

2 MONTHS ON, MORE QUESTIONS OVER OMBATSE MASSACRE



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Emmanuel Cheto is one of the 18 anti-riot policemen who returned alive from Alakyo, a village at the outskirts of Lafia, capital of Nasarawa State, where scores of policemen and operatives of State Security Service (SSS) were murdered in an ambush on them in May this year.

Like his other colleagues, Cheto is still ailing with pains from the gun wounds sustained from the ill-fated operation. Weekly Trust gathered that the survivor was referred to the

Federal Medical Centre (FMC) in Keffi, from OLA Hospital in Akwanga, where he was to be operated upon, but had no funds to pay the huge bills. He was handed a paltry N22, 000 (Twenty-two) from police authorities for the treatment.

Similarly, Mustapha Mallam, one of the victims is also still ailing. He had to leave Police Clinic in Lafia, where the Police authorities first brought him, to the Dalhatu Araf Specialists' Hospital (DASH). His treatment movement became necessary because there were no drugs at the police facility to treat him and 17 of his colleagues.

He escaped the scene of the ambush with bullets lodged in his stomach and left arm. He also received N22,000 from the authorities.

Garba Ngbede received machete cuts on his head and several other parts of the body. He was also taken to the same police clinic, and later transferred to DASH after medical officers there informed authorities that the facility had not seen drugs in years.

At DASH, he had no bed, although remained there for three days. Other policemen too were not given beds, and they had to contend with cold on German (concrete) floor, where they were admitted and took injective drips.

John Daniel was lucky to receive N200,000. He suffered multiple injuries from gunshots and machete cuts. But like all other patients, he had to pay for his drugs and sundry treatments at DASH.

"We paid for our treatment ourselves. When we could not pay anymore, the hospital discharged us and asked us to go. They said they are not running a charity organization", said one of the policemen who declined to state his identity.

Weekly Trust gathered that 18 out of the 61 anti-riot policemen including their Unit Commander (UC), sent on the ill-fated operation to Alakyo, returned. The rest of them, as well as a dozen conventional policemen and 10 SSS operatives were killed by the Ombatse traditional cultists.

But despite the series of complaints, state police commissioner, Umaru Shehu, denied that the survivors were given only N22,000.

"They sent money to them. We officers also contributed money and gave to them. How can that happen? They were given N200,000 each from the Force Headquarters, and we here assisted them with N40,000 each", he said.

The police command has long accused Ombatse, a group of Eggon people claiming to be representing the traditional religion of the people, over the killing, and has gone ahead to make several arrests of Eggon people

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since then.

The SSS too has accused Ombatse, although the service boss, Ita Ekpenyong has long declared forgiveness for the group members, whom he described as a cult. But relatives of the slain SSS officers, as well as prominent national figures including General Muhammadu Buhari and former service chiefs have condemned the declaration as defeatist and amounting to playing obvious politics, explaining that the service lacked the powers to declare forgiveness for a crime against the people and constitution of the country.

Ombatse, meaning "Time has come" in Eggon, has been fingered in widespread campaigns of violence, beginning with the September, 2012 clash between Eggon and Alago in Assakio, also at the outskirts of Lafia. A commission of inquiry set up by Governor Umaru Tanko Al-Makura indicted them, but the document remained in Government House files and refused to go public for months. The non-implementation of the report has raised questions about the governor's interest in the crisis.

Weekly Trust established that by November, the group was fingered to have attacked soldiers at Alagoni hill, near Nasarawa-Eggon. Two soldiers and one SSS operatives were shot by youths suspected to be Ombatse members after a team of security operatives stormed a site where the chief priest known popularly as Babalakyo was administering oath on male Eggon persons.

Eventually, invasion was launched on Agyaragu, also at the outskirts of Lafia, with both government and security agencies accusing Ombatse of fomenting trouble in the land. During the incident, 10 Migili people were killed in not less than 10 straight hours of the invasion, which also targeted houses and other properties of Migili people for burning.

Investigations also indicate that no fewer than half a dozen villages where Eggon people co-existed with other ethnic groups were attacked, once or twice between 2012 and February of 2013. Angwan Alaku, Bassa, Burumburum, Mararaba-Awange, Adoja and Igah communities are among the affected areas in the campaign of violence.

Fulani mercenaries seized the opportunity to also launch violent intrusions at a point, as they were fingered in some of the attacks, in what spread into counter attacks between Fulani and Eggon. Each of the opposing groups accused one another of sponsorship by political interests for the purpose of destabilizing certain interests ahead of the 2015 governorship elections.

At the centre of the accusations were the two Congress For Progressive Change's (CPC) strongmen, incumbent governor Al-Makura and Senator Solomon Ewuga (CPC, Nasarawa-North.) Al-Makura, a Gwandara won the 2011 election, defeating Aliyu Akwe Doma of the PDP. Ewuga, an Eggon won the senate seat, defeating the 2011 tag team of Labaran Maku and Madam Patricia Akwahsiki who was seeking a second term.

Gentleman's Agreement

Talks of a gentleman's agreement reached between the two CPC strongmen were widespread in the state. No sooner than he emerged the CPC flagbearer than Al-Makura began to talk about his desire for just a term to govern and handover the reins of power.

Many believed he spoke out of the honour for the said promise to Ewuga, who has contested twice for governorship of the state since 1999 – on various platforms. The first time Ewuga contested was in 1995 under the platform of the defunct UNCP where he was a national officer; the second in 1998 with the formation of the PDP where he was a founding member and zonal Legal Adviser. He was strongly persuaded to contest in 2003, but Ewuga kept his distance, and only vied for the position in 2007, making it the third time.

Again, he lost the contest for the PDP ticket to Doma, who just defected from the ANPP, compelling the former to run to the latter's old party where he emerged the flagbearer, but he lost again to Doma.

A CPC leader, Ewuga is one politician with no firm roots in any one political party. Between 1999 and now alone, Ewuga has had membership of three different political parties, with two defections from the PDP alone, and one from ANPP. His membership of CPC is also believed to be for the purpose of the seat he is occupying now.

His joining the CPC is believed to be the handiwork of Al-Makura who needed his political clout to defeat the PDP. The agreement was, therefore, said to be necessary so that Ewuga does not get too old to run for the seat by the time Al-Makura completes eight years.

Al-Makura was accused by Eggons for sponsoring Fulani mercenary attacks on Eggon communities, with Al-Makura's camp insisting that Ewuga sponsored Eggon militia to go after the Fulanis. When over five straight hours of gun fight between Eggon militiamen and Fulani mercenaries hit Kwandere, the governor's hometown on February 7, the accusations were rife because it was believed Ombatse militia entered the town to send a message to the governor as well as smoke out Fulani mercenaries allegedly camped there.

The ill-fated operation on Alakyo, and the gruesome murder of the security operatives only reinforced the widespread suspicion that the all-CPC fight between the two strongmen who benefitted from each other's political clout to end the long rule of the PDP.

But both men have denied there was any agreement, just as another strongman of the party, Dr. Hassan Lawal, also denied last week that there was an agreement.

Meanwhile, members of Former Lafia Division Elders' Consultative Forum (FLDECF), a 2011 pro-PDP group, has said the prevalent invasion of villages by militias and the killings, leading up to the gruesome murder of the security operatives by Ombatse is the result of "the growing culture of impunity in the state since 2012."

This is just as two stakeholders' forum, one led by political leaders, and the other by traditional rulers and religious leaders have accused Ombatse of the murder, condemning it as they called for security agencies to haunt them to bring them to book.

But in a reaction, leader of Eggon people, Chris Mamman told Weekly Trust on phone that the traditional rulers and religious leaders have not said anything different in the case of Ombatse and the Alakyo murder for him to border himself with reactions.

Nevertheless, he described their decision on Ombatse as "biased", explaining that "traditional rulers kept quiet when Eggon people were being killed across the state." He alleged that the months of violent crisis which rocked the state between last year and the early months of 2013, were sponsored to cleanse the Eggon ethnic group, with full knowledge of traditional rulers.

"They are biased, lest they would have first come out to fish out the perpetrators of the crime against 63 communities of Eggon which were burned down; they would have come out to address the killing of 259 Eggon people killed; they would have come out to ask questions about the 2,232 houses of Eggon people burned in the months of sponsored violence against the Eggon nation", Mamman, who is the National President of Eggon Cultural and Development Association (ECDA), said.

"It is unfortunate that custodians of tradition and peace in the state are this biased", he added.

Meanwhile, when contacted, the Nigeria Police Headquarters in Abuja said the Ombatse issue is under investigation and therefore will not comment for now. The State Security Service (SSS) could not be reached for comment. However, the Director General of the SSS Ita Ekpenyong had earlier said that the service had forgiven those who killed their officers, a move that was rejected by families of the victims.

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2

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2

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