

News Focus

Quiet Sunday in Port Harcourt after week of violent clashes

Port Harcourt was quiet yesterday after an apparent ceasefire agreement was observed by warring groups in the Rivers State capital.

A week of violence shut down the city. Dozens of people have been killed, many innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire between armed men trying to assert authority on the capital of the oil producing south. Hospital staff said the death toll was at least 20 by yesterday. Authorities confirmed 11 dead. A clinic run by Medicines Sans Frontiers treated 29 gunshot victims, a spokesman told reporters.

Citizens of Port Harcourt over the weekend began calling for a state of emergency to be declared. A local radio journalist was arrested by security services on Saturday after the public used his call-in show to demand the Federal Government take action to stop the violence.

The state government has dismissed the gang warfare as "cultism" and asked parents to keep their children at home and stop them getting involved in the clashes.

But others said the fighting had broken out between rival gangs, vying for control of the city. One head of a Non Governmental Organisation, who did not want to be named for fear of reprisal attacks, said the clashes were an inevitable consequence of the violent election rigging in April. He said: "It's what happens when you give guns to lots of people, they will try and take over the top."

Mother Ezeuwa Nkechi told *Daily Trust* she feared for her children during the crisis. She said: "What we are seeing is beyond imagination. We run everytime when sound of gunshots is heard. I have sent my children home. So I am alone with my husband. Children can easily be killed because they do not understand the situation. In my area, up to four persons have been killed. There is need for government to restore peace to our minds and environment".

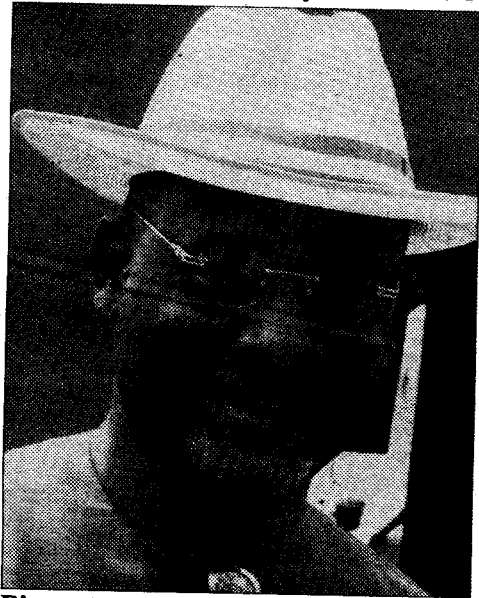
On Friday night, the main NNPC mega station was attacked with dynamite and a state radio station also blown up.

The Federal Government last week ordered the Inspector General of Police Mike Okiro and the Chief of Defence Staff, Lt Gen. Andrew Azazi to Port Harcourt to oversee the security situation themselves. On Friday after a closed door meeting they announced actions the joint taskforce of military and police would take action

From Mohammed Ajah, Port Harcourt

against the militants. The violence continued into Saturday before ceasing on Sunday.

The President's media advisor Segun Adeniyi could not be contacted yesterday for comment on the call for emergency rule. It is understood that the decision to send the task force top-shots to deal with the situation was taken after a security meeting chaired by



Rivers state governor, Celestine Omechia

the president.

The Senate President David Mark ruled out the possibility of declaring a state of emergency in Rivers State on account of the worsening security situation, insisting that the government would engage feuding parties in dialogue.

He said: "I'm sure that we should be able to calm nerves. We are working closely with some groups just to make sure that the situation does not continue. Even if it continues, the declaration of a state of emergency is ruled out. We have taken enough steps to stem the tide, to make sure that it does not go beyond what it is now. We are talking with the various groups that are involved."

The presenter of the Radio programme, Segun Owolabi was arrested on Saturday and detained for six hours.

Owolabi hosts a weekend phone in programme called *View Point* on Rhythm FM, a Silverbird station.

Some callers on the show demanded a declaration a state of emergency in the state while others insisted that the government was still capable of bringing the situation under control. A third group urged the militants to give peace a chance and allow the government which was still regarded new to work out its politics for the people.

Shortly after the progra-

me ended, the state Commissioner for Information, Mr. Emmah Okah condemned those calling for state of emergency and maintained that it was the work of the opposition group to discredit the incumbent administration under Governor Celestine Omechia.

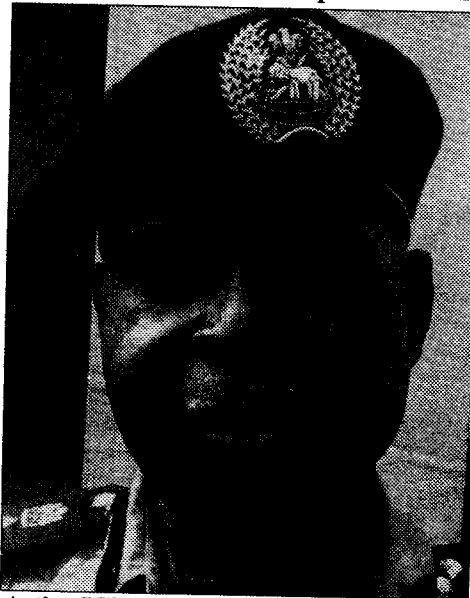
Okah noted that the government was capable of bringing back the state to order and appealed to the people to "imbibe the spirit of tolerance and give peace a chance".

In its reaction to the

electronic dealers. At the Trans-Amadi Industrial Layout, most companies operated partially in readiness to close their doors at the slightest sign of violence.

It was gathered that most foreign staff of oil companies and allied services have left the state in droves except the few ones who occupy sensitive positions.

Security personnel in the state also seem to be tired of the situations as some have indicated interest in leaving the state at the slightest chance. One policeman who



Acting IGP Mike Okiro

arrest, the Action Congress spokesman in the state, Chief Eze Chukwma Ezech described it as undemocratic and a means of denying the people freedom of expression on public matters.

He said: "The arrest further reveals the character of the government and its agents. Cultist had held sway in the state and held people hostage throughout the week without response from government or security agencies. What is the fault of this journalist to seek public opinions?"

Ordinary life in Port Harcourt came to an abrupt halt following the start of the shooting on Monday. Economic activities were completely paralyzed and many residents of the metropolis fled the state capital as the gun battle between the gunmen and security agents raged.

Throughout the week most commercial banks along Ikwerre Road, Diobu and other parts of the capital offered skeletal services under fear while few others closed their doors against customers who were desperate to make withdrawals especially for the weekend.

Busy shopping areas like Okija Street, Olu Obasajo Road among others were deserted. The situation was the same around the Ikoku area which is the home for motor spare parts and Ilabuchi which hosts

did not want his name in print said: "Despite the oil money that is said to be flowing on the streets of Port Harcourt which I have not seen, I am tired of staying here. I have applied for transfer outside the Niger Delta region. Once I get the approval, I will only become a casual visitor to the state in future".

Daily Trust conducted interviews with some residents from different parts of the metropolis and many of them said only the declaration of the state of emergency will solve the problem.

According to the managing director of a company, Mr. Abasima Ukpa, the federal government should either declare total state of emergency in the state or alternatively send troops into the creeks to flush out the criminals. Mr. Ukpa said businessmen have recorded huge losses in the past few months as the militias continue to terrorize the cities and even rob citizens of their belongings.

He said: "I do not really support state of emergency, but with the situation on ground, I think not many Rivers residents are thinking otherwise. The declaration of state of emergency will affect the masses and also the businesses. But whatever, the security of our lives wherever we live in this country is paramount and should be guarded religiously by the federal government first

before other federating units".

Mr. Monday Uko said: "The last government planted this rancour and disharmony among Rivers people. So even if the present government could be said not to be completely responsible for the worsening security hazards, it is also a product of the last regime. So the new government has been observed to be robbing minds with the militias. So the federal government should act fast to save our lives".

Mr. Ekoly Efofiong said the situation was beyond the powers of the police and state government. He said: "I feel too bad about the insecurity in this state. I want the federal government to act fast to rescue the lives of its citizenry. The cultists have continued to siege the city and nothing is done by the state government. It is clear that only the soldiers can fight the war".

About twelve persons of Northern origin were killed in Port Harcourt during cult related violence since 2002, the chairman of Northern chapter of PDP in Rivers state, Mallam Garba Abdullahi has revealed.

Mallam Abdullahi in an exclusive interview with *Daily Trust* over the weekend said most of them were killed by stray bullets in the turbulent areas.

From Abuloma, Tonye Sunday said government was not sincere in its dealing with the youths. He said: "Since the bill prohibiting cultism came into law about four years ago, can they tell us how many people have been arrested and prosecuted? Once a cultist is arrested by the security agents, a call comes from the highly placed politicians and the cultist is let go with immediate effect."

On the *View Point* programme, a contributor Dr. Peterside described the warning issued by the governor last Wednesday as watery and devoid of action because, he said, no action has been taken after the speech and more casualties have occurred.

Others recalled that the former SSS director who revealed the names of some of the sponsors and leaders of the militants in the state was immediately transferred without explanation. However, some others appealed to the rampaging youths to disarm.

In his reaction to the call for state of emergency by some people, the state commissioner for Information, Mr. Emmah Okah has said that the callers were "selfish and ignorant of the consequences of such calls."

Okah described the calls

as "a shameful attempt by the opposition to claim that the government under Governor Omechia was incapable of controlling the situation."

He said: "It is a total lie that this government cannot control the situation. Governor Omechia and his team are capable and able of bring peace and security back to the state. Those who have decided to cause the havoc can not go free. The government is working hard to salvage the situation".

A Non-Governmental Organization in Rivers state, Rivers Reformed Movement (RRM), has called for immediate summoning of a security summit to address the issue decisively.

RRM condemned the upsurge which it described as terrorist activities and called on the state government to initiate the summit for a quick result.

The group in a statement jointly signed by its convener and secretary, Conrade Nwauju Darlington and Comrade Zubi Iheanyi Dike respectively said issues pertaining the security of lives and property in the state must be taken serious and only a comprehensive solution will do.

The duo slammed the youths who have indulged in killing innocent citizens, adding that such elements cannot dodge the wrath of God if they could not be penalized on earth.

They said: "We call on government to immediately initiate a security summit where issues that concern security of lives and property in the state will be discussed. We are ashamed as youths that a few criminals who we want their principals unmasked have held the entire state to ransom in the past few days".

"This act must be condemned by all well meaning individuals as there cannot be development without peace. We suggest that a database of all unemployed youths in the state be developed to provide meaningful employment to all employable youths and create trade/training for others in the nearest possible time" they noted.

They, however, appealed to organized labour, market women and students, multinational companies as well as the international community to prevail upon the government at all levels in the state to swing into action and bring the situation under control.

The people of Rivers state have been urged to go about their normal and lawful businesses as security was being beefed up to guarantee their safety.