

Tear gas kills 80-yr-old woman

'No. It's a lie' — Police

By STEVE OKO, Okigwe

THE sleepy village of Obiohia in Obinaorie Ezinnachi autonomous community of Okigwe local government area in Imo State, was last week thrown into frenzy when an 80-year-old widow Mrs. Macy Uwadineke, suddenly dropped dead after inhaling police teargas.

According to family sources, trouble started when a team of police officers apparently in hunt of criminals stormed a television viewing centre in the village and began to indiscriminately release gun shots as well as tear gas in the air.

The noise generated by the police action "attracted the villagers including the victim to the scene" the source added.

Meanwhile, about six persons at the centre who were watching an European league match at the time were later whisked away by the police but released the next day "for want of incriminating evidence", according to police sources.

Apparently irked by the sudden death of the widow which, was blamed on the action of the police, the villagers later that night went on rampage at the palace of their traditional ruler, Godwin Inyama Ofoma, on the assumption that he invited the police.

The eze's palace was vandalised by the rampaging mob who also deposited the corpse of the deceased in the eze's compound where it laid till the next day although the eze managed to escaped being lynched.

Members of the community's vigilante were also not spared by the mob as they were reportedly given the beating of their lives.

According to a member of the vigilante group, Mr. Nduka Chinaka, "we were attacked by the mob numbering about 50 persons. They tied us and dumped us at the primary school in the village after beating hell out of us. We were tied to the school chairs until morning when a pastor came to our rescue. They said we are working for the eze and police".

Meanwhile, when our correspondent visited the eze's palace, the compound was deserted as the traditional ruler was said to have fled to Okigwe Divisional police station where he is now taking refuge for fear of the unknown.

Later in an interview, Eze Ofoma said he was being persecuted by the villagers because of his hard stance against criminals in the area insisting that he was only discharging his duties as a traditional ruler who must not harbour miscreants in his domain.

He therefore, vowed never to allow his community to be used as a breeding ground for hoodlums.

Commenting on the incident, the Assistant Commissioner of Police in charge of Okigwe, Mr. Paul Aliu, said the police ransacked the said joint, on the suspicion that it served as a hide-out for hoodlums who terrorise commuters on Ezinnachi axis of Enugu/Port Harcourt express way.

Referring to the teargas inhalation, Mr. Aliu however acknowledged that his men "dropped smoke" to enable them

effect the arrest of the suspects at the joint but quickly denied that the deceased died as a result of the tear gas she inhaled.

"The woman was sent out as a town crier to alert the villagers of what happened and suddenly dropped dead in the course of her duty. Or how can she die in a place of about 500 metres from the scene of the incident and you say it is police tear gas", the area commander contested.

However, when asked whether a woman of that age could possibly be sent on such errand, the police boss simply said the act of town crying was hereditary in the deceased's family.

Meanwhile, the corpse of the deceased has been deposited at the Okigwe General Hospital Mortuary as the result of the autopsy is being awaited for further investigation.

Investigations by *Sunday Champion* however, reveal that the traditional ruler has since lost popularity among his subjects who accuse him of high-handedness, misrule and conniving with police to harass innocent and defenseless villagers.

According to an indigene, Dr. Willis Ibe of Federal Medical Centre, Umuahia, "even the coronation of the eze took place in his palace in stead of the community hall. He was never chosen by our people. He stole the ezeship stool and has been harassing every body since then. Even the vigilante boys are in his pocket".

It will be recalled however, that robbery incidents on Ezinnachi end of Enugu/Port Harcourt express way have assumed alarming proportion in the recent times.