

# Brothers At War At Umuhu, Okija

To understand the extent to which the Onitsha crisis has traumatized other parts of Anambra State, visit Umuhu, a village in Okija, in Ihiala Local Council where the army, under the guise of fighting MASSOB, visited a sleepy community with mayhem.

FROM ANDREW UDEH (NNEWI)

**U**MUHU village is about 30 minutes drive from Ekwusigo Expressway Okija, Ihiala Local Council Area, Anambra State. It is one of the three villages that make up Okija, which was in the news for most of 2004, no thanks to its dreaded Ogwugwu Akpu Shrine, the fearsome shrine believed to possess magical powers that many men of power and influence in the country are so enamoured of. A remote place with virtually no means of basic life such as potable water, motorable road and the like, it is nevertheless a beehive of activities most of the time, because of the traffic of politicians and other important personalities. So, to a large extent, the indigenes don't seem to miss the dearth of these amenities as the famous (some would say infamous) shrine continues to attract prominent politicians and mega business people across the country, even after the police invasion and subsequent arrest of the shrine priests.

Umuhu Village is in the news again, but this time for an entirely different reason. Recently, a misunderstanding between the village youths and the local vigilante practically put the village asunder. The rustic environment is littered with broken structures as a result of mayhem that visited the place. Home appliances were burnt, cars and motorcycles crushed and set ablaze, farm lands invaded and muddled up.

When *The Guardian* visited Umuhu last week, old men and women were seen in twos and threes discussing in low tones the development in the community, their eyes darting sideways just in case trouble lay around. Indeed, there is apprehension as people live in fear of the unknown.

Trouble started for Umuhu when the presumed Okija traditional ruler, Obi Ben Okeke reportedly invited military men from Onitsha army barracks to take over the village. He had invited the military on the grounds that youths in the community were creating an atmosphere of insecurity in the area, emboldened, according to Okeke, by their alleged membership of the separatist group MASSOB. The siege happening barely a week after Onitsha mayhem, had forced prominent Umuhu indigenes to run into hiding after they were declared wanted.

In an interview with the press last Saturday at his "palace," Okeke lamented what he described as the increasing rate of "civil disobedience" in Umuhu village and blamed the crisis on the jobless youths in the community and their sponsors. According to him, "Umuhu village is one place that has been giving Okija town a bad name before the outside world. The negative posture in the eyes of the public is because of the nefarious behaviour of the indigenes; this time their youths armed with dangerous weapons fought the local vigilante, killing and maiming them. They also robbed homes, destroyed property worth millions before they were dislodged by the military men."

He accused some prominent, wealthy indigenes of Umuhu of supporting the youths to disobey the activities of the local vigilante installed by him. In his words, "the militant youths comprising some youths (names withheld) and many others have thrown Umuhu into an inhabitable village as people now live in fear. And their principal sponsor in this uncivil act is Chief Ugochukwu Obi, a Lagos-based indigene of the village. As the head of Okija traditional institution, I had to invite the military men from Onitsha army barracks to restore peace, and all those behind the mayhem have been declared wanted by the entire Okija people."

He alleged that some of the youths are "lucky escapees" from Onitsha mayhem, who sneaked into Umuhu village to add to the already "evil character of those at home," and warned all those on the town's wanted list to show up or stand the risk of being killed.

Lt. Suleiman Bayawo, leader of the military team confirmed in an interview that their presence at Umuhu village was simply to quench the crisis between the youths and the local vigilante group. He said: "We were called by Obi Ben Okeke, to checkmate the uprising in this village. We have spent close to two weeks, and we are not ready to go until normal life is guaranteed, and that would only be possible when those declared wanted are caught."

But Umuhu old men and women in random interviews conducted by the press crew, in the village for the briefing, had a different amazing story. Chief Iyke Odunaka, an elderly man confessed that the crisis was as a result of the criminal attitude of the local vigilante in charge of Umuhu village. He said the night guards made up of mainly Aguleri boys and a sprinkle of indigenes derailed from their routine job of protecting lives and property, and became criminals. He gave instances of places visited and the people harassed, stressing that when the situation became unbearable, the youths mobilized themselves to rescue the village. The result according to him was bloody confrontation, which made Obi Ben Okeke invite the military.

Mrs Ngozi Obieze, a victim, whose husband, Sunday Obieze is still languishing in police cell at the Umuahia Zone 9, Police Station, narrated her ordeal: "This small brick house is where we were living before the sudden invasion by unknown armed uniformed men numbering over 200 with 16 armoured vehicles. They rushed in and set the house ablaze, arrested my husband along with other villagers. Right now, they are at Umuahia Zone 9, police cell. The children and I only survive through the sympathizers from different places coming to see what happened in Umuhu village."

Explaining further in native language, the dispirited old woman defended the involvement of youths in the crisis, elaborating more on what other speakers had said. "The uniformed team was all armed and they were saying that my husband and others were suspects from Onitsha crisis, that government instructed them to come and arrest them. We are still at a loss because the indicted youths are innocent, they are not part of Onitsha escapees, and they only fought the local vigilante when they discovered that they had started stealing instead of protecting us."

Speaking from his Lagos base, Chief Ugochukwu Obi, a civil engineer and magazine publisher, who is top on the list of the people declared by the military in Umuhu corroborated the submissions of Umuhu indigenes. In a lengthy interview granted the press in his Surulere, Lagos office, he recalled the genesis of the crisis and accused Obi Ben Okeke of being the brain behind the whole trouble.

"The Umuhu village mayhem was principally a plot set by Chief Ben Okeke who calls himself traditional ruler. There is court injunction against him pending somewhere. We, the indigenes of Umuhu know the truth behind his purported enthronement, and had been at the vanguard of stopping him because the traditional stool does not belong to him. His village Ubahunum is even the third in order of hierarchy, not from the ruling class. He bulldozed his way to the throne and decided to intimidate everybody in Okija, with special security apparatus instituted in Umuhu village."

Obi who publishes *The New Transportant*, a professional magazine, added: "The way and manner the vigilante team was inaugurated in my village explained his inner ambition. The vigilante was made up mainly of Aguleri boys who do not understand our people, resulting in ceaseless insults and embarrassment. These people were only raping and maiming the villagers, and Chief Okeke only turned a blind eye because they were executing his bid. One Romanus

Onwuanuka is the security arrow-head, with Alphonsus Onwuasielo, Augustine Ogechukwu, Emechebe, Afrundenwa Ohanze, Uche Nwasolu and many others in their kitty. Their primary agenda was not to protect our lives and property but to silence vocal opinions like me. Although, I'm based in Lagos, Umuhu is still my village where I built the only house I have. I visit my people often."

Obi noted that as a stakeholder, who knows the importance of local vigilante, he initially supported their services, with the prompt payment of his security levy. In Umuhu, not less than 500 villagers contribute N120 each to the vigilante team every month, but only eight people, alleged Obi, earn salaries as security operators, putting question mark on the whereabouts of the collective sum

He said the levy being paid was not his greatest worry but the actual mission of the vigilante in Umuhu village.

"If the security team had been properly constituted, somebody in my position can afford to pay for at least three people, and that would reduce the burden in the village. But the whole exercise is a dirty plot to silence us," he alleged.

Obi who read engineering in Britain before returning to Nigeria where he served for 12 years in the Federal Ministry of Works, said that as an activist, he could not keep quiet while illegality triumphed.

"The truth is that Umuhu Youths had noticed the evil being perpetrated by the local vigilante team and decided to stop it," Obi argued, alleging that when the youths subdued the vigilante, Chief Okeke quickly rushed out to town and brought in the police and army to attack the boys.

"I was in the village when the incident started and as soon as invasion took place, a relation advised me to run away because I was on the want-

ed list. But before being assassinated, the whole world must know the truth; the poor youths now languishing in police cell at Umuahia are innocent, they are neither MASSOB nor NARTO members as they are being branded by Chief Okeke. They are law-abiding citizens who are helping the village to develop."

Appealing to the Federal Government through the Inspector-General of police, Mr. Sunday Ehindaro to call Chief Okeke to order, Obi said the court injunction against Okeke was enough stop him from parading himself as Okija traditional ruler. He maintained that a vigilante team made up of indigenes should only be allowed in Umuhu village, warning that inclusion of outsiders could ignite further anarchy. He also appealed to the police and the government to show leniency to the indicted youths because they are the future leaders.

"So many of them could be useful if proper orientation is given; the real cause of the crisis has not been made known to the police," he said.

He disregarded the manhunt imposed on him, saying that what Chief Okeke was doing was simply wishful thinking. He applauded internal security in various villages but quickly advised the Inspector-General of police to monitor the activities.

"It is Umuhu today, who knows the next village tomorrow? That's why it is paramount for the Inspector General of Police to have a method of investigating a serious matter like this. He should also set up a communication network with his men because a lot of things happen in remote villages. I think the police generally require reformation, they should be protecting lives and property, not destroying them," he surmised.



Lt. Bayawo, who led soldiers to Umuhu