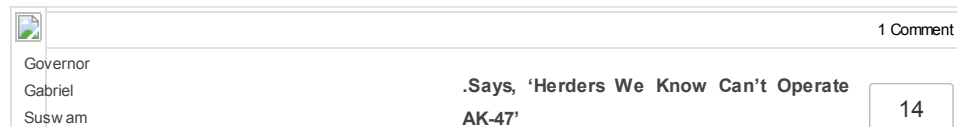


EXCLUSIVE: WHY BENUE IS UNDER SIEGE - GOV SUSWAM

Category: [Big Story](#) Published on Sunday, 30 March 2014 05:01 Written by Fidelis McClewa and Hope Abah, Makurdi Hits: 142



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Governor Gabriel Suswam of troubled Benue State has attributed the killings and wanton destructions in the state to the misconception that the people of the state, who have lived for many years with Fulani herdsmen, are responsible for cattle rustling in which herdsmen have lost their cattle in recent times.

He also stated that the attacks in which over 200 persons have been killed in the last few weeks may have been carried out by terrorists from outside his state, saying the Fulani who live in communities in his state carry sticks and local guns, not sophisticated weapons like AK-47, which have been used in the mass killings.

The governor stated these in an exclusive interview with Sunday Trust in Makurdi at the weekend. According to him, "I think what is happening in Benue is a reflection of what is happening elsewhere across the country. The Fulani that we have lived with we know very well. The highest weapons they carried were local guns and their sticks. But this crop of Fulani that we now have are people who carry sophisticated weapons. Therefore, I still believe, and it is the conviction of most Tiv people, that this is a different crop of Fulani who are not the ones that have settled with us and joked together with the Tiv. Therefore, the belief I have and which is shared by a lot of people is that it is the same insurgents that are operating in other parts of the country that have found themselves in Benue, using the Fulani as façade to unleash mayhem and create the impression that the Tiv people are fighting with the Fulani."

Speaking in the same vein, the Deputy Governor of the state, Chief Steven Lawani, told our reporter that, on the average, 12 people were being killed on a daily basis in Benue State, something that was unheard of in the communities previously.

According to him, "You won't believe that when I went to see the refugees on Tuesday, I interview some of them and discovered that many of them were entering into Makurdi for the first time in their lives. As close as Guma is to Makurdi, some of the people were coming for the first time. There is nothing that we could do for them, be it the food, water that we give them cannot substitute for their homes. So, they must go back to their homes for obvious reasons. We are doing everything possible to make sure that they go back to their homes. More so, there are the health hazards, the longer they stay here, especially when the rain starts could lead to epidemic. That is why we are working round the clock to ensure that they go back to their homes. Those who criticize us of being slow don't know what we are doing. If we give them relief materials here in Makurdi, they will not go back again, we are taking the materials to their wards to make them go back which many people are not aware of because it is worrisome that they are lying in schools and soon if care is not taken, we are going to have health issues on our hands."

The deputy governor countered allegations that the state had denied the Fulani vital amenities, saying Benue State had built nomadic schools, clinics and provide boreholes for the herdsmen.

Chief Lawani said further that the Federal Government has not done enough to tackle the situation because it may

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not have realized the enormity of the situation. However, he said the state was expecting top official of the Army and the Nigeria Police Force to visit the state and provide adequate security.

He said also that the motion in the House of Assembly that beef-eating should be banned in Benue State would not hold waters, arguing that, "You cannot ban the eating of beef as a means to resolve the crisis. I don't think that is the solution."

He called on the people to stop taking the law into their hands, saying that: "Government has consistently advised our people to shun rumour mongering and not to panic unnecessarily. People should also desist from any act of mob action or lynching. At times like this, it requires us as leaders to talk to our people. Many of them behave without adequate information and it is for us to give them this information. Some of them base their actions on fear from what they see on the pages of newspaper which are happening in far away Borno, Yobe and before now Kano, so they fear that these things they hear and see in the media have been brought closer to them."

Meanwhile, gunmen yesterday killed 19 people and abducted 15 others in different villages of Agatu local government area in Benue state.

Among those killed or taken away are women and children in the latest series of attacks by the gunmen who razed down many houses in the area.

The council chairman, Stephen Dutse said the attackers invaded, Olegaje, Ogumogbo, Ejuma and Ogbagaji, headquarter of the local government.

According to him, the incident happened simultaneously at 10pm on Friday night when most of the villagers had retired to bed.

Corroborating the chairman, the lawmaker representing the area at the State House of Assembly, Sule Audu lamented the absence of security operatives during the attacks in the affected communities.

He appealed to the security agencies in the state to deploy their personnel to the affected villages and surrounding communities in order to prevent further attacks on his people.

In the same vein, Commissioner for Works, John Ngbede, who hails from the LGA, decried the pathetic killing of children who were drown in the river by the gunmen suspected to be hired mercenaries of cattle breeders.

Ngbede was particularly worried that the police is insensitive to the plight of the people as no single presence of the security men was noticed in the area.

Contacted, spokesman of Police in the state, SP Daniel Ezeala said the command was yet to receive brief on the latest incident. He added that policemen were in Ogbagaji, the LGA headquarter.