

Killer bike-snatchers on the prowl in Makurdi

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BEMOA office in Makurdi

There was uneasy calm in Makurdi, the Benue State capital, last week Thursday when registered commercial motorcycle riders went wild on major streets in the metropolis to protest the killing of three of their colleagues by unknown gunmen.

The motorcycle riders popularly referred to as 'okada,' blocked major roundabouts and other roads within the metropolis at about 10 am with their bikes bearing green leaves and heavy objects to prevent vehicles from moving.

Needless to say that the motorists had a tough time dealing with the traffic gridlock, except for the quick intervention of security agents who waded into the chaos to calm the protesters and remove the blockade.

Some of the protesters told our correspondent that a gang of criminals had invaded the state capital in recent time, killing their members and carting away their motorcycles, especially at night. Bikes are the most popular means of public transportation in the capital of the nation's 'food basket.'

"We have lost three of our members in a similar manner within one week. The third victim was killed in the early hours of Thursday at Kwararafa Quarters in Makurdi. We are angry and protesting because the police have not done anything about it," narrated one commercial bike operator, Samson Timothy.

Another 'okada' rider, Isaiah Ejembi, said that he did not know what happened but had to join the protest when it became evident that his colleagues had taken over the streets for a cause that must have bothered them.

Chairman of the Makurdi branch of Benue State Motorcycle Riders Association (BEMOA), Austin Akaa, explained that his members reported the matter to him at about 9 am same

Thursday last week, alleging that some criminals had again killed one of their colleagues. "I then got in touch with the DPO in charge of A Division and he told me that at about 2 am that fateful Thursday, he got a call that somebody was killed around Kwararafa Quarters," Akaa said. "However, documents found on the dead okada rider did not indicate that he was a member of our association."

He however, admitted that the killing brings to three the number of motorcycle riders who had been hacked to death in the same manner within one week.

The chairman gave the name of one of the three deceased who he said was a registered member of the association as, Yusuf Usman, aged 21; killed on March 19 along Iyorkya Ako Street in High Level area of Makurdi metropolis at about 1 am.

Akaa lamented that the snatching of motorcycles and killing of their operators had become rampant recently and that findings showed that the phenomenon usually took place between 1 am and 2 am.

He said the union had consistently warned operators from doing businesses at such odd hours. This trend, in no small measure, has put fear into 'okada' operators with many now closing early.

Though commercial bike theft had been commonly reported in the past by local operators and those in the urban centres around the state, the latest trend of killings and taking away their motorcycles has added a new dimension to the crime.

Even though only one of the three slain by the killer bike-snatchers was said to be a registered commercial motorcyclist, members of the association are seriously worried about the danger posed by the rising criminality.

A registered biker, Augustine Onoja, who operates at the State Secretariat zone in Makurdi, said the snatching of bikes and killing of his colleagues had become rampant since March this year, adding that some of the cases were not known to the general public. "Because of these killings, I have adjusted my time of operation from the usual 6 am to 10 pm to 8 am to 4 pm," Onoja said, even as he blamed some of his colleagues who begin their work only as from 10 pm daily to such odd hours when men of the underworld are busy committing atrocities.

He stressed that those engaged in the habit were greedy because they charge passengers exorbitantly at night.

His views were collaborated by Jato Terna, another registered member who plies at the Yaman Park area in Makurdi but has now adjusted his closing time from the 10 pm to 6 pm to avoid falling victim to the criminals.

Meanwhile, the BEMOA chairman has urged the state government to revert to the policy of the ex-governor Gabriel Suswam administration which allowed commercial motorcyclists to ply their trade only between 6 am and 8 pm.

Akaa appealed to the government and the state assembly to accede to their abandoned bill after it underwent a second reading in the previous house, arguing that a law was needed to regulate commercial bike operators in the state.

While he called on the government to ascertain genuine members of the association after the ongoing biometric exercise, provide them with reflective jackets with identification numbers and to review their operational timeframe to start from 6 am to 8 am.

Akaa equally called on the law enforcement agencies in the state to intensify their intelligence gathering so that the culprits could be arrested and made to face the full wrath of the law.

Similarly, the pioneer president of BEMOA who is now a traditional ruler, Chief Ayua Innocent Lyemen, expressed sadness over the increase in bike snatching and killing of the

operators, describing it as “disappointing.”

“I felt terribly sad about the development. These operators suffer to buy their bikes, they put in so much hard work to convey their passengers from one point to another on a daily basis just to make ends meet, and then some criminals would kill them at the end of the day and take away the bikes. It is indeed disappointing,” Lyemen remarked.

The traditional ruler, who is still an advisory member of the association, urged members to be extra-vigilant and be wary of suspicious passengers who offer to pay a lot of money for a ride as it could turn out to be a trap meant to lure them to places where their bikes would be snatched.

Spokesman of the Benue State police command, ASP Moses Yamu, confirmed the killings, noting however, that the command was doing its best to ensure safety of lives and property in the state just as he warned members of any group against taking laws into their hands.

At the moment, Akaa is optimistic that the crime rate would be reduced to the barest when the biometric exercise would have been concluded and members given special aprons alongside other security items for their protection as well as passengers’ safety.