

# Inside Kogi's battle with kidnappers, armed robbers

By Itodo Daniel Sule, Lokoja | Publish Date: Jul 15 2017 2:00AM

facebook

twitter

Google+

LinkedIn

👍 (0 Likes)



Over the past four years, kidnappers, armed robbers and terrorist elements operating mostly within the Central Senatorial District of Kogi State had kept residents, motorists and commuters travelling through the area in perpetual fear.

On several occasions, these elements had abducted high profile personalities including expatriates from their homes and highways and taken them to their dens in thick forests or houses of their members and collected millions of naira in ransoms before releasing them if they are lucky.

At some points, many expatriates fled the state because of incessant kidnapping while others willing to work or invest there could not do so for fear of being kidnapped.

In the same vein, travelers passing through the state equally sought alternative routes to follow for fear of being kidnapped.

Series of kidnappings, armed robberies and killings had been perpetrated by these elements that usually operate around Okene town, Lokoja-Okene, Okene-Kabba, Okene-Adogo-Ajaokuta, Adavi/Ogaminana, Itakpe/Eika and Ajaokuta/ Lokoja axis of the state.

There were also some cases of kidnapping within the East and West Senatorial districts of the state.

## Timeline of kidnappings

Sometime in February 2015, Mrs. Phylis Sortor, a 75-year-old American missionary, was in her office at her school at Emiworo community in Ajaokuta Local Government Area of the state when gunmen scaled the seven-meter fence of the school and kidnapped her at gunpoint.

The kidnappers demanded N150 million ransoms but N5 million was eventually paid to secure her release after several weeks.

The dust raised by the kidnap of Mrs. Sortor had hardly settled when two Chinese nationals working in a construction company in Lokoja were kidnapped at Zango-Daji community in Adavi Local Government Area in March 2015.

Within the same period, three other Chinese nationals in another construction company in the state were kidnapped at Crusher area of Lokoja Local Government Area. Two police officers were killed in the process.

Two days after that incident, two other Chinese nationals working in Dangote Cement Company were kidnapped at Obajana community in Kabba Local Government Area.

On April 27, another Chinese national, Yang Zhengming, working in the West African Ceramic Company in Ajaokuta, was also kidnapped.

In May 2015, a High Court judge of Kogi State, Justice Samuel Obayomi and the Commissioner for Land and Urban Development, Stephen Mayaki, were kidnapped at gunpoint at different locations.

The judge was on his way to the office when the gunmen blocked his vehicle, killed his orderly and took him to an unknown destination while the commissioner was abducted in a farm where he had gone to settle a land dispute.

Two traditional rulers in Ajaokuta Local Government Area -the Ehtu Alaite, Aminu Akuh and paramount ruler of Eganyi, Musa Isah Achuja were among those kidnapped between May and December 2016.

A new tide under a new administration

The gale of kidnappings in the state continued unabated till 2016 when the present administration came into power.

Available statistics showed that a total of 167 cases of kidnapping were recorded in the state between January 2015 and June 2016, out of which 86 occurred within Kogi Central District while 42 and 39 cases were recorded in West and East districts respectively.

Before Alhaji Yahaya Bello became the governor of Kogi State, his aged mother, Hajiya Hauwawu Bello, had a horrible experience in the hands of the kidnappers who abducted her in May 2014. She was held in captivity for about 32 days.

Perhaps, the memory of this ugly incident and the ordeals suffered by many other victims might have necessitated the zeal and commitment with which Governor Yahaya Bello has been tackling the issue of kidnapping and general insecurity in the state upon assumption of duty on January 27, 2016.

Crack down on insecurity

Given the high rate of kidnapping and insecurity in the state, the governor came up with a number of policies and security strategies to curb the menace.

The Kogi State Security Adviser, Retired Navy Commander Jerry Omodara, spoke on some of the security strategies that had enabled government turn the tide.

Launch of "Operation Total Freedom"

Omodara said the formation of a Joint Task Force codenamed “Operation Total Freedom”, involving the Nigerian Army, Navy, Police, DSS and Civil Defence Corps has been yielding positive results.

“In order for them to effectively perform their job and tackle security in the state, a total of 150 vehicles have so far been distributed to security agencies. The outfit currently has over 545 troops that are deployed all over the state for 24- hour patrols. It has recorded high successes,” he said.

He said relevant logistics and up-to-date communication gadgets were installed at the headquarters of the operations for effective performance.

#### Building of Forward Operational Base for Nigerian Army

The Forward Operational Base (FOB) recently inaugurated and handed over to the Nigerian Army by the by the Governor Yahaya Bello-led administration was also part of measures aimed at checking kidnapping.

Governor Bello said the operational base project which gulped N204.6m was meant to support the military in actualising his administration’s policy objective of zero tolerance for kidnapping, armed robbery, communal clashes and other acts of violence.

He said the state was ‘helplessly in the grip’ of criminal elements when he assumed office over a year ago, adding that the launch of “Operation Total Freedom” had helped in tackling the rate of insecurity.

Bello said he would continue to support and collaborate with the military and other security agencies for more improvement in the security situation.

#### Demolition of kidnappers’ houses and property

One other strategies against kidnapping was destroying houses belonging to kidnappers and other premises used for such crimes.

“One thing that the government did again was to look at those criminals that have arms, if we recover arms from your house, if we discover that you keep kidnappers in your house and we establish those facts, there is a policy now in place that such houses must be demolished. This has been working very well,” Omodara said.

He said 18 houses belonging to kidnappers have been pulled down in the Central and East Senatorial District since the exercise began.

#### Whistle blowing policy on crimes

Omodara said the government introduced a whistle blowing policy for people to call and give information on places where arms/ammunitions are kept as well as planned crimes.

“The sum of N500, 000 is given to providers of information and their identity is well protected. This has received commendation and is fruitful to recovery of arms. So far, over 76 text messages and 102 calls have been received from citizens giving information. Some of these messages have led to the recovery and arrest of criminals,” he said.

#### Vigilante service/community policing approach

Omadara said government recognizes the importance of community policing hence inaugurated the Kogi Vigilante Service under which 3,000 vigilantes were recruited,

trained and posted across the 21 LGAs to assist in intelligence gathering.

#### Repair of roads/clearing of bushes

He said the state observed that criminals operate easily because of bad roads as a result of pot holes and therefore carried out repair of roads, including federal roads. Bushes along major roads were equally cleared to create a clear sight of about 10 metres away, adding that the measure had also helped in reducing crime.

#### Arrests/arms recoveries

Several arrests have been made and large cache of arms/ammunitions recovered following the adoption of the aforementioned security strategies.

A total of 88 arms comprising locally made pistols, AK-47 rifles, G3 rifles, double barrel guns and SMGs, among others.

Ammunitions so far recovered include 757 rounds of various categories.

Efforts of security agencies have led to an increase in the number of expatriates living and working in the state from the hitherto 73 to 180 at present.

Omadara urged members of the public to continue to collaborate with the government in tackling insecurity by giving relevant information that can help prevent crime.