



THE GUARDIAN

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Onitsha rages, rioters free 204 prisoners

ONITSHA, the commercial nerve centre of Anambra State has continued to be on a tailspin.

For the second time in four months, some rioters yesterday alleged to be members of the Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MSSOB) attacked the city's prison, freeing 204 inmates. They also attacked the Marine Police Post in the town,

wounding two of the officers on duty.

In the orgy of violence are some suspected members of the National Road Transport Workers Organisation (NARTO) who are staking claims to motor parks and using their alleged membership of MASSOB to instil fear in their opponents.

Police efforts to keep the peace have been largely unsuccessful and they have already received

military support.

It was learnt that the death toll in the current crisis, which started Thursday last week, has risen to 12, in spite of the curfew imposed by the state Governor, Peter Obi.

The resurgence of violence yesterday prompted the governor to order security operatives on

• Governor orders shoot-on-sight

From Gbenga Akinfenwa (Onitsha), Chuks Collins and Uzoma Nzeagwu (Awka).

special operations in the city to shoot-on-sight, any hoodlum that disobeys orders or tries to foment trouble.

The Administrative Block of the prison yard was badly destroyed,

while an officer received machete cuts in the head.

According to an inmate, Bright Chukwujioku, who has returned to the prison, the rioters came around 2.00 a.m. with gun shots and harassed the warders, threatening to shoot indiscriminately if the gate was not

opened for them.

The returnee inmate stressed that the prison officials refused to open the gate and the rioters jumped the fence and attacked the officer in charge of the gate demanding for key to the jail.

Bright said that the refusal of the officer to accede to their demand led to his being severely beaten.

He stressed that the nine

suspected MASSOB members, who came with pistols, knives and other deadly weapons, forced inmates out of the prison yard and marched them inside the bush with only four left. Three inmates returned later in the day.

This was confirmed by the Assistant Comptroller of the Prison, who simply called her name Mrs. Okpoko.

The officer in charge of

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Prosecution

Rioters wreak havoc in Onitsha

Continued from Page 1

the Marine Division, ASP Geoffrey Baraka, said that two of his men, Sergeant Emmanuel Ogenibbo and Constable Paul Godwin, were attacked by the hoodlums and had been hospitalised, battling for survival.

He added that one marine boat was destroyed, three "55" horsepower Yamaha engine and generators were destroyed with four Mark 4 rifles.

The Anambra State chapter of the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), in its reaction, expressed worry over the continued acts of brigandage and subjection of Onitsha and its environs to the rule of the jungle by hoodlums, operating under various violence-prone groups.

"Onitsha and environs had in recent times become the theatre of homicidal activities and other forms of criminality. For a couple of months now, major parts of the state, especially, Onitsha, Ogburn, Obozi, Nkpor, Nnewi and Awka had been under siege as a result of different bloody clashes among militant and other violence-prone groups."

the CLO noted in a press statement.

The group's chairman, Nze Enelika Umeagbasi, recalled that in January 2006, a bloody clash involving suspected MASSOB members and commercial road transport workers erupted in Ogburn Main Market, near Upper Iweka in Onitsha. The bloody clash later spread to the nearby areas in which no fewer than 10 persons were feared dead.

Again, between April 26 and 28, 2006, "similar clashes took place at the Onitsha Main market, between officers and men of the Nigeria Police Force and operatives of the Anambra Vigilance Service, on one hand and some suspected militant elements of MASSOB on the other hand. During the clashes, at least, six persons were reportedly killed.

The bloody clashes later enveloped major parts of Onitsha and environs. He stressed that in the course of the operations, a multimillion Naira Armoured Personnel Carrier and a TATA Lorry were burnt to ashes. Also, torched were four Mitsubishi Buses,

recently donated to the State Police Command by the Government of Anambra State. At least, eight people were reportedly killed in the operations. Three persons were reportedly shot dead on Onitsha-Owerri Road, three in Okpoko and one on Obozi-Ukuru Road.

The operations later got out of hand and degenerated into a gun duel between the suspected MASSOB militant elements and the NARTO Boys especially at Upper Iweka Area.

"This problem is easy and can be solved. All we want is that every group should leave Onitsha and the state. By that, I mean MASSOB, NARTO, AVS, or by whatever name called."

He urged the Federal Government to direct all the violent groups to leave the state and give support to a shoot-at-sight order to compel the violence-prone groups to give the state a respite.

A Deputy Inspector General of Police, Mike Okoro led other top police chiefs in an expanded state security council meeting with governor

Obi yesterday. The meeting lasted for about 47 minutes.

Okoro, after the meeting, told reporters that NARTO was an illegal body and that its operations in the state remained banned until otherwise stated by competent authority.

His words: "If it (NARTO) is proscribed by law, it remains so, and police does not support any illegality and it is our objective to make sure that law and order prevails."

The Police chief also pointed out that it is the duty of the force to ensure that laws of the land are complied with, declaring that "any group that is proscribed remains proscribed until such law is reversed."

Okoro acknowledged the casualty figure and was unhappy that the crisis could send wrong signals to any investor who intends to come into the state and the country.

Chief Frank Anthony Igboke, the Deputy Chairman of Police Affairs Committee of the State Assembly described the events in Onitsha as "unfortunate." He urged the state and the Federal

Government to tackle the problem before it escalates further. Igboke blamed road transport workers for the latest violent eruption. He said: "MASSOB was not involved, but the NARTO members who were contending for control of motor parks in the city/state".

He appealed to the Federal Government to prevail on the Police to withdraw its men attached to NARTO, if the nation is to take them serious on peace moves.

In the meantime, the Police high command led by Okoro and the AIG in charge of zone 9, Umuahia, Mr. Ade Ajakaiye have relocated temporarily to the state, all in effort to maintain peace, law and order.

The Onitsha prison was similarly attacked in the wake of the reprisal sectarian crisis that rocked the town shortly after the bodies of slain Igbo traders who were killed in parts of northern Nigeria arrived January 10, 2006. Then, the prison was set ablaze and some inmates were set free.

The then governor, Dr. Chris Ngige, undertook to renovate the damages.