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Cultists, kidnappers terrorise Rivers' communities

By Victor Edozie, Port Harcourt | Publish Date: Feb 12 2016 11:38PM | Updated Date: Feb 12 2016 11:38PM

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Rivers State Gov. Nyesom Wike

Members of cult groups and kidnapping rings break the law at will in communities in Rivers State, killing many people, seizing others for ransom, and raping women with reckless abandon, Daily Trust reports.

Communities in Rivers State are now living in fear, being at the mercy of cultists and kidnappers who have made life a trembling experience

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for residents. In various communities in the oil-rich state such as Ahoada, Omoku, Egi, Egbeda, Ubima, Ukwunzi, Ula-upata, Obrikom, and Aga among others, men take refuge in the bush at night, youths flee to neighbouring communities while women no longer go to farm for fear of being raped by the dreaded cultists.

Until a recent intervention in Egi in Ogba/Egbema/ Ndoni local government area by the military, the slippery oil-rich community was deserted, the residents left in droves to Port Harcourt and neighbouring communities in Imo State where they are on self-imposed exile.

The once peaceful Egi community recently drew media attention when cult groups started terrorising residents. Two rival gangs, the Ice Landers and Demgba and Demwell were in a battle of supremacy. The two groups, according to a resident of the area who pleaded anonymity because of the tensed security situation there, were only after their rival cult gangs and did not pose any harm to residents. "But their activities became deadly when they were hijacked by politicians who engaged them in all kinds of criminal activities to achieve their selfish aims," the resident said.

The two major political parties in the area, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) hijacked and armed the cult groups with dangerous weapons, according to the highly informed residents who said the intention was to create an atmosphere of fear to enable the politicians determine who controls the electoral space in the area.

"The boys invade the communities and start terrorising everybody. They would come to your house in the night, ransack everywhere and take personal belongings," a resident said, while explaining how the gangs operate.

"Mothers and daughters are raped in the presence of their husbands. They kill people with reckless abandon. Women no longer go to farm for fear of being raped by these criminals," he added.

Prior to the 2015 general elections, Egi and neighbouring communities were deserted because of the activities of the rampaging cult gangs. Scores of people were massacred. The National Human Rights Commission headed by Dr. Chidi Odinkalu, which investigated politically motivated killings in the state put the figure of deaths at over 100.

A story many found very pathetic was that of the murder of Chief Austin Adube, a prominent APC supporter in Obrikom who was killed alongside his two children by yet to be identified gunmen suspected to be cultists.

The entire Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area became a no-



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go-area with different groups setting up parallel governments. They were called in to settle disputes while residents that went for funerals and other ceremonies paid protection fees to them.

The insecurity situation in the area claimed its first casualty when the state house of assembly sacked the chairman of the council, Ephraim Ahianmadu. The former council chairman, an APC member, was accused of incompetence in handling security situation in the area. Governor Nyesom Wike constituted a caretaker committee to spearhead the affairs of the council, but the rival gangs continued in their killing spree. Succour however, came the way of the residents when the military in January entered the communities. The military has since occupied the troubled areas while normalcy has gradually returned.

The arrival of the military in Egi has however, had negative multiplier effects on neighbouring communities of the old Ahoada province. The cultists that were chased out from Egi have found safe haven in neighbouring communities of Ahoada.

Unknown gunmen reportedly killed 26 people in both Ahoada East and West local government areas. Sources told Daily Trust that at about 12.05 am of Wednesday, January 20, cultists numbering over 15 stormed Ula- Upata community in Ahoada East on motorbikes and started shooting sporadically while the residents scampered for safety. By the time the dust settled, 19 people had lost their lives.

Rivers State Police command confirmed the death of eight but locals said no fewer than 19 lives were lost. State police spokesman DSP Ahmad Muhammad said suspected cultists were behind the brutal murders, adding that the timely intervention of security forces saved the community from more deaths by the rampaging cultists.

An witness said he was in his room in the village when he heard gunshots, forcing him to rush into a nearby bush where he monitored all that happened. He said the assailants, after killing 10 in his Ula- Upata village, moved to Ahoada West to kill six other people.

Those that were killed were Mrs. Orluete Okpara Gam, Elechi Okereke, Man Cheta Ebeku, Manson Ekpan, Friday Udebu, Solomon Apia, Chinem Dealer, Isaac Sunday, Abuchi Godday and Agi Ege, who was murdered in nearby Ihubuluko community.

The gunmen also invaded other communities - Ubeta, where one person was killed at Ogordor while another person was killed at Ula- Ubie. At another community - Amunogboko in Ahoada West local government area, Daily Trust gathered that three people, namely Izu Abel, Eric Abel and Chidi Unume were killed while three others - Charity Martins, Mbata Mbadiwe and Iyumama Obu, suffered serious gunshot wounds.

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A resident of the community, who pleaded anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the matter, berated the police for 'ignoring' several distress calls made to them on the day of the incident.

"It is worthy to emphasise that while these operations lasted for over one hour, several distress calls made to the Ahoada Divisional Police and Area Command yielded no result as they practically refused to come even though Ula-Upata is less than one kilometre from the two police commands," the resident said.

"It was while these hoodlums had successfully executed their targets and were on their way to escape that vigilante group, through same distress calls put across to them, barricaded the hoodlums and apprehended one of them who was handed over to the commander of JTF in Ahoada," he added.

He said there was an upsurge in cult-related clashes and kidnappings immediately after the last general elections, and that most of the youths were armed by politicians, adding that the weapons were not withdrawn from them after the polls.

Former deputy speaker of the House of Representatives, Chief Chibudom Nwuche, who is also a political leader of Ahoada, believes the killings have political undertone. "I am very saddened at the dastardly murder of about 17 persons in Ula-upata and Ubeta, including an aged woman by unknown criminals. This is certainly not how to govern a people. This is especially so as it is emerging that these and the other murders numbering over 35 in Ekpeye alone are politically motivated," he said recently.

The paramount ruler of Ekpeye ethnic nationality, Eze Robinson Robinson, is not happy that hoodlums invaded his kingdom. The monarch has therefore called for immediate deployment of the military to check the activities of criminals in the area. The traditional ruler said he felt pained by the recent development in Ahoada, which he said is otherwise the most peaceful place in the whole of Rivers State.

"Our wives are being raped by these miscreants in the presence of their husbands. Our daughters are abused by these filthy criminals. These things are alien to our people. They are strange to the hospitality and caring character of the Ekpeye people. Our area now makes ugly headlines," he lamented.

The traditional ruler said the aim of the cultists was simply to kill the people and reduce the communities to ashes. He also confirmed that more than 40 people have been killed in the area while about 60 kidnap cases were recorded.

He said that at the initial stage of the upsurge of criminality in the area, the people of Ahoada gathered at Ula-Ubie, their traditional home and conducted traditional invocation against criminal elements who

engaged in killings and kidnapping.

"We took further actions in a joint meeting between the two local government areas, the DSS, the JTF, the police and Ekpeye Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs: we decided to constitute a vigilante group and their mandate was to check the activities of criminals in the area," he said.

In spite of these efforts, the criminal elements have continued to unleash terror on residents, prompting the traditional ruler to call on the military to beef up security in the communities.

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