

INSIDE YOUR
SUNDAY TRUST

NEWS

**Waiting
for
people's
verdict
in Edo** Pg 7, 8

POLITICS

**Now,
Ewuga
becomes
CPC
Senator** Pg 12

**How
insecurity
affects
farmers,
traders**

INTERNATIONAL

**Libyans
vote
in first
polls** Pg 55

FEVER PITCH



How Shelleng farmers, fishermen contend with hippos



TWO of the hunted hippopotami at Shelleng

From Ibrahim Abdul'Aziz, Yola

Although hippos are herbivores, they are extremely aggressive and unpredictable, fighting rival creatures and each other to defend their territories or offsprings. This was witnessed in Shelleng, a riverine community in Adamawa State last week.

It is not only in Shelleng. Rampaging herds of hippopotami are terrorising farmers and fishermen along river Benue, and, at least, two fishermen have been killed in their encounters with the mountainous beasts.

Though, the wild hippopotamus that killed the two fishermen was shot dead, the situation highlights how ill-equipped the Nigerian wildlife control officials are in their duty to protect wildlife and residents of the communities around the rivers where the animals visit frequently.

The marauding giant mammals are destroying fishing boats, turning to waste rice fields and attacking cattle. In all they threaten the livelihoods of local farmers and fishermen in the riverine areas.

Three fishermen from Talum in Shelleng Local Government Area of Adamawa State are nursing serious bodily injuries, after a mission to chase hippos out of their farms turned tragic. The local fishermen usually woke up at 1.00 am to fish. But this aspect of their daily chores was prevented by hippos on the water. They realised that the beasts were wreaking havoc on their fishing nets and farms, a few metres from their houses. Armed to the teeth, Mallam Habu, a fisherman, said no sooner had the prospective victims stepped out than the hippo charged at them, biting one of them in the event. The



ALHAJI Babangida Ibrahim, a hunter

same misfortune befell another neighbour who was stopped in his tracks by the hippo as he rushed to save the other man.

He sustained serious bites on his back from the animal before it retreated to the river from where it had strayed.

The affected residents said if the human-wildlife conflict was not addressed, they might resort to arming themselves and killing the animals. The Shelleng traditional council and local authorities had rushed to the state government, appealing to the state Wildlife Service Department to contain the destructive animals.

There is sanctuary for the hippos in Shelleng, and local people say the hippos have been coming into the towns from there.

Alhaji Babangida Ibrahim Jimeta, the state's deputy chairman of registered local hunters, was contracted for the assignment.

He said the hippos raided three fishing sites in one week, which has paralyzed fishing activities in the predominantly fishing villages of Shelleng and other neighbouring communities.

He said they were on the

lookout for two other hippopotami that had turned violent in a sanctuary of about 200 others on Kiri dam.

"We don't have appropriate weapons," Jimeta said. "Only people at national parks and doctors have those."

"Even while killing the animals, we nearly died in the river," he said.

The chief hunter further explained, "the hippopotami are the most dangerous of all herbivores in Africa; They kill more people every year than lions, leopards and crocodiles."

Extremely territorial, the hippo, particularly the male, can weigh three tons or more, and has been known to attack both in water (even capsizing boats and kayaks) and on land, where it can run incredibly fast despite its large size. It has the largest and mightiest jaws and longest canines than any mammal, and can cut an adult crocodile in halves. Imagine, then, what it could do to man!" he asked.

A fisherman, Alhaji Baba Ibrahim Italiya Shelleng, said after killing two fishermen last weekend, some hippopotami had smashed canoes and destroyed rice fields in Shelleng and neighboring towns.

But state wildlife control officials, who gave permission to the hunters to hunt down the hippopotami, said killing the animal was a last resort.

"We don't encourage killing," said Zakari Buba Yaduma, an assistant director of the wildlife control and conservation programme at the state's ministry of environment. "We went there to control, but this animal had already killed two men. We had no alternative."

The sanctuary has been there for decades, said Yaduma, but as the human communities around

it grow, the conflicts are more frequent. Older hippopotami also are known to being temperamental.

The ministry did awareness campaigns, teaching people in river communities about hippopotami routines so that they could avoid them, Yaduma said.

"When you dart an animal, it will just go unconscious so you can transport it," Yaduma said. "But you still need a special place to take that animal to; we lack the weapons and the machinery."

However, commenting on this incident, Desmond Majekodunmi, council member of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, said people have every right to kill the animals to protect themselves when they are not in reserves or national parks.

However, Majekodunmi warned conservationists to do more in keeping both humans and wildlife safe.

"Hippopotami are not on the endangered species list, but they are threatened animals," he said. "If hippos are alive there and they are not being protected in any official way, then there is a problem."

The third largest surface mammals after elephants and white rhinos, hippos have caused more human deaths on the continent than lions or tigers, by biting or trampling on their victims. Hippos spend most of their days wallowing in water, emerging at night to graze on land for up to two miles.

Their numbers have been greatly depleted by humans hunting them for their hide, meat and teeth. Today there are thought to be 150,000 wild hippos living in sub-Saharan Africa. They typically live up to 50 years, grow to 11ft long and weigh up to three tonnes.