



IN-DEPTH

FEATURES

From Bassey Willie, Yenagoa

Gangs of Yenagoa

How Bayelsa cult wars are costing lives

In Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital, armed cult groups have been running wild, killing several people and injuring others. People going about their legitimate businesses are often caught up in these attacks and now the people of the capital are fighting back.



■ Members of Bayelsa Volunteer Service exploring some hideouts.

people at a local drinking spot. The cultists, who were reportedly armed with assault rifles, shot sporadically at people on the street. Many residents and passers-by were critically injured.

The arrival of operatives of the State Police Command and some officials of the Bayelsa State Vigilante Service and State Volunteer led to a hot chase of the gunmen. They, however, escaped through the Edepie/Tombia areas of Yenagoa.

In a separate incident recently, suspected cult members, armed with guns, raided a church in Azikoro village in Yenagoa and killed four worshippers. They also torched a nearby house.

Within 24 hours, the police said they had arrested the ringleader of that group. But the police said the arrest would not have been possible without the help of a local vigilante group.

This year, reports of cult-related violence including

deaths have been on the increase and residents of the state capital and its suburbs have been forming vigilantes to provide security for themselves and their loved ones.

So rampant and unruly have the cults become that they are now being used by others to perpetrate crimes on their behalf.

Disturbed by this scenario, officials of the Bayelsa State Vigilante, Bayelsa Volunteer Service and all state-owned security outfits launched a mass raid on black spots in some parts of Yenagoa, and

apprehended 10 persons over alleged involvement in cultism, drug abuse and other related offences.

According to them, they have identified these black spots in the state and will continue to raid them until they curb cultism.

Both the chairmen of Bayelsa Vigilante and that of Bayelsa Volunteers, Mr Doubiye Alagba and Lucky Asanakpo, described the raid as part of the outfits plan to ensure that Bayelsa is safe from criminals, drug peddlers and cult-related activities, stating that the

state government has given different youth groups opportunities to embrace peace and turn a new leaf.

"Anyone or cult-related group that decides not to embrace peace will be treated accordingly.

"We urge residents of the state not to panic. Their safety is guaranteed, but they have to be vigilant and security conscious. Let us observe the happenings in our environment and report to the security agencies promptly.

"Our combined teams have raided the different areas within the Okutukutu and Tombia axis of Yenagoa, the state capital, and over 11 suspected cultists were apprehended," they said.

The raids extended to the Tombia axis, where a shop was raided and over 10 persons made up of seven teenage girls and 3 boys were apprehended for being in possession of illicit drugs, marijuana and charms.

At the Bozi Water axis of Tombia, an uncompleted building, which harboured suspected criminals was raided, and a mattress, a bullet, hard drugs and clothes suspected to belong to the cultists were recovered.

Mr Doubiye, however, lamented the high rate of drug abuse the youths are indulging in, saying the Bayelsa State Vigilante will partner with the Nigeria Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) to arrest pharmacy owners and stores selling these drugs to criminals without proper prescriptions.

Efforts by the vigilante groups in various communities of the state seem to have reduced the violent attacks and clashes by cult groups who before now, were having a field day in the state.

Already, a body known as Bayelsa Neighborhood Association has sprung up to coordinate the activities of all the vigilante groups in different communities in the state and to ensure that they join the existing security agencies such as the Nigeria Police to fight the menace of cultism and ensure that the society is safe.

Men of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) have also contributed immensely for the peace and security of the riverine state, which needs the experience of people who understand the terrain for proper surveillance.

While all these efforts are going on to bring an end to the cults in Bayelsa, relatives of the victims are left to bury their dead.

At about 3 pm on July 22, Chief Abraham Bayefa, a local businessman, was walking around his neighbourhood at Aritalin junction area of Ovom community in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, when he saw robbery in progress.

He tried to intervene but was shot at point-blank range and died on the spot. The killers fled but people, generally, knew who they were. Timipa Bayefa, the victim's niece, said her uncle was shot by two cult members.

One of the killers was said to be Tari Logos, a 21-year-old member of a cult, whom the police arrested in connection with the murder. The spokesperson of the state Police Command, SP Asinim Butswat said the suspect is being questioned and the hunt for his collaborators is on.

Chief Bayefa is not the only victim of such crimes that are becoming increasingly frequent in Bayelsa as the menace of cult members continue to spread. Most of these cult members are young people, like Tari Logos.

And the list of their crimes is long. In May, during a cult war, suspected cultists attacked a local drinking spot along the Custom Road area of Yenagoa and killed three persons and injured five others.

One of the casualties that day was 50 years old Mr Niceman Agonebi, popularly known as "Honourable" who is an in-law to the former deputy governor of the State, Hon. Peremobowe Ebibi.

Another victim was a restaurant owner popularly called Madam Odey, who had her jaw ripped by a stray bullet from the rampaging cultists. Two others received fatal gunshot wounds.

The gunmen arrived Custom Road in a commercial tricycle popularly known as Keke NAPEP at about 8 pm and opened fire on their target who was in the midst of



■ Suspected cultists arrested with hard drugs and other dangerous items in a hideouts.



■ Some of the items recovered during a raid by the vigilante service