

# COVER

## Onitsha: Violence, Mayhem As Staple Of Anambra Saga

As the commercial city of Onitsha in Anambra State boils over again, the second time in four months, many say it has become apparently a convenient staging post for the violent manifestation of the lingering Anambra Saga.

FROM CHUKS COLLINS (AWKA) AND  
GBENGA AKINFENWA (ONITSHA)

### GAIN, Onitsha! Four

A months ago, this commercial nerve centre of the Southeast erupted in an orgy of violence that dispatched hundreds (some would say thousands) to the great beyond. A luxury bus carrying the coffins of some Igbo traders killed in sectarian violence in Maiduguri, otherwise known as cartoon riots, had reportedly arrived in Onitsha and horrified, indignant residents spontaneously went on rampage. In the process, northerners were killed in retaliation for the same fate suffered by Igbos in Maiduguri and a few other places in the north, who were killed when Nigerian Moslems protesting the cartooning of Prophet Mohammed in a newspaper in far-away Switzerland, took it out on their fellow citizens in a very bloody way.

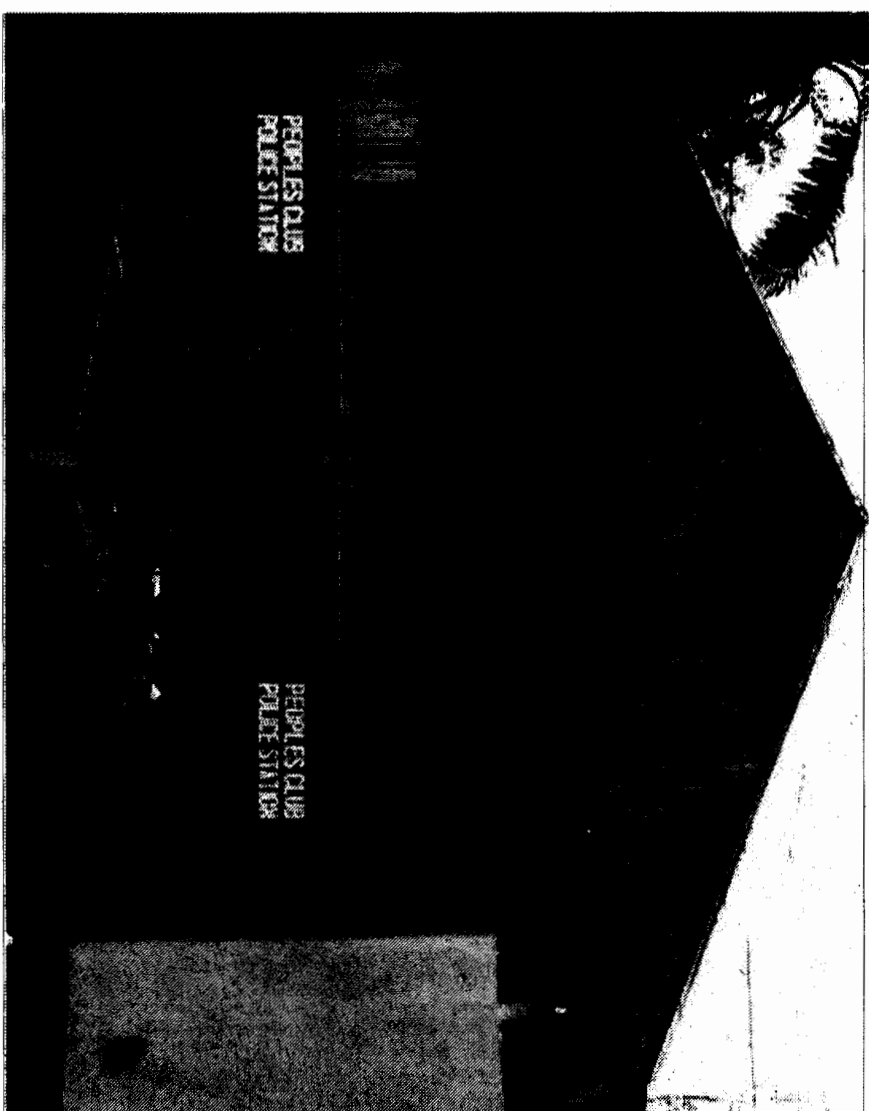
Now, Onitsha is in the news again, also on account of violence. Thursday, last week, persons sus-

Police Area Commander, Mr. Mathew Uyanna who led the operation with Awka Area Commander, Umar Gwadabe said the operation was largely successful at Akpaka Forest Reserve, where they raided and cleared members of the group and arrested some, recovered rifles and other dangerous weapons and charms.

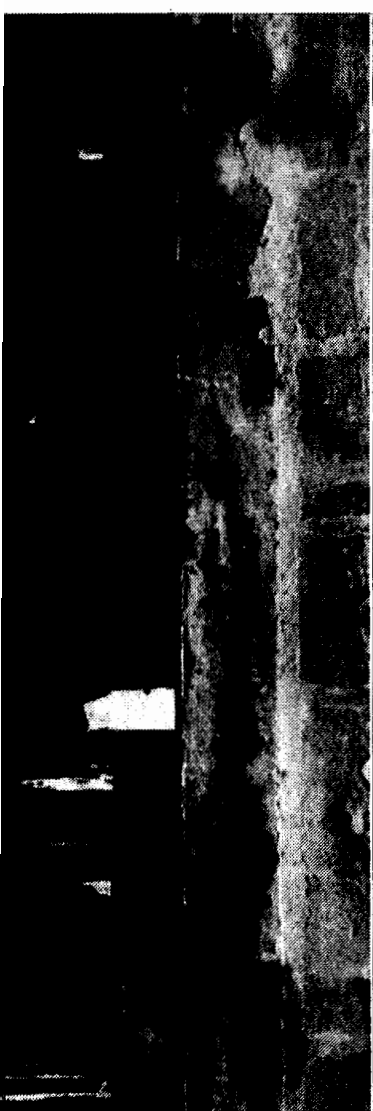
It was however gathered that at Nkplkpa, the operation failed as the police team ran into MASSOB members, who, in a counter attack, captured and destroyed all the vehicles brought for the purpose of the crackdown including the APC brought from MOPOL Unit Five, Benin.

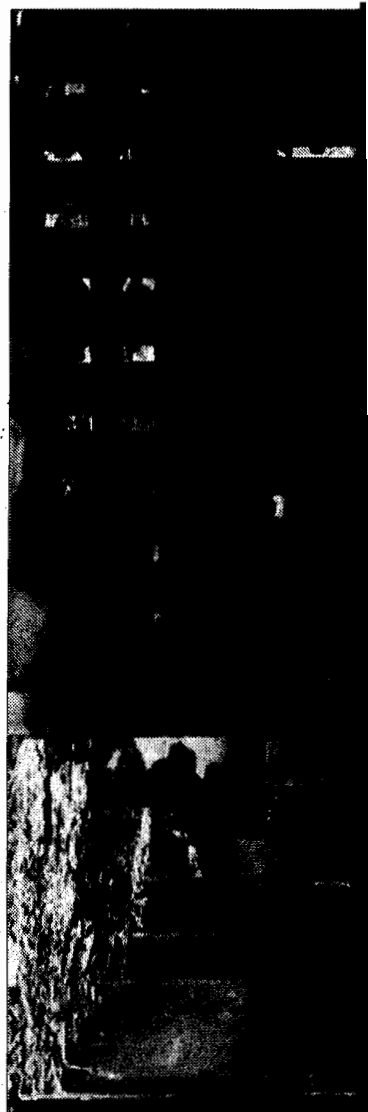
The Three-Three Police and the Marine Police Stations both in the commercial city were razed by the militants who also attacked and wounded some police officers, still battling for survival in hospitals. The burning of the police stations was believed to be a reprisal measure for the police raid on their Akpaka Forest Reserve base.

The violence took another dimension on Friday when the operation

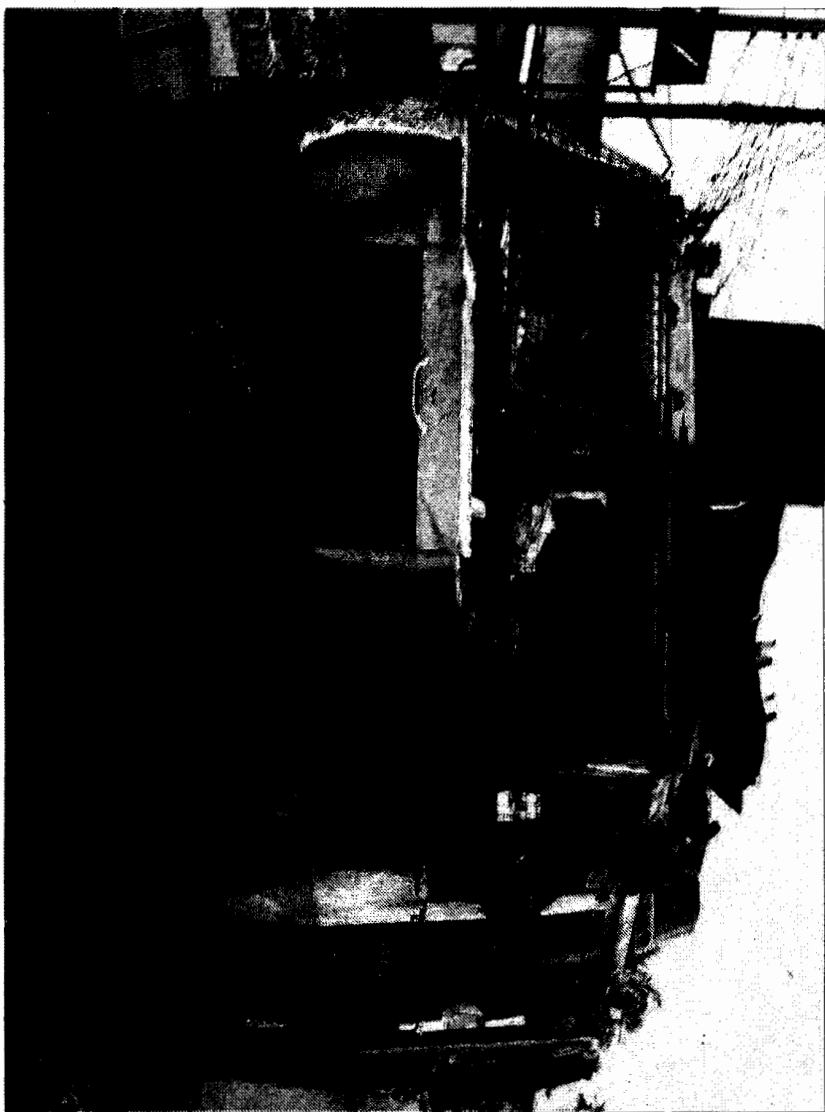


Torchet: A police station





A burnt building



A torched mini-bus

...group movement for the  
Actualization Of The Sovereign  
State Of Biafra (MASSOB) clashed  
with the Nigeria Police Force on  
one hand and members of the  
National Association of Road  
Transport Owners (NARTO) on  
the other, resulting in social and  
commercial disruptions in the oth-  
erwise boisterous city on the Niger.  
It is, indeed, a grave develop-  
ment, which has been declared  
inimical to the peace and security  
of Anambra State, which has seen  
a lot of disorder since the begin-  
ning of this dispensation. And as it  
is such that the residents are not  
sure of what will happen the next  
minute.

A few weeks ago, the Federal  
Government through the Inspector  
General of Police, Mr. Sunday  
Gabriel Ehindero had set up a  
Presidential Task Force against  
MASSOB with a mandate to cur-  
tail the activities of the group in  
parts of the Southeast. The Task  
Force, according to reports, was  
equipped with two helicopters,  
Armored Personnel Carriers (APC)  
and others to put an end to the  
activities of MASSOB, which  
would appear to have put Onitsha  
and its environs under siege for  
some time.

Consequently, suspected hide-  
outs of the movement's militant  
elements were raided and scores of  
them arrested. It was the second  
part of the 'Operation Flush Out  
MASSOB Elements', which was  
carried out on that Thursday that  
witnessed stiff resistance by the  
militant group. In the process,  
about eight people were killed  
while a multi million naira  
Armored Personnel Carrier (APC),  
a TATA lorry and four new buses  
donated by the Anambra State  
Government were destroyed.

The battle against MASSOB that  
Thursday, according to Onitsha

into a gun duel between the sus-  
pected MASSOB elements and the  
National Association of Road  
Transport Owners (NARTO) boys  
at Upper-Iweka Area of the city, fol-  
lowing an alleged attempt by MAS-  
SOB to enforce the state govern-  
ment order banning NARTO from  
operating in motor parks.

This brought to a standstill eco-  
nomic activities and vehicular  
movement around the Upper-Iweka  
area and Owerri road. Passengers  
coming and going out of the city  
were stranded for several hours as  
bonfires were made on the express-  
way.

Distressed by the security situa-  
tion of the state, the state Governor,  
Mr. Peter Obi on Saturday outlawed  
the groups as, according to him,  
they did represent anything good  
for the society. He described their  
activities as selfish.

He appealed to President  
Olusegun Obasanjo to intervene in  
the security crisis in Anambra State  
by taking a stand on the issue, to  
enable the state take immediate  
action or give the state directive to  
take action.

In response to his call, the police  
headquarters deployed Assistant  
Inspector General of Police (AIG),  
Zone 9 Mr. Adewale Ajakaiye and  
later Deputy Inspector General of  
Police (DIG) Force Headquarters,  
Mr. Ogboma Onovo to Onitsha to  
bring sanity and normalcy back to  
the beleaguered city. The high-rank-  
ing police officers will be in town  
until peace returns to Onitsha and  
environs.

Last Sunday, the Federal  
Government reinforced its support  
by deploying soldiers to take over  
the security of the city. Stern-looking  
and combat-ready soldiers, from  
302 Artillery Regiment, Onitsha  
were strategically positioned at  
Upper-Iweka and Bridge Head pro-

COVER

# 'We Will Flush Out Criminal Gangs And Manage Our Resources Legitimately'

Anambra State Governor Mr. Peter Obi spoke with Chuks Collins and Gbenga Akinfenwa in Awka on ways to stem the recurring violence in the commercial city of Onitsha.



Obi

Sir, the problem in Onitsha had been going on for days and there were signs that it was over until the prison was attacked.

**THAT** was within the same period. Everything that happened in Onitsha was within the same two days — Friday, Saturday and early hours of Sunday.

There would appear to be a perception among members of the public that enough has really not been put in place to forestall further spread. Do you share that view?

I don't think so. Enough is in place, the place is peaceful, people are going about their businesses very normally.

As they say, Sir, peace does not necessarily mean the absence of war. It is generally believed that a few fundamental things, like the presence of MAS-SOB and the subject of their agitation, which obviously has not been addressed. As long as those issues remain unattended to, many believe there will still be trouble.

I don't know what they are agitating for. Can you tell me what they are agitating for? And if they are agitating for anything why Onitsha?

So in your own point of view what are really the causes? And how can we address them?

I don't know the causes. That is what I am saying. If you are agitating for something, why Onitsha? Why is the agitation only in Onitsha? That would lead you to the story that there must be something other than what they are agitating for that is keeping them within that particular town.

Okay sir, depending on who is speaking, some say the bone of contention of is the control of motor parks and other revenue generating sources in

Onitsha. So, what are you are doing about that?

I think you are now getting to where the problem is. The problem is the control of the market and the motor park. Over the past years, this problem did not just start and has been there for several years. I agree. But we are saying, we can't go with it again. The constitution allows the federal government to enjoy a certain part of the market and park, the same way the same constitution allows the state government to enjoy certain ownership and management of the market and park and everything. In Nigeria, that position in the constitution has been maintained except in Anambra State. The Anambra State government and its local governments cannot be managers of their market and their parks. Revenue from these markets and parks the government don't know where it goes, we don't receive them and that is affecting the effective running of the government of Anambra State. In Lagos State, their budget is 60% of their IGR and so it is in other states. In Anambra State, it is less than 5%. We are supposed to have at least 10-15% of Lagos IGR, which means we are not going to get less than N10 billion. But, what we get is far less than that, because some people have

decided that it is theirs. That is why every body is fighting in Onitsha.

**What is the solution?**  
The solution is that everyone of them must go, every gang star and miscreant must leave, they must go.

**Before now, there had been a law outlawing the existence of NARTO here, but they kept on operating. Now, how do we ensure that they leave?**

Well, you don't allow illegality to continue because it was there in the past; we must stop it now. There was a law allowing any group but that law was what we implemented. Every successive government rather than humbly request that these miscreants and gang stars leave our environment, what they did was to compromise and negotiate with them or create their own gang. Our government is not going to create our own gang and we are not going to negotiate with anybody. We cannot negotiate the future of our children. This is a state in Nigeria. We have to enjoy those prerogatives enshrined for us in this state in the constitution of Nigeria and that's all we want.

**Sir, sending them away without providing alternative for them may be a little bit difficult, especially now that election is coming close.**

(Cuts in) there is an alternative. If you go to Lagos State, the area boys

and OPC became agents of government in collection of their taxes. They now wear uniform. Let them become better citizens of the country. They should be patriotic, help their own state. We have agricultural loan, we have industries all over the place for people to work. We are doing road construction. There are so many useful places for them to work.

**Ideally, yes. But sometimes, people don't go by ideals.**

In Lagos, it is both ideally and practicable. We want to make the same what is ideal in Lagos State ideal in Anambra State.

**You had a stakeholders' meeting yesterday (Wednesday), which was all embracing. Can you throw a little more light on the event?**

Okay, we had a meeting yesterday, with all the traditional rulers, Members of the House of Assembly, members of the government, bishops of Anambra State. We all agreed that what the government is doing... we had two DIGs of police and AIG for this zone, the police commissioner... and everybody agreed that what the state is requesting is the constitutional right. We are going to come out with our position very soon on management of these areas. As long as they are within the boundary of Anambra State, we are even appealing to everybody to change their ways and be good citizens of Anambra State. Anambra State is home for all, but we are trying to change to home for good people. So anybody who feels the same way we feel and a good person, come and stay with us, we will accept you.

pr-bayer

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# Unusna Grippped By Violence, Mayhem

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Bridge Head providing security.

The soldiers who were seen in trucks were said to have been ordered to clamp down on anybody claiming to be a MASSOB or NARTO member, both of which have been outlawed by the state government.

But the MASSOB deputy director, information, Mazi Chris Mocha, dismissed the ban on MASSOB, saying it was not the first time the government had claimed to have banned the movement. He said the group would instead wax stronger with the ban since it was a non-violent organisation.

Also on Sunday, the state governor in another television broadcast imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Onitsha. The curfew, which the government said would last for one week in the first instance was to stem further violence and would start each day from 7pm to 6am. In other words, the curfew, if things had gone according to plans, would have been lifted today.

But less than 24 hours after the announcement, even as a formidable team of joint army and police special squad had taken over Onitsha security in Onitsha and environs, the rioters on Monday morning, in what was a daring commando-style operation, beat all security barricades and invaded the Onitsha Prison and released 204 prisoners.

It was the second time in four months that such a thing had happened, the first being the period of the reprisal attacks in February when over four hundred prisoners were set free by rioters. The administrative block of the prison yard was badly destroyed while an officer on duty received machete cuts in the head.

According to an inmate, Bright Chukwujiokwu, who willingly returned to the prison, the rioters came around 2am, overpowered the warders and set the prisoners free.

He explained that the nine suspected MASSOB members who came with pistols, knives

and other deadly weapons gained entrance through the fence, beat the officer and inflicted injuries on him before forcing inmates out of the prison yard and marched them inside the bush with only four left. But as at Tuesday, five of them had returned, making them nine inmates in all now left in the prison.

After a Security Council meeting with the governor on Monday, Deputy Inspector General of Police, Mike Okoro, leading top police chiefs, told reporters that NARTO was an illegal body and that its operations in the state remained banned until otherwise stated by competent authority.

Stressing that it was the duty of the police to maintain law and order, Okoro warned that the police would deal ruthlessly with members of any proscribed group found to be breaking the law. Admitting that the police had lost some men in the violence, DIG agonised that the crisis could send wrong signals to any investor who had plans to come in and set up shop in the state or, for that matter, in the country as a whole.

But which of the outlawed groups in the state was responsible for the latest orgy of violence in West Africa's largest market town? MASSOB or NARTO?

According to the Deputy Chairman of Police Affairs Committee in the State Assembly House of Assembly, MASSOB had nothing to do with the crisis. He said the violence was perpetrated by NARTO members who were contending for control of

motor parks in the state, appealing to the Federal Government to withdraw its men attached to NARTO, if the nation was to take it seriously on peace moves.

Mazi Mocha also alleged that NARTO, backed by the police and the government had been responsible for disturbances in the city, noting that his men were not responsible for the burning of police stations and their vehicles.

Similarly, MASSOB Area Administrator Onitsha zone, Comrade Edison accused the police of witch-hunting and humiliating innocent citizens who had nothing to do with MASSOB, pointing out that the police raid last weekend left seven of the group's members dead and over 50 arrested at Akpaka Forest Reserve where they were having meeting.

He said the police came with 30 buses, two Armoured vehicles, eight Peugeot saloon cars and began to shoot indiscriminately as well as arrest passers-by and MASSOB members, killing seven of their members in the process.

The MASSOB boss wondered why the police should be looking for harmless and peaceful agitators with all the ammunition in the country, when armed robbers had a field day in broad day light unchallenged. He accused the Federal Government of a calculated attempt to wipe out the Igbo in the name hunting down members MASSOB.

Meanwhile, the state chapter of Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) said in a statement that it had ear-

lier written a memo dated March 31 this year, to the then Anambra State Police Commissioner, Mr. Moses Anegbode on what it called, "Gun culture and politically sponsored robberies in Anambra State," which CLO alleged were on the increase in the state. CLO boss in the state Nze Emeka Umeagbasi told *The Guardian* that in the memo, the civil liberties group had actually catalogued the criminal activities of the violent crime groups in Anambra State, adding that their names, sponsors, cells and methodologies were also extensively highlighted.

Nze Umeagbasi noted that another memo dated April 10 was sent to the state governor, Mr. Peter Obi alerting him on the existence of other private armies and illegally armed persons in the state and the urgent need to stem the orgy of terror that had trailed the activities of these criminal gangs in the state.

He stressed that today in Anambra state, it had become a tradition for a group of hoodlums to coin a nomenclature and enlist some socially ostracized nouveau riches as members of its board of trustees.

Expectedly, politicians in the state have jumped into the fray, with the leadership of the PDP and ANPP in the state blaming the APGA-controlled government of Mr. Peter Obi for acting "too slowly, too late" to nip the crisis in the bud.

While the PDP accused Governor Obi of 'complicity' in the crisis, due to his reported visit to MASSOB officer earlier, the ANPP accused Obi and the Federal Government of "flickering around now when a more horrendous crisis took place in the state on November 11 to 13 2004, when public and private property were vandalized by political thugs."

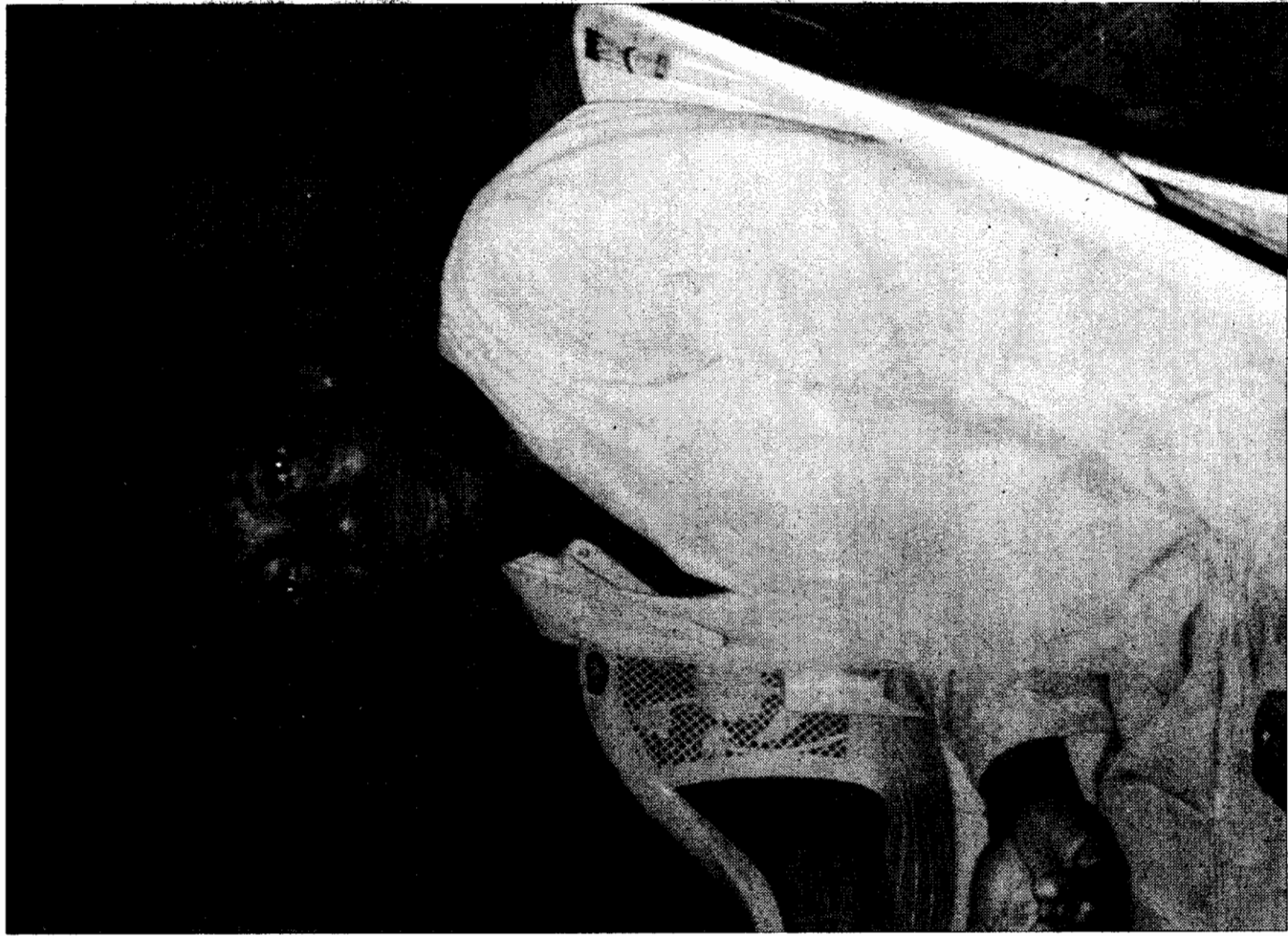
He noted that although a government white paper was released and everyone expected Obi to start from there, the governor appeared to be carrying on as if nothing had happened, until this latest incident.

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 verify date of the case ne  
 10 previous reports per Guardian  
 s'ajoute par aux

## COVER



Inspector General of Police, Sunday Ehindero



Ralph Uwazurike, MASSOB leader