

## NEWSINTERVIEW

## Bound To Violence

From Onitsha to Nteje, Nnewi to Okija, Ogbunike to Npkor, violence in Anambra State, where all manner of groups and individuals are fighting for God-knows-what, would appear to be on the increase. Is this land of gifted people on an inexorable path to self-destruction? From Onitsha, GBENGA AKINFENWA writes, again, on the reign of terror in the Home For All.

**I**N the last few months, the once boisterous city of Onitsha has become the flash-point of violence. Last month, a bloody clash erupted between members of the purportedly illegal organisation, the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO), and the separatist group Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). When tempers cooled, scores of people lay dead while property worth millions of naira were destroyed.

The mayhem forced the federal government to deploy a joint police and military taskforce to the streets of Onitsha, especially areas the Police consider as the strongholds of MASSOB, to deal with the situation. The areas most affected in Onitsha include Fegge, Okpoko, Upper-Iwaka, Akpaka Forest Reserve and Npkor.

Normalcy is, however, returning to the city after the orgy of violence that had rocked it in these past few weeks. But residents of the 'danger zones' are counting their losses. They allege that the police/military patrol team sent to maintain law and order in such neighbourhoods as Fegge, Okpoko, Upper-Iwaka, Akpaka Forest Reserve and Npkor harasses and brutalises innocent members of the public.

The soldiers and policemen are on special assignment in Onitsha, or, for that matter, Anambra, at the invitation of the state governor Mr. Peter Obi, in the wake of the crisis that engulfed mid-June and in which about nine persons died.

His appeal to President Olusegun Obasanjo for urgent intervention to arrest the security situation in the state was heeded by the federal government, which then deployed soldiers in the streets of Onitsha and environs to contain the orgy of violence that was threatening to take over the city. Assistant Inspector General of Police (AIG), zone 9 Mr. Adewale Ajakaiye, Deputy Inspector General of Police (CID) Force Headquarters, Mr. Ogbonna Onovo and later DIG (Operations), Mr. Sunday Smith were equally deployed to Onitsha, to help in arresting the violent situation that the city had been plunged into as a result of the inter-group fighting there.

The governor was later to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the town, that is still very much in place and renewed every week.

Since then, many an innocent citizen residing in Onitsha, the commercial nerve centre of Anambra State has had to go through, it has been reported, a lot of harrowing experience in the hands of the security agencies.

A national daily reported last Sunday about the shooting of a pregnant woman by men of the Mobil Police Force, who had to Fegge Onitsha in search of one Mr. Uwa whose friend accused of being a MASSOB supporter. According to the report, which was confirmed by the police themselves, when they could not find the man, a Nigerian police officer drew his gun and shot his pregnant wife in the abdomen and neck. She died instantly.

As Onitsha was grappling with the ugly fall-outs of its own moments of madness, reports came that Nnewi, another commercial and industrial nerve centre in Anambra was on the boil. What happened? According to reports, persons suspected to be ele-

ments of MASSOB and numbering more than 300 were reported to have last Saturday invaded the town and engaged the police. In the process, two officers, including a Sergeant and Inspector, were killed while the Central Police Station (CPS) and vehicles were set ablaze, leaving behind only a MASSOB flag and identity cards.

Expectedly, the joint military/police patrol team has since deployed, again at the invitation of Obi, in Nnewi, determined to battle the separatist group to a standstill.

But the development simply goes to show that for the average Anambra person, the past few weeks have been precarious indeed. As has been pointed out, many residents allege harassment by security agents, a situation which the foremost rights organisation, Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Anambra State, has totally condemned.

In a recent letter sent to President Olusegun Obasanjo, CLO decried what it described as deliberate extra-judicial killings carried out by the military and police personnel in Onitsha, especially in the Fegge area of the town. It noted that there were indiscriminate arrests, torture and solitary detention of mainly innocent members of human rights organisations.

The group warned that such attacks on innocent persons, could rubbish whatever success may have been recorded in the fight to free Onitsha from all manner of criminality. CLO wondered if the goal of the exercise in Onitsha was to encourage residents of the so-called danger zones to desert their homes, for that is what, it alleged, is happening at the moment.

Generally, however, calm is gradually returning to major parts of Onitsha and other areas considered by police as strongholds of the alleged hoodlums. A visit to Fegge area of the city, for instance, showed that normalcy is returning, but only a few people are still on the streets, owing, *The Guardian* learnt, to the fact that most of the people who ran away from their homes to avoid torture, harassment and constant attack by the police/army personnel on their trail, are yet to return.

Bright Adimekwe, a resident of Okpoko one of the 'danger zones' in Onitsha who spoke with *The Guardian*, said some residents took to their heels in the last three weeks when the Joint Military Police/Army Security Personnel invaded the area with A.K 47 rifles shooting indiscriminately and wounding and killing several people in the process.

He accused the Mobile Police Officers and their Army counterparts of "heartlessness", saying that every so often, they hardly bothered to find out the identity of an individual before arresting or shooting him. He lamented that the security agents were treating every one as a MASSOB member and roughening them up as such.

Adimekwe pointed out that the cold blooded murder of a pregnant woman in Okpoko, who was shot in her room, had inspired fear in people with more Mobile Policemen being deployed daily to the area.

Tracing the cause of unrest in Okpoko and Anambra in general, Adimekwe opined that the problem was caused by the National Association of Road Transport Owners (NARTO) whose members engaged in the collection of fees, contrary to government guidelines.



Obi



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According to him, it was the illegal fees that the MASSOB people tried to stop which brought about hostility between the two groups leading to unrest in the city and Anambra State in general.

It is also believed in some quarters that the lingering problem in Onitsha and other parts of the state is not about MASSOB but politics. Accusing fingers have pointed at the tendencies represented by the self-styled political godfather Chief Chris Uba, who is believed to be sponsoring the NARTO hoodlums and the Mobile Policemen to make the state ungovernable. And it is all part of the game towards the 2007 governorship election.

Onyinye Uche, a resident of Fegge, also reiterated claims that security personnel were harassing innocent people and may, indeed, have added to the crisis rather than contained it.

She claimed that people in Fegge are still relocating to interior villages considering what they experienced, with lot of lives lost and people living at Silas works, Miss Elenas, Ukpor and Portharcourt road all in Fegge running for their safety.

"At Akowa street, a bungalow was set ablaze by security agents. Most painful of it all is that they rape our girls. Some would break your house in your absence and make away with valuable items. I believe these sldiers are using this opportunity to revenge what Igbo did to the Hausas" (in the reprisal riots over the Prophet Mohammed cartoon).

She pleaded Governor Obi to come to the aid of the Anambrians to avoid their further maltreatment in the process of bringing peace, calm and normalcy back to the commercial city of Onitsha.

Meanwhile, the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) has alleged that its members have been killed in quatum by the combined team of police and army being invited by the state governor to quell the crisis and mayhem caused by the NARTO boys and vigilant groups who are allegedly being sponsored by Chris Uba.

The Eastern Region Deputy Director of Information, Comrade David Macdavidson told *The Guardian* that the invitation of the military by Mr. Peter Obi, the curfew and shoot at sight order were given to the kacky boys against his Igbo brothers in the name of restoring peace and normalcy and clamping down on MASSOB members.

He noted that the total number of the dead and lost presently in Onitsha is 129, adding that along Onitsha - Owerri Road, people, both passengers, traders, passers-by were maltreated, their personal belongings such as handsets, hand-bags, wallets and money routinely taken away from them and any who refused to such indiscriminate body search were often labeled MASSOB members and arrested.

"I am confused at this juncture. I mean, if the world is waiting for the Nigerian Government to wipe out all the Biafrans before they come to our aid and rescue or are they waiting for these country to be turned into a war zone like Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Sierra-Leone, Liberia, Iraq and Iraq? Though, members of MASSOB are crying and mourning those of our members who were sent to their earlier graves by these agents of death, we will never get jittery or cowed," he said.

Macdavidson stressed that MASSOB subscribes to the non-violence philosophy as a means of achieving sovereignty and independence, adding however that he was disappointed that the world had failed to react to the violence being visited on them who are unarmed and defenseless, by the government and agents of Nigeria, in the course of the "non-violence drive for the actualization of Biafra."

Said he: "We would like to remind the world that the self-determination drive of Biafrans for Biafra sovereignty is in full swing; we are using a non-violent process, even while the government of Nigeria is using lethal and deadly force, coupled with blackmail and intimidation, against us."

Similarly, the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) has said that the recent crises in Onitsha and Nnewi are attempts geared towards the declaration of the state of emergency in Anambra State, a move he described as "unpopular, anarchical, militarist, pecuniary, roguery, thoughtless, tactless, wicked, undemocratic and unconstitutional."

In a statement signed by the chairman of the group, Nze Emeka Umeagbalasi said the promoters and prompters of such infamous activities are "political illiterates, pillagers of the Anambra Commonwealth, election riggers, sponsors and proprietors of criminal entities, abductors of a sitting governor, masqueraders of democracy, usurpers of peoples' liberties and treasonable felons."

The chairman said that the N10billion annually being lost by the government and people of Anambra State in the hands of such criminals from motor parks and garages and another N1 Billion - plus a year also being lost in the hands of the homicidal vigilance operatives and their sponsors, which have been successfully abolished, are major reasons for such inglorious conducts.

The police in her reaction through the State Acting Commissioner of Police, Mr. Haruna John on July 13, gave an update on the crisis said his men had effectively taken possession of all the parks in the city.

"NARTO has been flushed out, all the parks are now manned by the police. Our problem however, remains MASSOB. They have resorted to guerrilla warfare, attacking our men at will. Last night we carried out another raid on some of their hideouts in Akpaka forest," he said.

But MASSOB has denied its involvement in any of the crises, insisting it has not involved itself in any violence in the last seven years and can never be involved because they hold the peace of Anambra and Biafra sacrosanct. So, "how can we go about killing and destroying property?"

It claimed that the incident in Nnewi should not be blamed on its members because they don't possess sophisticated weapons to attack the police.

Mac-Davidson said the APGA national chairman, Mr. Victor Umeh has exonerated MASSOB from the Nnewi attack. "The police said Biafran flag and identity cards were seen. How can we involve ourselves in violence and drop our I.D. cards and flags? The only time we can use our flag is during rally, so it is the handiwork of the enemy, miscreants even the NARTO boys because they are paid to cause problem in Anambra by politicians".