

# After recovery of 11 soldiers' bodies: Army denies killing 70, locals want probe

- Villagers allege invasion by troops, mass destruction
- Return stolen military weapons – Benue gov
- Military can't take laws into their hands – CSOs

Following the discovery of remains of 11 soldiers allegedly killed by locals, there is tension and anguish amongst residents of Konshisha community in Benue State who also alleged that troops have invaded the area and surrounding villages, killed over 70 people and destroyed residential and public buildings, *Daily Trust* Saturday reports.



■ A destroyed house in the locality

Itodo Daniel Sule, Abbas Jimoh, Idowu Isamotu (Abuja) & Hope Abah Emmanuel (Makurdi)

**T**he people of Mbator in Shangev-Tiev of Konshisha Local Government Area of Benue State, yesterday, alleged that at least 70 persons were killed during an invasion by soldiers while 100 others were missing.

It was alleged that the military invasion followed the recent killing of 11 soldiers who were deployed to the area on a peacekeeping operation following renewed hostilities between Bonta village of Mbator in Shangev-Tiev of Konshisha LGA and Okpute-Ainu in Oju LGA of the state.

However, the Nigerian Army, yesterday, described as "laughable", the claim by the residents that at least 70 innocent persons were killed during an invasion by soldiers.

*Daily Trust* Saturday reports that the latest alleged massacre by the Nigerian Army was coming 20 years after a similar incident at Zaki Biam in the state when over 100 civilians were killed and their houses destroyed.

The killing of civilians at Zaki Biam and environs in October 2001 was said to have been carried out by the military in revenge for the abduction and killing of 19 soldiers by a Tiv militia group in the area.

#### The latest event

Our correspondent reports that Bonta village and Okpute-Ainu have been enmeshed in a decades-long tussle which usually

prompted the deployment of security operatives to quell the crisis.

Renewed hostility, however, broke between the communities five days ago and this led to the deployment of soldiers.

Addressing a press conference in Makurdi, the Benue State capital yesterday morning, a group known as Shangev-Tiev Assembly (STA), stated that at least, 15 villages and other surrounding communities were destroyed by the military since the aerial and ground raid against the villagers began three days ago.

Elder Tyoh Jude, who spoke on behalf of STA said: "The army has so far razed and demolished farms, schools, hospitals and residences of Bonta, Tse-Jembe, Tse-Anyom, Gbinde, Mbaakpur, Aku, Agidi, Gungul, Adoka, Guleya, Awajir, Shiliki, Achoho and Ullam in Gwer Local Government Area, and are planning to do same to other neighbouring towns in Konshisha LGA.

"Unarmed people are being killed intentionally in large numbers by armed personnel of the Nigerian Army. Presently, over 70 persons are reported dead and more than 100 people are missing, mostly women, children and the elderly and hundreds of thousands displaced with its attendant humanitarian consequences," Elder Jude claimed.

He called on the federal government to prevail on the military to stop the ongoing killings with immediate effect while urging the Benue State government to

ensure that the land under dispute is amicably demarcated.

When contacted, the Force Commander of Operation Whirl Stroke (OPWS) directed our correspondent to the media unit of the Defence Headquarters in Abuja.

However, an army source who pleaded anonymity, told our correspondent that the soldiers who were killed belonged to the 72 Battalion Special Forces of the Nigerian Army and that apart from the 12 militia neutralised on Wednesday with some military rifles recovered from them, nobody else was killed.

The source said those claiming that 70 persons were killed by soldiers should prove it by showing the corpses of the victims or their graves.

#### Claim laughable – Army

Reacting to the claim, the Nigerian Army yesterday described it as "laughable".

In a telephone interview with one of our correspondents, the spokesman of the Nigerian Army, Brig-Gen Mohammed Yerima, described the claim as incomprehensible.

He said the residents were the ones killing troops of the Nigerian Army while carting away their rifles, adding that they would not fold their arms and watch hence the army's intense search for the perpetrators of the dastardly act.

"How can you comprehend this claim? If they kill 70 people the whole of Nigeria will not know? That's not true. We have not killed anybody. We are only searching

for those who killed 11 of our troops. Maybe they don't like the way we're searching, but that's their problem. We want to fish out those perpetrators," Yerima said.

When asked if gunmen have not killed more troops, the army spokesman said, "No, they have not killed more than 11. What we want to do now is fish out those people and bring them to justice. Arrest them and prosecute them, so that the whole world will see the consequences of such actions. We are in the place to maintain peace; we are not there to kill anybody."

**Ortom calls for restraint, warns against unverified statements**

Governor Samuel Ortom has dismissed claims by Shangev-Tiev Assembly that over 70 persons were killed in Konshisha LGA.

Ortom also said three out of the weapons seized from the military by armed militia in Konshisha have been recovered.

The governor made the remark while addressing journalists at the government house in Makurdi yesterday over the development in Konshisha area.

He explained that eight persons, including two bandits who had exchanged fire with the soldiers, were caught and killed while a cripple whose house collapsed on him and a middle-aged woman who was running fell and died.

"That is the report I got from the chairman. So, I'm taken aback to hear that an unknown group held a press conference and said 70 people were killed.

"I wish to call on the people to restrain themselves from making unguarded and unverified statements. This will not help. You will only succeed in aggravating the matter. You will only succeed in pouring petrol on an existing fire and you know the implication.

**...Return military weapons without delay**

Governor Ortom also yesterday directed leaders of Konshisha community to prevail on those who took away military weapons to return them without further delay.

Ortom, in a statement he endorsed, made available to newsmen in Makurdi through his spokesman, Terver Akase, however, called on the military as well as other parties in the ongoing crisis in the area to restrain themselves.

"Following the crisis between communities in Konshisha and Oju Local Government Areas resulting in the current military operation in some communities, I, on behalf of Benue State government, call for restraint on all sides including the military.

"I have already directed leaders of the affected areas to ensure that the weapons the bandits took away from the military personnel deployed to bring peace between the warring communities are returned without delay.

"I further urge members of those communities to expose perpetrators of the unprovoked attacks on the military as such

an act is condemnable and also capable of jeopardizing the efforts the government has made to guarantee the return of peace to the area.

"I however, urge the military to avoid civilian casualties and protect law-abiding people while efforts are on to recover their missing weapons," the governor said.

#### Residents desert homes

Many villagers have deserted their abodes while many buildings were razed by soldiers allegedly in reprisal over the ambush and subsequent killing of their colleagues.

Some locals also claimed that some people were taken away even as they expressed fear that there was nothing to suggest that the military activity would end soon.

One of the people told our correspondent by telephone that many houses have been destroyed in the past three days that the military bombarded Bonta and surrounding communities using aerial and ground soldiers.

"A lot of houses were destroyed. The villagers have fled their abodes and even people of the neighbouring communities are running away.

"As we speak, the palace of Chief Lazarus Unaha Koko is in ruins. He is a popular monarch in the area. My family and I have already fled the village," a witness who declined to have his name in print said.

**'11 missing soldiers found dead in Benue community'**

Earlier on Friday, the army said 10 soldiers and one military police officer were found dead in Konshisha LGA.

The development, it was gathered, has generated tension in the community following the deployment of troops and personnel of Operation Whirl Stroke to fish out the perpetrators.

Nigerian Army spokesman, Brig-Gen. Mohammed Yerima, confirmed the killings of the soldiers by yet-to-be-identified individuals in a statement made available to journalists Thursday night.

Yerima explained that the bodies of the slain soldiers were immediately evacuated, adding that efforts are ongoing to track those who perpetrated the crime in order to bring them to justice.

He said, "Nigerian Army troops operating in Benue State came under attack while on routine operational task.

"The troops comprising one officer and 10 soldiers were initially declared missing, which prompted the deployment of a joint search and rescue team comprising NA troops and personnel of Operation Whirl Stroke.

"The search and rescue team, unfortunately, found all the missing troops dead in Konshisha LGA of Benue State.

"While the bodies of the slain troops were evacuated immediately, efforts are ongoing to track down the perpetrators of this heinous crime with a view to bringing them to justice."

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