



Victims of communal clash running for dear lives

Bringing an end to communal clashes in Gombe

TITUS Richard, 19, a Junior Secondary School III student of Comprehensive Secondary School, Kaltungo, Gombe State, was shot in the head and thigh on Sunday, Feb. 7, 2010.

Richard survived this attack but lost two fingers of his right hand. Six of his kith and kin were not so lucky. They all died.

These are some of the victims and casualties of communal clashes in Gombe State.

The clash of February 7 to February 9 was between the neighbouring communities of Dadiya and Kaltungo. Both are in Kaltungo Local Government Area and Gombe South Senatorial District.

By the time the warriors on both sides decided to "wait till another day", six people were dead, Richard and 19 others were injured and 870 others displaced from their ancestral homes.

Women and children account for most of the victims of this clash that has become an "annual event". The bloodbath has been reenacted yearly for seven years.

Its source is the same -- disagreement over the ownership of farmland that stretches across the boundaries of the two communities.

Although there is a subsisting court judgment declaring who owns the land, the other party is not comfortable with this. Hence, the orgy of killing, maiming and burning must continue.

In its early years, the violence was restricted to the stretch of land in question and was occurring mostly during the farming season.

But, as the clashes become more frequent, the flashpoints have expanded to the center of towns and villages.

Jonah Galadima, Secretary of Nigerian Red Cross Society, Kaltungo Division, said 250 houses were destroyed and 870 people displaced during the recent unrest.

Sources at the Kaltungo General Hospital confirmed receiving six corpses -- just a body higher than police statistics on the violence.

DSP Abdullahi Kamba, Gombe Police Command's Spokesperson, gave the casualty figures as "five dead and several others injured".

However, the affected communities are claiming that the figures are higher as several of their people remain missing since

the clash. Some of these are suspected to be dead and others stranded in the bush.

According to the Red Cross, some of the missing people are in the bush and have been making frantic calls for help through their handsets.

"But we could not venture into the bush for fear of our personal safety", explained Galadima.

Malam Umar Ahmad, Disaster Management Coordinator of the Red Cross in Gombe State, said that at the peak of the conflict, attempts at helping the distressed were hampered by heightened insecurity.

The strategic location of the feuding communities -- along the Gombe-Yola highway -- exposed motorists and passengers to danger.

During the crisis, each community mounted roadblocks within their territories on the road to accost their opponents. Identified ones were "dealt with" swiftly and without mercy.

Dr Sirajo Abdulkarim, a Medical Practitioner, who belongs to neither of the two communities, said he almost lost his 70 year-old father to the recent conflict.

"My father was heading to Gombe when his car was stopped at one of the roadblocks. He was ordered to open the booth of the vehicle; but as he came out to do so, his driver got scared and drove off, leaving him behind.

"The group then concluded that an 'enemy' must have been hidden in the booth and they descended on my dad heavily, inflicting severe injuries on him", narrated Abdulkarim.

One of the victims of the conflict, Pastor Davou Bulus, explained that apart from not knowing the whereabouts of his two children, he had lost all his property.

"My house was completely destroyed

with all that I have in it. But, my major worry now is that my son and daughter, aged seven and five, are missing," said Bulus.

The socio-economic consequences of the conflict had been grave. Markets within the two communities no longer flourish as they used to be.

Apart from their members not wanting to trade with one another, neighbouring communities are avoiding them as they have been labeled "trouble makers."

Inter-marriages between the two communities have stopped and earlier contracted ones are collapsing.

Alhaji Sale Muhammad, Emir of Kaltungo and Deputy Chairman of Gombe Council of Emirs and Chiefs, could not hide his displeasure over the recurring crisis between the two communities.

Muhammad said he had personally done all he could to bring a lasting solution to the crisis.

"It bleeds my heart to see people killing themselves over a piece of land -- something we shall all die and leave behind," lamented the royal father.

He called on the state government and security agencies to take decisive steps towards arresting the situation.

In the same vein, the paramount ruler of Dadiya, Alhaji Adamu Abubakar, condemned the violence.

Abubakar regretted that whereas the traditional rulers of the two communities were living like brothers, their subjects have failed to emulate them. "The situation is beyond our (traditional rulers') control. I am hereby calling on the appropriate authorities to intervene and find lasting solutions to the recurring violence," he pleaded.

Elders of Gombe South Senatorial

"We will commence reconciliation efforts, targeting attitudinal change towards one another by opponents, and also display video clips to sensitize the people on the repercussions of violence."

District and the State Governor, Alhaji Mohammad Goje, have met on the issue. However, the government is yet to make a public statement on it.

Unlike in the past, when the perpetrators of this crime go unpunished, the police have charged 36 suspects to court over the recent clash. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), has also concluded arrangements to embark on an extensive awareness campaign for peace to reign in Gombe South Senatorial District.

"We will commence reconciliation efforts, targeting attitudinal change towards one another by opponents, and also display video clips to sensitize the people on the repercussions of violence", said Ado Solomon, NOA Director in Gombe State.

Solomon suggested that the land that the land in dispute should be confiscated by the state government. "Such a land should be taken over by the government and social amenities beneficial to the feuding communities established on it. This will help in bringing them together as they share the facilities", he added.

Dr Keftin Amuga, an elder from Gombe South Senatorial District and also a Lecturer at the Federal University of Technology, Yola, said it was high time all elected representatives of the district convened a peace conference.

However, many believe that the people at the grassroots in Kaltungo and Dadiya are the ones to do away with belligerency for peace to reign in their communities. (NAN)

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