

END THIS CARNAGE IN BENUE



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While the nation's attention in recent times with respect to insecurity has been glued to the North East, not enough attention is being paid to sordid events currently unfolding in Benue State. In recent weeks alone, dozens of people have been killed, many communities have been sacked, crops and livestock have been destroyed and thousands of people have been internally displaced due to what has become a war of attrition between Tiv farmers and Fulani pastoralists.

The skirmishes have been going on on a relatively small scale for quite some time but they recorded an increase in both ferocity and intensity in recent weeks. **One episode that got the most media attention was the February 18 pre-dawn attack on Tse-Torkula community in Guma LGA of Benue State. Though the police did not disclose the number of casualties suffered in that attack, local residents said fourteen people were killed.** The attackers also burnt several houses including the country home of the Tor Tiv, Orchivirigh Dr. Alfred Akawe Torkula. As a result, thousands of people fled the area and became refugees in Makurdi and other towns.

The attack on Tse-Torkula village was described as a reprisal attack by suspected Fulani herdsmen. It was apparent retaliation for what happened days earlier at Agasha, also in Guma LGA. A prominent Tiv chief was said to have invited Fulani elders to a meeting. According to reports, they not only attended the meeting but paid N3 million to be allowed a portion of grazing land in the area. However, while the meeting was still on, suspected Tiv youth invaded the venue, killed seven of the Fulani elders and removed some of their body organs.

Episodes like these, as well as widespread cattle rustling and allegations of cattle straying into farmlands and destroying crops, have led to many skirmishes as well as so-called reprisal and counter-reprisal attacks. In all the attacks heavy casualty figures in terms of human lives and property were recorded on both sides. While the Tiv count their losses in terms of houses and farm produce, the Fulani mostly count theirs in terms of lost cattle herds. As a result, an atmosphere of insecurity now pervades many parts of Benue State. What caused this carnage between two communities that have lived together peacefully for generations? There are as many answers as the number of people you ask. Secretary of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, Benue State Chapter Haruna Garus Gololo said the Fulani have so far lost 320 lives and over 500 cows in the crisis. He said, "Our members have also fled to other states like Nasarawa, Taraba, Kwara and even Cameroon because the chairman of Makurdi LGA gave a directive that Fulani should all leave the state."

Benue State Governor Gabriel Suswam on his part called on the federal government to intervene in what he described as "incessant attacks on Benue people by suspected Fulani herdsmen." He said the trend was capable of degenerating into a tribal war. Suswam said he had met with traditional rulers in the state to work out modalities to implement interim measures aimed at checking further attacks.

However, former Lagos Police Commissioner Abubakar Tsav blamed the state's elders for maintaining what he called "a conspiracy of silence" while the crisis persists. Tsav said, "We the elders in Benue have not taken the matter very seriously. The Fulanis have lost their cows and human beings just like the Tiv have lost so many people... Our people have become refugees in their own land." Tsav also said, "Government and stakeholders should strike a deal whereby the Fulani would no longer destroy a Tiv man's farm produce while the Tiv man would stop tampering with a Fulani man's cows. The police on its part should hold periodic meetings with the Fulani and Tiv people."

The crises actually transcend Benue State's borders. Senior Special Assistant on Media and Public Affairs to Governor Suswam, Mr. Cletus Akwaya said most of the people who carry out the attacks in Benue come from Nasarawa State. He said, "The state government has been battling with the problem in the past three years and the attacks were mainly carried out in Guma, Makurdi, Gwer West and Agatu, leading to the death of hundreds of

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people and displacement of not less 200,000 people in the four affected areas."

The Federal Government has also made some moves to settle the crises, though not nearly enough. Akwaya said as a result of a letter sent to him by Governor Suswam, President Jonathan sent the Police's Deputy Inspector General, Operations Mike Zuokomor and the General Officer Commanding the 82 Army Division, Enugu to undertake an assessment tour to Benue State.

Some observers have adduced many reasons for the worsening state of insecurity in Benue State. While some said there is a conspiracy by historical Kwarrarafa elements to wipe out the Tiv, others point to a more real problem on the ground, that of growing political thuggery in the state in recent years. Even before the farmers' herders' clashes assumed their present dimension, there have been many episodes of political thuggery and even political assassinations in Benue State. Observers now say it was these well-armed political thugs that attacked the herders and rustled their cattle, while the herders responded by attacking the local communities.

Last week Sultan of Sokoto Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad, who has been deeply involved in the search for solution to the Benue crises, called for the setting up of a judicial commission of inquiry to unravel its causes. We support the setting up of such a commission because it will enable community elders on both sides to state their own side of the story as well as the losses they have suffered.

In the short run, the police and soldiers must do their best to curb the violence and restore order. In the long run however, a just solution must be found that protects the farmers' crops as well as the pastoralists' cattle herds and restore the harmonious relations that existed in the past. All hands must be on deck to end this terrible carnage in Benue State.

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