

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Agony as communal clashes persist in Benue communities

From Hope Abah Emmanuel,  
Makurdi

For many years, the people of Agatu in Benue State have continued to suffer misfortune of crises, which have claimed many lives and impacted negatively on the socio-economic life of inhabitants.

The area had not only been bedeviled by herders-farmers crisis but incessant communal clashes, which seem to have defied solutions.

Daily Trust on Sunday reports that the latest of the crises was the killing of 11 people in two separate incidents in Agatu Local Government Area, barely one week after gunmen attacked and killed 27 people in Odugbeho community on June 7, 2021.

The fresh killings had occurred in Odugbeho and two other rural villages of Aila and Adagbo. While two people were said to have been killed in Odugbeho, the remaining nine persons were killed in Aila and Adagbo villages on Sunday night.

The chairman of Agatu Local Government, Adoyi Sule, told our correspondent on telephone that the attack on Odugbeho community, which led to the death of two persons, was carried out by suspected armed herders, who burnt 21 houses.

He, however, disclosed that the other nine deaths were recorded as a result of communal crisis between Aila and Adagbo communities, adding that eight people who were wounded were being treated in a hospital.

A victim of the crisis, 68-year-old Joseph Oyaju from Adagbo community, who lost his son to the latest crisis on a Sunday night, said it had been difficult to cope with the reality of the death of his child.

He narrated that his late son, Imanche Joseph, 27, was at his barbing salon shop that fateful day when suddenly, the attackers invaded the village about 7:45pm and shot him dead.

"My son was barbing a customer's hair when his assailants shot him dead in his shop. Other people were also killed in our village that night. It has been difficult for me to cope since we buried him.

"The atmosphere appears calm now, but there is panic among residents. We cannot predict what would happen tomorrow or next, so we appeal to security operatives to be stationed in Adagbo to forestall further attacks," the bereaved father said.

A youth leader from Adagbo, Simon Seidu, told our correspondent that it was the first time in the history of Idoma



Some of the destroyed property in Agatu warring communities

land that a village would come under attack for providing shelter for displaced people from other communities.

He said his community never had any issue with neighbouring communities and that was why the attack of July 14, 2021 was a surprise to them as it happened unexpectedly.

Seidu recalled that the last time Abugbe and Agbaduma people had crisis, some residents relocated to Adagbo for safety, stressing that people from Abugbe were not happy that his community allowed displaced persons to take refuge.

"Four communities — Abugbe,

Egba, Akwu and Odugbeho — ganged up and attacked our people. Odugbeho had alleged that our people colluded with armed herders to carry out the killing of the people in their village. We don't even have boundaries with Odugbeho because they are far from us," Seidu narrated.

He said the people of Adagbo had lived peacefully with their neighbours for quite a long time.

The youth leader is worried that at the moment, no one in his area can go to farms for fear of being killed, especially as there is no security presence to protect them.

"The army came that day the

attack happened. They saw the dead bodies and took away the injured to the hospital. At the moment, the general atmosphere is still tense because the people are afraid," Seidu said.

Some other people from the crisis-ridden communities, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the Agatu communal clashes had remained complex as there are traditional, political and external forces fueling the crises.

A youth leader of Aila, Aboje Joseph, however, explained that his community, which falls within the nine clans to include Agbaduma, had in the past three years, suffered from a traditional rulership dispute, adding that his people were killed severally without retaliation.

He said the latest crisis was triggered by a farmland after agreement had been reached during several peace meetings for the communities to stick to the portions approved for them by local authorities.

He further explained that the land in dispute was a FADAMA

area, alleging that the Abugbe/Egba people continued to deprive them, who are of the large clan, from farming.

Joseph alleged that the latest trouble emanated from Abugbe people who left Aila when crisis broke out to take refuge elsewhere, adding that they are in the habit of invading their community occasionally to kill people.

The youth leader decried the negative impact of the crisis on the economy of the once peaceful communities of Agatu, as he sued for peace.

"I am in Aila as we speak now, but homes are deserted, leaving only few of us. I can tell you that there are gunshots right now and the situation is not yet balanced. The people are afraid and cannot yet return home.

"As it is, only God will help us for peace to return to our land again," Joseph said.

According to the vice chairman of Agatu, John Ikwalono, the people are feeling bad and

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