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Day herdsmen/farmers clash claimed 70 in Nasarawa

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FRIDAY, 25 DECEMBER 2009 21:47

Except for the presence of the vigilante and armed men of the MOPOL 38 Squadron who were drawn to keep vigil at the community, the once densely-populated Udeni Gida in Nasarawa Local Government Area of Nasarawa State could pass for the faint remains of an ancient world. A first-time visitor would hardly believe that there was once life in the once bustling community of over 30,000 people who invested everything and scratched a living from their land through peasant farming. It was from this same land that death came knocking on the doors of over 70 inhabitants who were felled by firearms and other weapons of the invading army of local warriors last week Friday, December 18.

The attack that lasted only hours was launched by charm-bearing local warriors believed to have been brought in from Epira and Jukun ethnic groups of neighbouring Kogi and Taraba states respectively. The Osu Udeni (Chief of Udeni community), Chief Agah Okonu who spoke to our correspondent during a visit on Thursday evening alleged that the local mercenaries numbering dozens and bearing sophisticated weapons and charms were brought in by Fulani herdsmen who they (Udeni people) had had two weeks long misunderstanding with.

The state police commissioner, Shehu Babalola, said the crisis broke out on December 6 after cattle rearers allegedly drove their cattle into a yet-to-be harvested rice farm, which attracted a protest from the farmer who was later killed in the ensuing misunderstanding. The farmer whose name Okonu gave as Abdulrahman Adamu woke up that fateful day and headed to his farm to commence harvest of a well-tendered rice only to discover that cattle rearers from the neighbouring Fulani settlement had driven their animals into the farm, thereby crushing what would have enhanced his living standard. "He was alone, so he raised his voice in protest. As if they had planned it, the Fulani herdsmen gathered round him and began to beat him with their sticks. Before his kinsmen who were working on nearby farms could reach the spot, Abdulrahman had already been killed", the chief said.

The alleged killing of the farmer built up tension between Udeni Gida and the neighbouring Fulani settlements and it later led to the Epira and Jukun invasion, which was allegedly sponsored by the herdsmen. The chief of the vigilante group in the community, Ibrahim Osu, whose men are currently assisting the riot policemen on patrol duty, told Weekly Trust that it was difficult, but community members could recognise that the invading mercenaries were Epira and Jukun warriors through their dressing and the two languages spoken. "Among them were some Fulani men who led the mercenaries to particular houses, including our chief's own, which they razed as they shot their way through the village, killing people and chanting words of war," the chief of vigilante said.

The state police commissioner, Shehu Babalola, confirmed the fighting between Fulani herdsmen and peasant farmers in the community when he spoke to our correspondent a day after the December 18 invasion. He, however, withheld details about the number of people killed and what the police were doing about it for fear of sparking off further tension. Babalola who said the clash has been a "perennial problem" said the police brought normalcy to the area before it could escalate further. The commissioner said two units of anti-riot policemen from MOPOL 38 in Akwanga and some army personnel were brought in to quell the crisis, adding that "normalcy is now restored".

However, the lawmaker representing Udege/Loko (part of which is Udeni-Gida), Mohammed Baba Ibaku, gave further details, saying the report he received from the area was that the latest crisis killed over 30 persons. "The day before yesterday (Friday), we discovered 20 corpses, yesterday, 12 corpses were recovered making it over 30 corpses", the lawmaker said. He added that dozens of houses and other properties including crops were razed by the arsonists in their trail.

Ibaku said over two weeks ago, a group of Fulani herdsmen drove their cattle into a rice farm and the farmer protested, which led to a clash in which the farmer lost his life. "But we held back our people and pleaded for calm only for them to be woken up at about 6am of Friday by gunshots from some Fulani and their mercenaries who laid ambush around the village.

"They opened fire and killed the people", he added, alleging that the local Epira and Jukun warriors who invaded the village were said to have been brought in from neighbouring Kogi and Taraba states. The lawmaker commended the prompt response from both the police and army, although he appealed that, "we need more security personnel in the area because we heard that the people are still hiding in the bush and can attack again".

When Weekly Trust visited, it was to come face-to-face with a dead community lying at the end of a three-hour journey from Keffi through Nasarawa. Our reporter lens vividly captured the destruction of Udeni-Gida. "Women and children were not spared either", said one of the vigilante men, Isah Yusuf, who led our correspondent through the community.

"Nobody could cry out again after we brought out the bodies, most of which were charred remains of burnt people", Yusuf said as he walked through the burnt buildings, pointing at what used to be shelter to over 30,000 once happy persons. "Now, the owners of these buildings are refugees scattered in other people's villages with nothing eat or call their own", Yusuf continued.

As Yusuf led this reporter through fallen structures, he could not help but burst into tears as he stood in front of what used to be his proud shelter. Tucked in between other buildings belonging to his old father, his wives and concubines, Yusuf's old home tells the complete story of the invasion. "The Dane gun in my hands and the dirty clothes on my body are the only property I could escape with", he said, providing fuller details of how he fired a couple of shots from his less superior weapon to keep off the invaders.

"As you can see, this is only a Dane gun that I use in my hunting vocation. It is no match to the machine guns that

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our attackers used. The sound of their machine guns alone shook Udeni-Gida. We couldn't do anything, so we fled in different directions," he said.

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At various points, the walk by Weekly Trust and his guide led to buildings still billowing with thick smoke one week after the invasion. Specifically, a large store house of beniseed (sesame) was still burning when this reporter was leaving by 7pm. Thick black oil looking like condemned engine oil dripped from the store house in what Yusif explained as "the burnt treasure of a hardworking farmer".

In a makeshift shelter he provided with the help of his loyal subjects was found the chief of the community, Agah Okonu who sat looking at our reporter without answering greetings or taking his gaze away from the large compound that once housed over 30 of his family members. Weekly Trust gathered that the chief was saved by his subjects who had to leave their own homes undefended. "Two youths died in the event", one of the guards at the makeshift palace told our correspondent.

The chief, however, had to break his thoughts to answer our reporter's inquiries. "What else can I say other than to call for calm among my people? We are not warriors, we are peasant farmers and we have lived ages here with other neighbours including Fulani cattle rearers without any trouble. I am shocked at what happened. But I give God the glory for everything. All I am asking for is relief for my people. They need to return and be settled. Any assistance from anybody including international agencies will count".

He also said he will not be persuaded by the invasion to commit the peasant settlement into a warrior camp. "We are farmers. We cannot be persuaded by this unfortunate war which was taken to our doorsteps while we were still in our beds with our wives and children to build a violent community. God will avenge us", he added quietly, saying over 70 people were killed in the invasion which lasted only hours. "We had to bury them immediately - children and women first."

Like Okonu, the Sarkin Fulani (leader of Fulani) in Nasarawa State, Senator Walid Jibrin, said he was worried that both Fulani and farmers in the area decided to take a rather different approach instead of dialogue in settling a minor difference. He said he was disappointed that both parties failed to take their differences to appropriate authorities as has been outlined by the various committees working for the peaceful co-existence between Fulani and farmers. He named the efforts as those of the Sultan of Sokoto, Governors Gabriel Suswam of Benue State, Aliyu Akwe Doma of Nasarawa State and Murtala Nyako of Adamawa State and the various committees set up calling on all parties to shun violence and dialogue when settling quarrels.

Senator Jibrin called on those who have fled the trouble spot to return to the area and assist the police and army personnel in fishing out the troublemakers among them, saying, "I am calling on all Fulani and farmers who fled from the area to come back. Efforts are being made by law enforcement agents to ensure that the unfortunate clash does not happen again. They should come back and assist in fishing out the troublemakers in their midst". He advised that both Fulani and farmers "must live together in peace and harmony".

Dan Asabe Onah and Ishaya Yakubu stood still as they watched this reporter leaving. They said they would miss the company since it was the first they were having a visitor apart from the police and men of the Nigerian Army to the community after the invasion. "We have not seen anybody here since the invasion", they said as they led this reporter to the gateway with their Dane guns on their backs.

This is the unfortunate aspect of the incidence that attracted the comments of the Action Congress (AC) in the state. The opposition party picked quarrels with Governor Aliyu Akwe Doma over his failure to visit the flash point. The AC said it was unfortunate and a display of lack of concern over the lives and property of Nasarawa people.

The state secretary of the opposition party, Faruk Gyado, expressed worries that the government has continued to sleep while instability continues to threaten the lives of Nasarawa State people. "We are surprised that over 30 lives have been reported lost in a two-week-old violent clash in a community in Nasarawa, yet the governor has continued with his usual sleep.

"Over 30 lives reportedly gone and the governor has not deemed it necessary to say a word, to at least condemn the violence, visit the community and see things for himself, call for calm and give confidence in our people. Must everybody be killed before the governor will act? It is very unfortunate and a demonstration of lack of focus and vision. Doma's government is not responsive, and keeping quiet while the state burns confirms the fears of our people that this government is impotent", said Gyado.

Gyado said it is not the first time violence is threatening the state, noting that communal clashes are common in the state, but expressed concern that the government of Doma has not designed a responsive approach to the development. He called on both cattle rearers and farmers in the state to learn to tolerate each other and to always use dialogue instead of the usual resort to killing in settling misunderstandings.

But the Nasarawa State government through the Information Commissioner, Abdullahi Aliyu Mustafa, said the government had completed arrangements to move relief materials to victims. The commissioner said Governor Doma has directed the state Water Board to ensure steady supply of water to the flash points, so that the condition of victims is not further worsened. He added that the governor has had sleepless nights over the incidence and has committed a lot of resources in terms of funds and time.

"The government is not resting. We are trying to build confidence in the people, return law and order. All these are for the quick return of the people who fled the area", the commissioner added.

A grazing route that will run through four neighbouring states - Nasarawa, Plateau, Benue and Ebonyi -- is on the way for Fulani herdsmen as part of Federal Government's efforts to tackle the incessant conflicts between the herdsmen and farmers. If the planned demarcation of the route works, farmers would stay at arms' length from lands designated as grazing route. 30 metres of land would be marked as the range for grazing route, according to Mr Patrick Boga, the head of Livestock Division of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources who visited traditional rulers in the state last month.



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