleged MASSOB members and security forces will only rise unacceptably higher?

This is worrisome.

For one, though the Police have linked MASSOB members with the spate of kidnappings in the South East area of the country, MASSOB spokesmen have categorically denied this link. They say that none of their members is among those who kidnap others for any reason. And that the kidnappers are criminals who should be apprehended and punished according to the law.

As it turned out no fewer than 40 youths suspected to be involved in the Anambra kidnappings lost their lives in the latest operation by security forces.

Every right thinking Nigerian will condemn and has condemned the act of snatching people for ransom and other acts of criminality under the guise of pursuing some political objectives. Kidnapping becomes even more reprehensible when the targets are the most vulnerable in society - children, old women and foreign workers here to help our economy one way or the other, and also earn a living like everyone else. However, considering the intensity of this kidnap activity in areas outside the South East, the wholesale slaughter of 40 alleged MASSOB members in Onitsha, in one week alone, appears to be a mindless blood-bath.

The South East has not witnessed kidnappings until recently when some individuals arranged same for each other in pursuit of purely personal objectives. Therefore, to hide under the cover of law and order, as the security forces appeared to have done, and decimate a particular tribe appears drastic and brutal. It recalls charges of ethnic cleansing which MASSOB has consistently alleged.

The emergence of ethnic nationality groups in modern Nigeria like the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Arewa Youths and MASSOB has historical roots and are too well-known for rehearsal.

But all the recent agitations by these groups have centered on the release of their avowed spokespersons: Asari Dokubo, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, Frederick Fasheun, Gani Adams and Ralph Uwazuruike.

Everyone in this list of the nation's detained "subversives", have been let go on bail on the general and official understanding that they would help government to calm down their foot soldiers. Only Ralph Uwazuruike is still being denied bail.

Though freed from jail, there is even intensified violence in the Niger Delta where the former released suspects come from.

MASSOB, by self avowal is an organization that takes non-violence as an operational credo. They are therefore largely unarmed.

That a criminal group would masquerade under the MASSOB banner to unleash mayhem on society is very unfortunate. That the security agencies have a duty to apprehend such culprits is beyond question.

But we ask, is the best way to do this the application of jungle justice and gunning down scores of suspects without bringing them to trial before a competent court of law?

Much as we condemn the criminal acts of youths in the Anambra area, that should not be a justification for identifying MASSOB with these atrocities leading to the wanton killing of able-bodied men in Onitsha.

We think that the extra-judicial killings of alleged MASSOB members have gone enough and should be halted.

Chief Uwazuruike, who is still being incarcerated, should be let off to go and mind his foot soldiers as his counterparts have been let go.

It might appear reasonable to want to fight the symptoms of a disease, as the Nigerian security forces appear to be doing in Anambra state, but the real task should be identifying and treating the disease itself. Better still, the authorities should devise ways of addressing the root causes of the disease.

Both the issue of MASSOB and kidnappings have traceable, verifiable origins. They should be addressed by federal authorities.