

Victims Of Otukpo Bank Robbery Recount Ordeal

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■ Mr Ogoh survived the ordeal

■ Aftermath of the robbery attack at one of the banks

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On October 20, 2023, Otukpo town in Benue State, popularly referred to as “Red Sand Texas,” was forced to a halt by men of the underworld who unleashed terror on citizens.

The day began well for residents, who went about their lawful businesses until 3:30pm when the unexpected, which has now thrown many families into mourning, happened.

It was a coordinated dastardly robbery in banks and police formation that led to loss of lives.

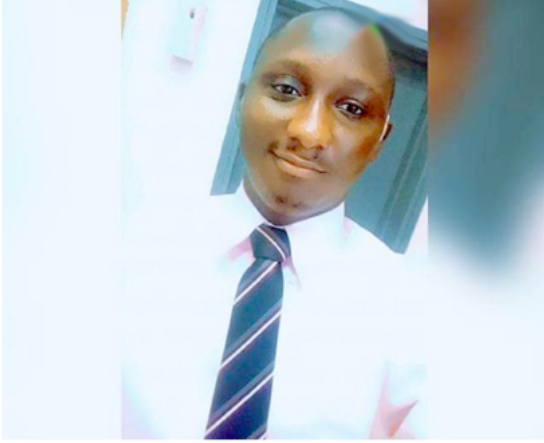
A vice principal in one secondary school in Otukpo, Mr Ogoh, who survived the attack, said he was at the United Bank for Africa (UBA) doing a transaction when the robbers invaded the financial institution. He said one of the robbers gave him his gun and ordered him to start shooting, but he replied that he did not know how to shoot.

Infuriated by Ogoh's response, the robbers collected the gun from him and began shooting sporadically inside the banking hall.

Sadly, Abdullahi Muhammad Saba and Emmanuel Uche Best – staff of the UBA—were killed.

While Best, a new employee, gave up the ghost on the spot, Saba, who was recently transferred from the Minna branch of the bank to Otukpo, was able to garner strength and took photos of himself in a pool of blood with his telephone and sent to his uncle, indicating that his end had come. He was said to have died while receiving treatment at the hospital.

Ogoh and four others sustained varied degrees of injury as they scuttled to safety.



■ Saba, UBA staff killed



■ Emmanuella Ankyov, one of the female police officer killed in the attack



■ Best, the newly employed UBA staff who completed NYSC in June 2023

Witnesses said that at least eight people were killed during the attack on five banks simultaneously.

Our correspondent earlier gathered that four police personnel—three females and the Otukpo Divisional Police Officer (DPO), as well as four other civilians who were bank workers and customers, were among those killed.

Hospital sources said that those admitted, including Ogoh, who sustained injury on his foot, had been treated and discharged at the time of this report.

But one week after the deadly incident, normalcy appeared to have returned to the vicinity of the incident while the affected families of victims and banks are still counting their losses.

Residents believe that it was the deadliest crime ever witnessed in the ancient Idoma kingdom. Ruins of the affected banks have now become a spectacle for passersby.

Amanyi Ankeli, an Otukpo resident, said that apart from Stanbic IBTC, which attempted to tidy up the rubbles of their building, the other banks had not come close to the scene of incident, one week after.

Although normalcy may have returned to Otukpo, people still tread cautiously around the scene of the incident, according to residents.

Another resident, George Okopi, also said calmness had returned to the environment.

“The atmosphere is very calm. People are going about their normal businesses. The banks are located near the Otukpo main market, so the environment is always busy.

“People are going about their businesses in the market and around the banks. It is only the bank premises that have remained quiet since the incident,” Okopi said.

Similarly, an activist, Julie Ooja, who earlier visited injured victims at the teaching hospital in Otukpo, recounted the horrific incident to our correspondent.

Ooja said, “From the details and stories we got, it was a spontaneous attack. They walked into the places they needed to attack. In my view, somebody just gave them a cracker and told them to move. They attacked UBA, Stanbic, First Bank and Zenith at the same time. Improvised explosive devices (IED) were detonated at the same time.

“Somebody said up to eight of the robbers operated in First Bank—five outside and three inside.

“They walked in from various angles of the town. Ten people were killed—three female police officers, the DPO, one Uloko, George, Desmond and another guy.

“There were about four injured victims when I visited the hospital. One was in a very bad state and said to have been taken to a hospital in Makurdi. One policeman and one vigilante was brought there too.”

A witness simply identified as Omeysi told our correspondent that the armed gang first attacked the Otukpo police station located opposite the banks and disarmed all the operatives on duty before moving to the financial institutions, shooting indiscriminately.

The witness said Stanbic IBTC, UBA, Zenith and First Bank were mostly affected while Access Bank suffered less.

Residents also said the robbers drove in two Hilux vehicles and one smaller car to carry out the attack, which lasted over an hour.

They said the robbers stormed the banks at 3:30pm and operated unchallenged till 4:50pm.

Omeyi said everybody within the area scuttled for safety as gunshots rented the air.

“It was the first time we experienced such level of wicked act in Otukpo,” Omeyi said.

Expressing shock over the incident, Okopi Elijah said, “No one dared to move in the direction of Otukpo township main road for fear of being caught in the web as the robbers had their day.”

At the end of the raid, which residents described as a movie scene, some people said death toll from the incident rose to 10, while others it was 14.

But the Police confirmed the Otukpo Divisional Police Officer, CSP. John Adikwu and three other operatives killed during the armed robbery raid on the commercial banks.

The police public relations officer (PPRO) in the state, SP Catherine Anene, in a statement confirmed that five banks were robbed simultaneously.

Anene added that in a hot pursuit of the outlaws, security operatives gunned down two of them while still on the trail of others, who abandoned their vehicle and ran into the bush along the Otukpo-Taraku axis.

“On October 20, 2023 at 1615hrs, armed robbers invaded Access, First, Zenith, UBA and Stanbic in Otukpo simultaneously.

“The Otukpo Divisional Police Officer, CSP John Adikwu and other police teams in the area engaged them in a gun dwell but were unable to prevent the attack on the banks.

“More police teams, in collaboration with other security agents, have been deployed to Otukpo to assist in stabilising the area and prevent these robbers from escaping.

“The robbers, who were intercepted along the Otukpo-Taraku road, engaged officers in a gun duel. Two of the robbers died in the process. Other gang members abandoned their vehicles and escaped into the forest area and are being chased by the police.

“The DPO, who sustained a gunshot injury on his stomach, and three other police officers, have been confirmed dead at the hospital. Other persons who sustained injuries in the bank have been moved to the hospital for treatment,” Anene noted.

She stated that investigation into the matter had commenced, but was, however, silent on the number of civilians killed during the incident.

Meanwhile, one of the military personnel who engaged the armed robbers on their escape route, said security operatives could not do much while the robbery operation went on because of the crowd of innocent people at the scene.

“We waited for them on their escape route and engaged them. They had to abandon their vehicles towards Taraku town. We pursued them into the bush and fell two of them and apprehended one,” the military personnel said.

When contacted for an update about arrests made so far, the police public relations officer said, “Nobody gave me any number of arrests made.”

Anene also confirmed that normalcy had returned to the affected area.

She said, “The place is calm now, but I don’t have any other detail. Apart from the two gunned down, I haven’t gotten any other information. You know, armed robbery takes time for investigation.”

In the meantime, following an emergency meeting of the Bankers Committee held at the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in Makurdi on October 23, 2023, all banks in the state have been mandated to operate for business between 8am and 2pm from now until January 31, 2024 when a review of the security situation will be carried out.